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Dialogue, Virtue and Ethics

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Introduction

In Chapter 3 of this book, John Strain rejects the usefulness of the distinctions between ethics and morality on the one hand and between ethics and meta-ethics on the other. I would suggest that there are useful distinctions to be made here. I think of ethics as a practice: a practice based upon values, ideals, moral convictions, character, or socially accepted norms. Morality in contrast, is a theoretical construct which posits a set of obligations, prohibitions and principles which are intended to act as a curb upon our wills. Accordingly, morality has a more limited scope than ethics. The two seem to intersect in that many people consider that the practice of ethics is based almost exclusively upon moral principles. It is this that suggests that ethics and morality may indeed be coextensive, though I doubt that this is true. But even if they were coextensive, the two terms do not have the same connotations. Morality, as Bernard Williams (1985) has argued, connotes a system of ideas which is said to undergird the practice of ethics. This system of ideas, in turn, requires intellectual justification and defence. It is the task of meta-ethics, or moral theory, to supply these. The fundamental question for meta-ethics is, why or how are the norms of morality binding upon us? What is the source of their normativity?

I make these distinctions in order to posit the question of what precisely we are talking about when we discuss the role of ethics in the universities. Are we talking about the role that universities have in relation to meta-ethics? If there is such a role it would clearly be that of teaching and research, and it would be largely confined to philosophy departments. Are we talking about the role of morality in the university? There is no doubt that we would expect the university and everyone within it to live in accordance with the prevailing norms of our society: to obey valid laws and to not cheat, lie or steal. But this is a very minimal requirement. In couching our question in terms of the relationship between the university and ethics, we open up a much more complex terrain of inquiry: one that includes values, moral convictions, ideals, virtues of character, and socially accepted norms as they are realised, or not, in the many practices and activities that constitute the life of a university.
In this chapter, I propose to raise questions about just one of these practices: that of teaching, and I will argue that ethics should be both the object and context for teaching throughout the university. I will suggest that universities should be highly suspicious of morality, meta-ethics and other theoretical doctrines. I will also make a suggestion as to how ethics should be taught in a way that does not depend upon conceptions of morality or doctrines of meta-ethics.

**An Example**

Three bushwalkers had been walking through the forest all day when, towards evening, they found themselves in a clearing on the crest of a hill. As the three rested from their walking they had a magnificent view of the setting sun in the clear air of the wilderness. Each walker was moved to describe the experience. The first said that he had experienced beautiful colours as the sun's rays fell upon the clouds against a golden background. The second said that she had been moved by a feeling of peace and harmony with nature. The third said that he had felt the presence of God.

Let us reflect on these three reports. The first describes the actual visual experience of the walker. We hear of the colours, the clouds, and the sun's rays. The description is being given partly in terms of what philosophers in the past had called 'sense data' and partly as a description of simple material things and of how they appear as objects. It is an empiricist description upon which any visually competent observer can be expected to agree. The sun, the clouds, and the colours are there for anyone to see. However, this walker also used evaluative terms such as 'beautiful', and these introduce a more subjective element, an element that involves a judgement which goes beyond the simple recognition of what a thing is. Nevertheless, given that sunsets are for many people paradigm cases of what constitutes beauty, this is a simple judgement upon which we could expect widespread agreement.

The second walker's report focuses upon the feelings and emotional reactions of that walker. Being moved by a feeling of peace and harmony with nature is an affect produced by the visual experience. This report does not refer to the things that are experienced but to the way in which they are experienced. Accordingly, it is a description that gives heightened expression to the subjective aspects of experience. And yet it is not simply an evocation of an inner state of being. It is not a swoon or the involuntary uttering of a sound like 'ah!' The bushwalker has given some structure to her experience and given it a description that others could possibly understand and relate to. Saying that it is a feeling of peace and harmony with nature goes beyond merely expressing the feeling because it uses concepts like peace and harmony that introduce complex ideas with social and discussable meanings. A person in a different culture might describe the feeling differently (perhaps as a feeling of desirlessness) using terms that many in our Western culture find hard to understand. But my key point is that this description is a structuring of an emotional experience and, as such, is relatively immune from disagreement or counterclaim. It would not make much sense for either of the other walkers to reply to the report that she had been moved by a feeling of peace and harmony with nature by denying the truth of the report. They have no alternative access to the inner life of their companion. Instead, if they share the same notions of peace and harmony with nature, they would see the report as an appropriate way of describing a human emotional reaction to the sunset that most people could have.

The third description is of a somewhat different kind. To say 'I felt the presence of God' could be interpreted in either of the two ways above. It could be a description of the thing that is being experienced, in this case that 'thing' being God, or it could be an expression of an emotion. Given that the other two walkers have seen only the sunset or felt only the peace and harmony, it does not seem that there is any objective corroboration of the claim that God was actually present in a way that could be sensed or experienced by all present. Perhaps then, this description is the expression of an emotion. But the walker did not say, 'I felt as if I were in the presence of God.' He said, 'I felt the presence of God.' This is more than a conceptual structuring of a subjective experience which others may or may not understand but could not challenge. It involves a factual claim, albeit one of a metaphysical nature. It is a claim which can be contested in the form of theological debate or philosophical arguments about the existence of God. It would make sense for one of the others to say, 'No you didn't, you just saw something beautiful or experienced a feeling of peace and harmony.' The claim, 'I felt the presence of God' implies a claim that God exists and that he manifests himself in harmonious experiences of beauty. This claim goes beyond both the empirical terms in which experience is normally described and the emotional terms in which it is often expressed. I call this a 'theoretical claim'.

**Theoretical Claims**

By a theoretical claim, I understand a proposition or statement which goes beyond the immediately presented objective and subjective data by constructing or using concepts which are not grounded in experience. Both our everyday discourses and our more academic discourses contain a great many theoretical claims in this sense.

I am using the term theoretical in a way that harks back to the Greek word *theoria*. The contrast is not the one that science makes between an empirical phenomenon and explanatory theory: it is the one that ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle made between the realm of everyday concerns and experiences and the realm of eternal things which are thought to exist beyond the everyday and which we are able to contemplate by virtue of our having a contemplative aspect to our being. Plato, in particular, tended to accord metaphysical reality to this realm in direct proportion to its significance. For
him, the concepts of truth, beauty, and goodness were important as guiding ideas for life and hence could not but be real, albeit that they existed in the super-sensory realm of metaphysics. My own use of the notion of a theoretical claim need not depend upon any explicit metaphysical claims as to the reality of that which such a claim alludes to. It is enough that it takes us to an alleged reality which is beyond what is available to everyday and common-sense perception of the empirical features of the world or to our immediate emotional reactions to those features.

There is a very strong link between cultures and theoretical claims. Indeed, one might be able to define and differentiate cultures in terms of the theoretical claims which are central to them. Our Western, modern, secular culture (if that is not too broad a category) is centred upon theoretical claims that stem from the physical sciences and from economics. In contrast, many traditional societies are centred upon theoretical claims that stem from religion. Whereas we in the West decide many issues on the basis of scientifically based assessments of possible beneficial outcomes and calculations of risk, other cultures will do what they perceive to be God’s will. I do not want to suggest that these ideal types are always fully distinct – some decisions may be made under the influence of both kinds of thinking – but the theoretical constructs in the light of which such thinking develops can be distinguished clearly enough.

Although there are many examples of paradigms of thinking and of the theoretical claims which are central to them, religion provides the most readily understood instance. Those who experience God in the sunset are clearly experiencing the world through a different theoretical prism from those who see simply beautiful colours or feel simply peace and harmony with nature.

Tolerance

What is my purpose in developing these points? Along with the many ethical issues that arise in the professions and for which universities should prepare their students, the educational mission of our universities cannot but be influenced by pressures arising from the world at large. No discipline, whether in the humanities, the sciences, or technologies, can avoid discussion of what we should do about the issues and crises that beset our world today. These problems include questions of social justice, economic and environmental sustainability, multiculturalism, gender relations, health care, education, social order and national defence. International issues include war and peace, global warming, nuclear proliferation, ethnic cleansing, mortality and morbidity rates in developing countries, international economic justice through foreign aid and trade liberalisation, exploitation of labour through the globalisation of industry, humanitarian intervention to prevent despotism or starvation, refugee policy, the enforcement of international law, and many other problems whose scope transcends national boundaries and sovereignties.

What will be central to such discussions are the differing values and world views of peoples around the globe and which are present even in our local communities. Whereas international conflict in the recent past was based on ideological differences centred on economic models (capitalism versus communism), current conflicts highlight religious and cultural differences (the so-called clash of civilisations according to Huntington [2003]). Accordingly, the ethical formation of future leaders and professionals in our societies, which is the responsibility of our universities, must encourage cross-cultural understanding and sensitivity and a recognition of the common humanity of us all. This concern with global ethics implies a concern for different political and cultural contexts of human life, just as a concern for more local ethical issues frequently requires negotiating between differing subcultures and communities within our national borders.

My elucidation of the concept of a theoretical claim allows me to say that what constitutes ‘difference’ in the notion of different political and cultural contexts is not difference in experience, but difference in theoretical claims used to describe experience. Everyone, no matter what their different political and cultural contexts, can experience a sunset, a conversation with friends, a death, a birth, a war, an injustice, or an act of kindness in much the same way at a pre-theoretical level. The material things and events involved will be what they are and anyone can apprehend them more or less directly. The feelings that these events evoke, whether they be feelings of awe, joy, grief, elation, fear, anger, or gratitude, will also be much the same, although the way they are described may differ somewhat. But what will differ most of all will be the theoretical claims which will be inherent in the way these matters are described. For example, whether an event is described as chance, whether it be good luck or bad luck, or whether it is described as ordained by the requirements of justice, the unfolding of destiny, the historical mission of a nation, or the will of God, will make a considerable difference to the way that event is understood.

Moreover, these theoretical constructs make a difference to the tolerance with which differing understandings are received. Theoretical claims are the major constituents of intolerance. It is because of their differing religious beliefs, political ideologies, and nationalistic self-understandings that people kill each other. Of course, it would be a mistake to be simplistic about this. Resentment at injustice or previous military defeats, anger at economic exploitation, and distrusts built upon differences in ethnicity are among the many factors that lead peoples to take up arms. Merely greed is seldom enough to motivate peoples to go to war. Military aggression results from hatreds and resentments that have a variety of causes, but it is fuelled by the perception of the other as different and by the assurance that Justice, Destiny, or God are on one’s side. It may be that these latter theoretical constructs are used as a cover or a justification for the more operative motivations, but they are seldom used
cynically. They are genuinely believed, at least by the rank and file, so as to provide a higher reason for the most base of motivations. To kill the other, one must first hate him. And the most efficient way of generating and expressing this hatred is to attribute theoretical beliefs to him that are different from one's own, for example, to see him as an infidel (Ruthven 2004).

If the cultural discourses of peoples stayed close to their actual empirical and emotional experience they would not disagree so deeply. Everyone can understand what it is to love a child. Not everyone can understand how those who love it can mutilate it in the name of religion or tradition. Everyone can understand that war is to be avoided. Not everyone can understand why God might call upon us to wage war. Everyone can understand that death is a loss to the living. Not everyone can understand that ideologies might lead one to kill. It is theoretical claims that move us from the simple truths of humanity to the murderous and intolerant ideologies that lead to hatred. If we can avoid moving from the simple and direct experience of life and its immediate values to the theoretical constructs of religion, ideology, and metaphysics, we will achieve that level of human understanding and tolerance between different political and cultural contexts which could ground global peace and understanding.

The Role of Universities

At a recent meeting of the faculty of which I am a member, called to discuss curriculum developments, the dean of the faculty stressed the need to develop courses that would attract overseas and local fee-paying students, since university finances depended upon expanding those numbers. I responded with a speech in which I suggested that in a world beset with environmental problems, political conflicts, and the 'clash of civilisations' it might be important to prepare students for leadership roles that would be sensitive to the needs of others and to the demands of cultural tolerance. The dean replied that the university is not funded for that. I take this to be an extreme position on the spectrum of views elaborated in Part 1 of this book: a spectrum ranging from a complete and even cynical pragmatism to a traditional and idealistic conception of universities that sees them as preservers and transmitters of all that is best in a society's cultural traditions.

In this second conception it can be assumed that universities will promote and develop the theoretical claims of that culture. As John Strain has pointed out in Chapter 3, universities have always had pragmatic missions. In the distant past, universities trained young men for law, medicine, and the ministry. However, such training was not merely an inculcation into craft skills. It was accompanied by a research-based discourse in which theoretical claims were very fully developed. Whether it was the concept of Natural Law; the four humours and their connection to earth, air, water, and fire; the 'vital principle' in biology; the concept of the human soul; or the contents of divine revelation, it is clear that the fundamental concepts around which university thinking revolved, involved a great many theoretical claims. The universities took you away from the world of everyday reality and into the world of theory and metaphysics. Even when this movement was motivated by the need to inform praxis, it valorised the theoretical over the commonsensical, and thereby led to theory-driven practices such as therapeutic blood-letting (or phlebotomy) that survived the countervailing evidence of common sense well into the nineteenth century (Porter 1997).

But is it realistic to ask the contemporary university to eschew theoretical claims in favour of empirical and common-sense research? Let me be clear that I am not suggesting that universities should eschew the development of explanatory theories in the modern scientific sense. An explanatory theory need not be seen as a theoretical claim in my sense. Copernicus did not posit any new metaphysical entities when he argued that the earth rotates around the sun. He merely asked us to interpret what we see, i.e. the apparent setting of the sun at the end of the day, in a different way. Quantum physics does not posit any metaphysical entities. It merely asks us to conceive of matter in a new and more fluid way. While the exact nature of scientific theories and the entities they posit is a matter of considerable difficulty, it is clear that such entities are not metaphysical. Their reality is related in intimate if complex ways to experience. My question is whether universities should eschew theoretical claims in the classical senses of metaphysical doctrines or moralistic ideals. The secularisation of most universities in the last century or so has tended to achieve this to some extent, and my dean seems to have taken this tendency to the limit. Have universities become nothing more than purely pragmatic and value-free training grounds for professional employment in the contemporary world? My dean would seem to think so.

Ethics

The role of ethics teaching in universities becomes very interesting in the light of this question. Does ethics as an academic discipline, as opposed to a practice, continue the tradition of theoretical claims propounded by the traditional university? This is not the time to engage in a major exploration of moral theory, but it might be enough to suggest that several of the central concepts of moral theory, stemming from the ancient Greeks, involve theoretical claims in my sense. This is clear in the Divine Command theory. I have already mentioned Natural Law. We might also recall the resounding opening sentences of Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (Kant 1998) which posit a distinction between our 'will', understood as the ability to make rational decisions, and our inclinations and natural predispositions. Further, we might reflect on how the concept of person is used in ethics. Moral realism is a further example to add to the list of these various forms of moral metaphysics.

The ancient Greeks believed that the world was ordered by justice (Cornford 1972). While more sophisticated Greek thinkers did not suppose
that this could be understood as a providential oversight of human affairs on
the part of the gods, they did believe that a divine or superhuman principle of
justice ordered everything in accordance with justice, fate, or destiny. Clearly
this belief is an instance of a theoretical claim in my sense. The idea is that
things do not happen by chance or are caused by blind forces of nature. Rather
they have a purpose and an inherent goal instilled by an overarching order
which has the moral quality of justice. This idea survives in some of our
everyday utterances, as when we say that it is unfair when an innocent person
suffers a great many hardships, or that a certain significant event was meant to
happen. To what reality are we alluding when we say it is unfair? Who or what
meant that event to happen? Our experience gives us no answers to these
questions. The concept of morality itself is bequeathed to us by this way of
thinking. Morality was thought to consist of the norms by which we should
live that arise from the metaphysical sphere of justice. The authority of
morality derives from its transcendent nature.

Those who believe that morality is based upon religion have a similar
outlook to that of the ancient Greeks. The only difference is that, rather than
an impersonal cosmic order of justice, they posit a God who issues commands
and thereby establishes the moral norms which we are to obey. Once again, the
authority of morality derives from its transcendent nature and depends upon
theoretical claims.

Natural Law theory posits a metaphysical order in which some actions or
policies are inherently right and others inherently wrong. While this view
developed in conjunction with religious beliefs which posited God as the
author of this Law, it is also frequently justified with reference to a priori
doctrines about human nature and its inherent values. So, for example, human
life is said to be absolutely sacrosanct on the grounds that all human beings
have an inherent desire to persist in life. Leaving aside Hume's famous
rejection of such theories on the ground that they move illegitimately from
factual claims about human beings to moral injunctions (the 'is to ought'
fallacy), I need only point out that the absoluteness of the injunction is not
justified by the evidence. It would only take one person prepared to sacrifice
their life for any reason to show that the premise of the argument is not
absolute. Accordingly, the conclusion will not be either. The only way to make
it so is to return to the premise that God commanded it. Insofar as this
thinking moves from the everyday and common-sense observation that most
people value their lives most of the time to an absolute norm which transends
our ordinary experience, it is a good example of a theoretical claim.

While Kant tried to base morality on a non-transcendent foundation, the
distinction between reason and inclination which is so central to Kant's
theoretical edifice is itself a theoretical claim. By grounding the obligatoriness
of his categorical imperative in the logical rigour of reason he may seem to be
making a point that is unassailable from the perspective of pure reason. But his
positing of a priori reason as distinguished from the empirical dispositions and
inclinations which motivate our actions in real life is not grounded in our
actual experience. This concept of pure reason is said to attach to idealised
agents such as angels or God: agents who are not troubled by the inclinations
and distractions of worldly existence. This may be a noble conception, but
when it leads Kant to argue that an action motivated by love alone has no
moral worth, we can only suspect that common sense has been left behind.
That Kant, despite his Enlightenment credentials, goes on to posit a
providential God in order to make the whole enterprise of morality
meaningful for us further shows that his moral theory is highly dependent
upon theoretical claims.

For all of its secularism, much contemporary moral theory and applied
ethics remains dependent upon theoretical claims as well. Take the abortion
debate as an example. Much of the content of this debate centres upon
deciding when an embryo becomes a person or a potential person. The
thought behind these questions is that a person is owed certain moral duties.
Following the doctrine of the sanctity of life, the first of these duties is the
protection and preservation of that person's life. An organism or entity,
therefore, that can be declared to be a person will be said to be owed those
duties. Accordingly, much ink has been spilt over the question of when a
newly conceived human organism in the womb becomes a person. In the face
of the common-sense observation that an embryo clearly is not a person in the
obvious sense that you or I are persons, a great many theoretical claims have
ton be made, usually by way of an excursion into the metaphysics of
potentiality, in order to argue the case. My own approach would be to drop the
rhetoric of persons and ask what, if any, moral duties we owe to embryos. I am
sure no one would deny that they are organisms of considerable ethical
importance. But my point here is to say that the concept of person as used in
these debates is not linked to our everyday usage of that concept and therefore
involves theoretical claims in my sense.

Moral realism is the view that there really are moral rights and wrongs. We
really do have moral obligations. There really are duties and some courses of
action really are forbidden. The problem, of course, is what could be meant by
the word 'really' in these formulations. There is no denying that in well-
brught-up people there often occur feelings that we just 'ought' or 'ought not'
to do something. This is a phenomenological fact about us. Moreover, where
that something is of ethical significance we may describe that feeling as that of
a moral duty or moral prohibition. The reality of these duties or prohibitions
lies in their being actually felt. The problem begins when we seek to justify
these feelings or seek their rational foundations. It might be asked whether
such a feeling is appropriate and whether there can be rational justifications
for it. This question would lead us back to Natural Law or to Kant. Or it might
be asked whether, since it arises in one who is well-brought-up, the feeling is
relative to a particular culture. If this were the case, the argument goes, its
foundation would not have the qualities of universality and normativity which
our moral duties should have. But this thought, in turn, leads beyond everyday
experience into a realm of theoretical claims where the only reality that is
available is metaphysical reality.

The only current moral theory that tries not to invoke theoretical claims is
utilitarianism. By positing the greatest happiness for the greatest number as
the foundation of the normativity of the duties and prohibitions we live by,
utilitarianism bases itself on a common-sense intuition: namely, the thought
that we should consider the consequences of our actions when we deliberate,
and that we should seek to achieve the best outcome for all. The well-known
problem that this could licenue us in sacrificing one or a small number of
individuals for the sake of outcomes that favour the majority suggests that this
theory has considerable problems but, to its credit, it apparently does not seek
to overcome these by appeals to theoretical claims. However, it could be argued
that the central premise of utilitarianism: the claim that human beings
want happiness understood as more pleasure rather than pain or more
preference satisfaction rather than sacrifice, is itself theoretical in my sense. It
is a claim about what happiness consists in that seems to reflect common sense
but actually fails to be sensitive to the feelings and experiences that ordinary
people have in their daily lives. If it is a theoretical claim it will seek universal
assent and it can then be refuted by only one example. Anyone who sacrifices
their interests for another would be such a counter instance. Accordingly, we
had best take that premise to be an empirical generalisation. But then it will
not provide a foundation for norms because of the is/ought fallacy and because
it will not have the universality required for that role. So the only way that
utilitarianism will work as a moral theory that grounds the normativity of
morality is if it does make theoretical claims of one kind or another.

The only tradition of ethical thought that does not rely on theoretical claims
is virtue ethics. Stemming from Aristotle, by way of Hume, virtue ethics takes
seriously the common-sense understanding of ordinary life. We all have
characters shaped by nature and by nurture and we are motivated by a
complex of emotions, desires, and rational deliberations to do what we see to
be virtuous. This philosophy is based on a thoroughly naturalistic conception
of human life and so eschews absolute, objective, and universal moral
theorising. It acknowledges the contingency of human motivation and of our
moral sentiments. It derives the goals and values in pursuit of which we feel we
must act from empirical observations of human life. It takes it as obvious from
a common-sense perspective that human beings need and desire such goods as
food, shelter, security, meaningful relationships with one another, cultural and
political engagement, freedom from exploitation and unfair treatment, stable
communities, and opportunities to procreate and establish nurturing
relationships with offspring (Nussbaum 1999). It admires those character
traits and those actions that pursue these goals and finds anyone who denies
them abominable. While I do not have the space here to defend these
propositions at length, the point I would make is that they involve no
theoretical claims in my sense.

Accordingly, the teaching of such an ethics within the university would
involve no reliance on metaphysical doctrine, dogma, or ideology. On the face
of it, virtue ethics gives us a form of moral discourse that is free of the kind of
theoretical claims that create tension and misunderstanding across cultural
differences.

Rather than further espousing virtue ethics as a method or theory of ethical
inquiry, however, I will now argue that there is a method of teaching ethics,
and of philosophy more generally, that also systematically avoids such reliance
on metaphysics, dogma, or ideology. This method is that of Modern Socratic
Dialogue.

Modern Socratic Dialogue

Modern Socratic Dialogue is a structured method for philosophical discussion
that was developed in the early twentieth century by a group of German
thinkers and educationists surrounding the philosopher Leonard Nelson
(1882–1927). It begins with the premise that everyone has an inborn aptitude
for philosophical thought and that no specific book learning is required for
pursuing philosophical insights. All that is required is a facilitator who is
trained to bring out this ability in all of the participants. Groups ranging from
six to twelve gather to discuss a topic that is couched as a general question and
proceed through a number of stages that conclude when consensus is reached
on an answer to that question. It takes time and perseverance to reach such a
result and the quest for consensus ensures that the group thoroughly explores
everything that is contributed to the discussion. Anyone who does not under-
stand a statement made by another or who does not agree with it will be left
behind by the discussion and will not be part of the concluding consensus.
Accordingly, it is an important rule of the procedure that everyone persists in
seeking understanding. It is also a requirement that everyone makes them-
several clear and that they do not invoke unexplained book knowledge.

Suppose that the topic for a given dialogue was ‘What is courage?’ The
session would begin with the facilitator asking the group to bring forward
eamples of incidents that they have themselves experienced in some way and
which are germane to the question. The group then discusses the three or four
eamples that have been offered in order to choose one to concentrate upon.
Already at this stage, themes will emerge as participants compare the eamples
and note similarities or differences between them. Having chosen the example
the group then explores it by asking the example-giver for more details. The
aim of this phase is for each participant to be able to imagine themselves
in the incident. They then seek to understand, from their own perspective,
how the incident illustrates what courage is or what the example says about courage. It is only when the group has understood what courage is in relation to the specific example and what features of courage might be specific to the example, that the facilitator will introduce the last phase of the dialogue: the phase in which the question is explored in its more general form.

It is significant that the method of Modern Socratic Dialogue calls upon participants to contribute examples from their own experience to the dialogue in order to provide a touchstone for the discussion. In proposing examples, participants are urged to tell their story briefly and in simple terms. Theoretical interpretations and constructions are to be avoided. Moreover, when exploring the example they have chosen, participants are urged not to speculate or to engage in hypothetical thinking, but to establish the facts. The task is to imagine yourself in the situation of the example-giver. It is not to reconstruct their thinking or their view of the world, or to explain them psychologically. It is simply to imaginatively be in that place and then, in that place, to be who you are and think how you think. In short, the dialogue method systematically excludes, to a very large extent, what I have been calling theoretical claims.

If the sunset example were to come up in a Modern Socratic Dialogue the description of it as ‘being in the presence of God’ would be challenged as being too theoretical. That participant would be asked to re-describe the experience in terms of what happened, what appeared, and what was immediately felt. These are terms upon which there can be consensus. Because the world views of people in today’s multicultural societies differ so greatly, theoretical claims in my sense do not conduces to consensus. They establish insurmountable differences and conflicts. The basis for consensus in a discussion which follows the rules of Modern Socratic Dialogue is the common-sense and everyday experience of each individual in the group.

Accordingly, what Modern Socratic Dialogue can contribute in university education generally and in ethical education more specifically is a form of discourse which systematically excludes those claims which ground intolerance. Modern Socratic Dialogue begins with concrete examples rather than generalised and theoretical claims. In the place of such claims, Modern Socratic Dialogue presents direct expressions of our concrete humanity and of our primordial rapport with each other. Whether this form of discourse would then converge upon virtue ethics or a more theoretically grounded moral theory is an empirical question which can only be decided by experience. What is clear is that it can guide us towards acting ethically. The goal of such a teaching method is not so much to teach students about ethics, but to give them the resources for being ethical.

References


Notes
1 It would be difficult to account for supererogatory actions if it were true. I also think that etiquette is a part of ethics, but that it is not usually a moral matter.
2 I have argued for this extensively in chapter 2 of my Life, Death and Subjectivity: Moral Sources in Bioethics (van Hooft 2004).
3 I argue for them at length in van Hooft (2006).