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## **Teaching Moral Philosophy Using Novels: Issues and Strategies**

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### **Introduction**

Philosophy instructors have long noted that students often find ethics courses unrelated to their lives—abstract, dry, and dull. I believe that using literature in conjunction with ethical theory is not only an effective way to teach moral philosophy but it also makes ethics classes more interesting and more relevant to students' lives and concerns. The purpose of this article is twofold: to argue in favor of using literature in ethics classes and to show that this is carried out most efficiently by using a couple of novels—preferably two that have different takes on the same issues—rather than short selections as advocated by some authors. To illustrate my case, I will describe an ethics course in which I use Mouloud Mammeri's *L'Opium et le bâton*,<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus' *The Plague*, and Oliver Johnson's *Ethics: Selections from Classical and Contemporary Writers* as the primary texts.<sup>2</sup>

### **I. Advantages and Limitations of the Standard Methods of Teaching Ethics**

College instructors usually adopt either a theoretical or an applied approach to teaching ethics. The former approach takes the form of either a presentation of the philosophies of Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill—virtue ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism—followed by the standard objections to them, or the examination of important themes

of ethics such as autonomy, rights, justice, etc. In theory classes, real-life problems are sometimes discussed in the light of theories, but lectures and discussions are usually directed towards the evaluation of arguments and the analysis of ethical concepts, principles, and theories. Applied ethics courses, on the other hand, are case-based. Books in applied ethics usually start with a chapter in which normative theories are explained. In the subsequent chapters, the theories are applied to analyze real and hypothetical moral problems in medicine, business, the environment, etc. In these courses, the focus is on application rather than on theories for their own sake. When students are asked to examine cases, they are expected to (1) describe the pertinent facts of the case, (2) clarify the moral problem involved, (3) identify the stakeholders, (4) present alternative solutions, (5) articulate and critically evaluate reasons for each one of them, and (6) recommend the solution in favor of which one has the strongest arguments.

Each approach to teaching ethics outlined above obviously has advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of the theory approach is the grounding in philosophy, historical depth, and exercise in conceptual analysis and argumentation that result. The case approach to teaching ethics has the advantage of making ethics concrete. It also allows students to imagine tackling moral problems they may encounter in their professional lives and may be useful to teach students how to deal with some relatively noncontroversial and simple issues, such as informed consent and confidentiality.

The major disadvantages of the traditional ways of teaching ethics are their abstraction and their oversimplification of the moral life, and this is precisely what makes them dull and uninteresting: students tend to dismiss course material in which the people do not think, feel, and behave the way they expect ordinary people to think, feel, and behave and tend to get more involved in courses in which they do.

Indeed, for modern moral theorists, moral values can be compared on a common scale, duty for deontologists and utility for utilitarians. But, as Bernard Williams pointed out, lived morality contains, in addition to duty and utility, all sorts of values that cannot be compared on a common scale: gratitude, friendship, commitments, the sense of personal responsibility, and the aspiration to become a certain kind of person (Williams, 1981, p. 76). In addition, according to deontologists and utilitarians alike, morality is essentially a question of knowledge: Emotions are irrelevant and possibly dangerous; they, therefore, ought to be set aside because they undermine the possibility of shared morality and destroy its rational character. In everyday life, on the other hand, emotions and imagination play an important role in morality, not only

in the sense that sometimes they enter in conflict with one's sense of duty but also in the sense that, as Aristotle asserted, right feeling is necessary for right judgment and, ultimately, for good character and happiness.<sup>3</sup> As Martha Nussbaum puts it,

The agent who discerns intellectually that a friend is in need or that a loved one has died, but who fails to respond to these facts with appropriate sympathy or grief, clearly lacks a part of Aristotelian virtue. It seems right to say ... that part of discernment or perception is lacking. This person does not really, or does not fully, see what happened. We want to say ... [that this person] really does not fully *know* it, because the emotional part of cognition is lacking ... The emotions are themselves modes of vision, or recognition. Their responses are part of what knowing or truly recognizing or acknowledging, consists in. (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 79)

Modern moral theorists also think of moral principles as independent of time and place and have the tendency to regard the self as detached from entanglements of society and history (Hare, 1981; Kant, 1959). By contrast, lived morality is interpersonal in the sense that many moral problems are not limited to dilemmas within the minds of individuals who perceive conflicts between their own values or between their values and their inclinations but involve interaction and conflict with other people. Lived morality is also often social and political; many moral disputes are manifestations of deeper political conflicts. Finally, while deontologists and utilitarians alike think that all moral problems are, in principle, resolvable, for many philosophers, such as Lyotard (1989) and Hampshire (1987), morality is essentially conflictual. Conflicts of ideals, obligations, and interests are pervasive and often irresolvable. Williams sums up the weakness of moral philosophy as follows:

The resources of most modern moral philosophy are not well adjusted to the modern world.... In other ways, notably in its more Kantian forms, it is not involved enough; it is governed by a dream of a community of reason that is too far removed, as Hegel first said it was, from social and historical reality and from any concrete sense of a particular ethical life—farther removed from those things, in some ways, than the religion it replaced. These various versions of moral philosophy share a false image of how reflection is related to practice, an image of theories in terms of which they uselessly elaborate their differences from one another. (Williams, 1985, pp. 197-198)

## II. Reasons for Including Literature in Ethics Courses

In response to some of the aforementioned problems, some educators have advocated the use of literature to supplement philosophy textbooks.

At least three books have recently been published for that purpose: *The Moral of the Story: An Anthology of Ethics through Literature* by Peter and Renata Singer (2005), *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature* by Louis Pojman (2007), and *The Moral of the Story: An Introduction to Ethics* by Nina Rosenstand (2004). The works of these authors represent a move in the right direction; literature can, indeed, make ethics concrete and therefore more interesting and more relevant. One of the qualities that make a good novel is its capacity to convey a sense of the complexity of the problems that confront people in everyday life even when it deals with fictional situations and characters.

To be precise, unlike many philosophical works, such as Immanuel Kant's, that reject emotions and anything that is not fully intelligible,<sup>5</sup> literature is not limited in its subject matter; everything can, in principle, be a proper object of literature: facts, thoughts, feelings, what makes sense, and what does not. Also, unlike philosophers who rely on logic and conceptual analysis and repress ambiguity and contradiction, novelists are free to use narrative techniques, style, and language in creative ways, even to distort them. As John Adamson rightly remarks, while philosophy is "tidy," literature has a "disorderly, spontaneous, and messy character" (Adamson, 1998, p. 87).

These two features of literature make it uniquely suited to deal with moral experience in all its details, nuances, complexity, and messiness. "Through literature," Iris Murdoch writes, "we can re-discover a sense of the density in our lives" (Murdoch, 1997, p.293).

To start with, many works of literature depict moral problems from the perspective of those who experience them in all their ambiguities and contradictions. Likewise, many works of literature ring more true to life than philosophy does because they presents a person's moral point of view in the context of the narrative or narratives that shape his or her self-understanding. As Alasdair MacIntyre explains:

Man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question, 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question, 'of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 201)

Many works of literature also present moral problems in terms of the histories, relationships, and conflicts of individuals and groups rather than just as dilemmas of solitary moral agents. Furthermore, many works of literature attend to the social context of moral problems. *L'Opium et le bâton's* and *The Plague's* characters' moral dilemmas mirror

the social and political conflicts of their times, colonialism in the case of *L'Opium et le bâton* and Nazism in the case of *The Plague*. Part of what makes some novels good is their capacity to expose the workings of good and evil in the individual and in social relationships. As Nussbaum puts it, "Literature speaks about us, about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence and the totality of our connections" (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 171). Finally, many works of literature show that there are no easy solutions to moral problems. Works of literature that are straightforwardly didactic or preachy are often less interesting and less appealing than those that show the ambiguity and limitation of conventional morality and of universal moral principles.

Because much literature is often more in tune with real life than theory and because it appeals to the imagination and emotions of readers, it evokes a deeper response in students than theory alone does. First, it encourages students to think about moral issues before they master the technical language of moral philosophy. Second, it helps them learn to pay attention to the context, details, and nuances of moral situations. Third, it shows how seemingly abstract ideas are dramatically realized in the behavior of individuals and groups. Fourth, it directs them to accept the inevitable ambiguities and difficulties in attempting to solve moral problems and thereby reflect on the importance and the limits of ethical theory. Fifth, it helps increase sensitivity and understanding of viewpoints expressed from different cultures, countries, and backgrounds. And, finally, it enables them to be aware and to sympathize with the suffering of others. As Richard Rorty explains:

Fiction like that of Dickens, Olive Schreiner, or Richard Wright gives us the details about the kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we have previously not attended. Fiction like that of Choderlos de Laclos, Henry James, or Nabokov give us details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby let us redescribe ourselves. That is why the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress. (Rorty, 1989, p. xvi)

### III. Questions of Pedagogy

Having made a case for the use of literature in ethics courses, there remains the question of how this can be carried out in practice. Two major tasks of designing an ethics course that includes literature are deciding what role literature is to play in the course and selecting suitable material. Unless one is clear about the function of literature with regard to philosophy and unless one chooses carefully the kind of mate-

rial to use, the whole enterprise of supplementing ethics classes with literature in order to make them more effective and more interesting is counterproductive. A case in point is Singer's and Singer's, Pojman's, and Rosenstand's ethics and literature texts mentioned above. The books are anthologies that combine primary texts from philosophy and short selections from novels, short stories, and plays. Despite their popularity, these books suffer from serious weaknesses.

The first problem with using short selections from novels, short stories, and plays from different periods and different genres and styles, instead of a couple of carefully chosen novels, is that students are more likely than not to confuse the characters, the plots, and the themes of the different works. Second, if the purpose of using literature is to make ethics more interesting, then *Antigone*, *Hamlet*, *King Henry V*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Phineas Finn* (Singer and Singer) *Medea* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (Rosenstand) may not be most appropriate. The plots, settings, characters, and language of these works are out of step with many twenty-first century students. They do not find stories about gods and goddesses, kings, rich heiresses, and aristocrats appealing. This is not to imply that students should not be exposed to this kind of literature, but only that it is not appropriate for the purpose of making ethics courses more interesting. One must distinguish between literature courses and using literature as context. If students cannot connect their readings to some of their preoccupations, they are not likely to appreciate them; there has to be some correlation between their previous knowledge and experience and what they read.

Another requirement of choosing literary texts to supplement philosophy textbooks is verisimilitude; most students want believable plots and characters, novels that involve conflicts in which they can believably find themselves and can realistically decide what to do. In addition, when selections are relatively very short—sometimes as short as one and a half pages—they, very much like cases, do not present moral problems and moral experience in all their nuances. The selections do not show, for example, how characters change. They also neither explore motives nor show how morality is fundamentally an interpersonal affair. Worse, the one-literary-text one-ethical-issue/theory structure of Singer and Singer's, Rosenstand's, and Pojman's books destroys the multi-faceted character of moral life.

A more serious problem with the approach described above is that literature is seen as either a storehouse for examples to stimulate reflection or simply as illustrations of philosophical concepts and theories. This, I think, does not do justice to literature and prevents instructors from using literature to its fullest potential. Novels do not just dramatize and



illustrate moral problems and theories, although they also do that; they have plenty to say about moral life in their own right, as we have seen.

Entire novels—or at least substantial selections from two novels—such as *L'Opium et le bâton* and *The Plague*, unlike short selections, provide a rich tapestry of issues and characters for exploration in an ethics class. Not only do they present people as multidimensional, rather than solely as egoists, or utilitarians, or deontologists, thus making literature more realistic, but they also explore how characters change as the stories unfold. In *L'Opium et le bâton* we see, for example, how Tayeb, who is apparently a selfish traitor, can have a change of heart and that his personality is puzzling and complex.

Furthermore, the use of entire novels shows that morality involves an active relationship with people who sometimes have radically different beliefs, desires, and behaviors. Novels also expose the reader to the fact that moral problems take place against a background of political/ideological conflicts. *L'Opium et le bâton*, for example, not only examines individual dilemmas within a larger sociopolitical context but deconstructs the belief that moral theories are ideology-free.

Finally, many novels present and dramatize ambiguity and contradiction as irreducible aspects of moral life and, as such, they show the limitations of moral theories.

#### IV. A Practical Example of Using Literature to Enhance Ethics Teaching

To show how novels can be used to supplement theory textbooks in ethics classes, I sketch below an outline of a course using *L'Opium et le bâton* and *The Plague* as the primary literary texts. These two novels are particularly appropriate for courses in ethics, as they deal with all the topics mentioned above. The fact that they have different takes on the same issues leads to more interesting discussions and increases students' sensitivity and understanding of different points of view from different social classes and cultures.

##### A. Method

The purpose of the course is to help students learn the concepts, theories, and methods of moral philosophy and be able to apply them while keeping in mind their limitations and problematic nature; it is neither to moralize nor to offer final solutions to moral problems.<sup>6</sup>

The general pattern of each class session is a sequence of observation and reflection. Students:



- express their own observations on selected passages of the novels, focusing either on specific characters or on particular incidents that set the characters at odds with themselves, with each other, with society, or with the world;
- are then prompted to express a view on a specific question;
- compare and critique different views;
- move to theory and summarize and discuss textbook material;
- reflect further on their initial observations which are, then, either strengthened or modified.

The major theories of normative ethics, i.e., egoism, utilitarianism, deontology, care, and virtue ethics, are presented in such a way that each is an attempt to surmount some of the weaknesses of its predecessor. Through this dialectical process, the course moves towards a reflection on the usefulness and limits of ethical theories. At the end, the logic that governs the design of the course becomes explicit.

### ***B. Initial Reading of the Novels***

Throughout the semester, students are introduced to the basic concepts, principles, and theories of ethics by reading and contrasting in detail some important selections from Mammeri's and Camus' novels. But they need to keep in mind all the time the plot and the characters of the novels when discussing the selections. Thus, in the first meeting, I ask students to read *The Plague* and a summary<sup>7</sup> of *L'Opium et le bâton* for the following class and to focus on the stories as wholes, paying special attention to their setting in time and place, initial conflicts, and central characters. One way to lead students to attend to the works as wholes is to provide them with questions that deal with the structure and topic of the novels rather than with any particular details. Another useful way is to encourage them to draw story and character maps. The next class, I begin with a synopsis of the novels followed by a brief review of the socio-political atmosphere of France during the German occupation and of Algeria in the 1950s. I mention that literature is a site where social and political conflicts take place. I also sketch short biographies of Mammeri and Camus.

*The Plague* and *L'Opium et le bâton* may seem somewhat remote to some students. To help them relate to the plight of the inhabitants of Tala and Oran, I remind them of the Avian and Swine Flu scares and ask them if they think what takes place in the *Plague* could happen in the United States and what would they do if it does happen.

### C. Moral Problems

The first problem of moral philosophy is to determine what makes a problem a moral one. Students will not respond morally to moral problems if they fail to recognize them as such. One particularly effective way to begin is to ask them to recall instances of what they think are moral problems in *L'Opium* and in *the Plague*. I have students read the passage from *L'Opium et le bâton* where Dr. Lazrak wonders whether or not to join the ALN (Armée de Libération Nationale) and the passage from *The Plague* where Dr. Rieux describes how he feels about his wife who was suffering from TB. I ask them to identify the characters' internal conflicts and whether or not the problems the two characters face are instances of moral problems.

I also ask them to provide their own definitions of *moral problem*. Students' definitions provide a starting point for discussion, but they are usually either too vague, too narrow, or do not conform to the way the word *moral* is used in ordinary language. I ask them to read what the book says are the essential features of moral problems: (1) they are problems in which one is faced with two or more alternative courses of actions all of which have the potential to either benefit or harm other people, and (2) they involve an internal struggle between duty and inclination. I ask, "Having read the textbook definition, are you inclined to change yours? If so, how? If not, why not?"

### D. Moral Problems Are Pervasive

Having developed an idea of what a moral problem involves, the next step is to sensitize students to the pervasiveness and inescapability of moral problems. I start the discussion by pointing out that the meaning of a symbol is closely tied to the themes of literary work. I ask what kind of theme does the word *plague* suggest. I also ask what is the significance of the facts that Tala is surrounded by barbed wire in *L'Opium et le bâton* and the gates of Oran are closed with no possibility of escape in *The Plague*, and how do they foreshadow the events that occur later. I suggest that *L'Opium* and *The Plague* each explore the theme of the existence of a specific form of evil, colonialism in the case of *L'Opium et le bâton* and Nazism in the case of *The Plague*. I add that Tala being surrounded by barbed wire and Oran being quarantined from the rest of the world may symbolize the impossibility of avoiding taking a stand in face of evil. I ask students if they can find passages in *L'Opium et le bâton* where Mammeri says so explicitly. One example is where Captain Marcilliac tells Dr. Lazrak:

Life in Algiers was, certainly, not very pleasant, but ...don't be mistaken, Doctor... You were better off there because it was easier for you to go

by unnoticed. We are here in a provincial town, with all its poetry and its horror. Everybody here lives in a glass house. Everything here is transparent, and the colors are clear-cut. The sizes are reduced which means the proportions are distorted. Life here ignores all notions of nuance and shade, it is always monochromatic. Everybody is either on one side or the other of the barricade. In Algiers there is a whole area of troubled water or shade.... But here...look at this horizon (he stretched his arm) almost at a hand's reach. And then, it is a useless risk (he looked Bachir in the eyes) ... and dangerous! As a result, everybody plays openly: There are only two teams and no spectators. Among you, Belaid is in one team and Ali is in another. For Belaid, Ali is a stray, but for Ali, Belaid is a traitor. It is as stupid as this! (Mammeri, 1965, pp. 66-67)

At this point, I ask students if they can find in Camus' novel passages where he makes a similar point about the necessity of taking position. Students may point out the passages where he writes that the plague "concerns all of us" (Camus, 1947, p. 67), is "everybody's business and everybody ought to do his duty" (Camus, 1947, p. 149), and "everybody is in the same boat" (Camus, 1947, p. 178).

### ***E. The Moral Point of View***

After getting an idea of the pervasiveness of moral problems, the next step is to find out what is involved in adopting the moral point of view. I have students compare Dr. Lazrak and Dr. Rieux on one hand and Tayeb and Cottard on the other and find out what makes Lazrak and Rieux moral and Tayeb and Cottard, if not immoral, then amoral. The class then discusses if Cottard and Tayeb fare well when evaluated morally. They put their own interests first and have no concern for others; they also do not experience any sense of duty. By contrast, even though Dr. Rieux and Dr. Lazrak have a moment of doubt in which they wonder whether or not they are doing the right thing, they both resist the temptation to serve their own selfish interests. Both realize that meaning and freedom are found neither in withdrawal from society nor in individual pursuits, but in commitment to others.

I ask students to articulate what is involved in adopting the moral point of view: (1) to consider impartially the interest of each individual involved in the moral situation, (2) to recognize that moral decisions or judgments must be supported by good arguments and finally, (3) to be aware that morality is overriding in the sense that it ought to take precedence over other considerations such as self-interest.

### ***F. Normative Theories***

With these things in mind, students get acquainted with normative theories by examining how, in *L'Opium et le bâton* and in *The Plague*,

different people react to evil and the adequacy or inadequacy of various courses of action. Some, like Tayeb in *L'Opium et le bâton* and Cottard in *The Plague*, only want to profit from the situation. Then there are those who try to find refuge in religion: the prayer leader and the Jesuit Paneloux. Finally there are those who, not knowing whether or not they will succeed, act to change the world: Dr. Lazrak and Dr. Rieux. The goal of this section is to identify parallels between the positions of the character in the novel and moral theories: utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, justice ethics, and care ethics.

1. *Utilitarianism*. As they go through Camus' novel, I invite students to compare and contrast the ways the characters react to the plague. I have them read the passage where Dr. Rieux urges the authorities to quarantine the city, but some members of the city council are reluctant to do so. I ask what arguments Dr. Rieux and members of the city council put forward to justify their actions. Recognizing the plague as such, Dr. Rieux convinces the authorities to close the town. The argument he puts forward is fairly straightforward: to prevent the epidemic from spreading outside the town. The averse members of the city council do not want to do so for fear of alarming the inhabitants. After going through the answers, I ask students if they see any parallels between the actions of Dr. Rieux and the members of the city council and the ethical theories in the textbook. The students may point out that Rieux's reason for urging the authorities to close the town and the councilmen's unwillingness to do so are typical of utilitarianism.

2. *Deontology*. To further investigate utilitarianism and introduce deontology, students will read the section of *L'Opium et le bâton* that describes the events before the village is bombarded. The captain asks the villagers to turn in those who hide the ALN combatants in order to save the village. I ask students to compare and contrast Belaid's and the mayor's reactions to the captain's ultimatum. Belaid is willing to give up; he is even ready to denounce his own sister to the captain. The mayor, on the other hand, refuses to betray anyone, even if that means the death of all the inhabitants of the village. I ask, "How do you account for the differences in their reactions? And "What theories of ethics Belaid and the mayor implicitly subscribe to?" While Belaid, according to the standard definition of utilitarianism, is a utilitarian, the mayor appears to be a deontologist. For him, the outcome of an action does not matter; what matters is doing the right thing. To assess utilitarianism, I point out that the textbook mentions that it is often said that utilitarians will sometimes consider unjust actions to be right. I ask students if they can find examples in the novel where achieving the greatest good for the

greatest number does not necessarily mean that everyone is treated fairly. One obvious example is Belaid's willingness to sacrifice his sister for the sake of the majority.

3. *Virtue ethics*. Discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism and deontology inevitably leads into discussions of virtue ethics; making moral decisions is not simply a matter of applying principles, although it includes that. It is also a matter of discernment, not to mention willpower. A good place to begin the discussions is to ask students if there are in the novels characters they think are admirable and characters they think are dishonorable. Asking students to portray Dr. Rieux and Cottard, for example, will provide them with the occasion to consider questions of virtues and vices. Focusing on officer-cadet Hamlet will address questions of weakness of will. Finally, describing Dr. Lazrak's mother and the inhabitants of Tala will highlight the need to go beyond principles to make the right moral decisions.

I call attention to the passage of *L'Opium et le bâton* where the author, Mammeri, describes the plight of the villagers who have to please both the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the French military and ask students if there are any principles they can rely on to do so. The answer will likely be negative; to be able to live in such difficult situation one needs force of character and discernment, not just abstract principles. I ask students if they can identify some of the inadequacies of relying on principles alone.

We need to widen our perspective from a focus on particular actions to include character (virtue ethics) because how a person interprets and discharges duties such as beneficence and justice, etc. depends on the kind of person one is. In addition, moral life presents more complexity than abstract principles suggest; there are situations when principles do not apply or provide little guidance. To emphasize this point, I then ask the students to reflect on Dr. Lazrak's mother, Tassadit, and ask whether she was right to advise him not to antagonize the French captain. I ask whether Tassadit is the kind of person Aristotle would describe as a virtuous person. She has no formal education, yet she makes a good decision based on experience and good character.

To further deepen students' understanding of virtue ethics, I then, ask them to take a close look at Tayeb and Cottard and whether their moral lapse is due to the failure to know what is right. They may suggest that Tayeb and Cottard's behavior is best explained by the lack of a certain kind of disposition; they seem to lack sensitivity to the needs of others. Students may also point out that Dr. Lazrak's and Rambert's attitudes toward evil are at first ambivalent but both manage to overcome their hesitation.

The class then turns to the way Plato and Aristotle understood moral failure. I explain that for Plato, moral failure is due to ignorance. People fail to do what is right because they do not know what is right. If one knows what is right, one cannot help but do it. For Aristotle, on the other hand, moral failure is due either to the disposition to do evil (wanting to do wrong) or weakness of will (the inability to refrain from acting on one's desires even though one knows that it is wrong to do so). Aristotle calls one who wants to do wrong *the vicious character* and one who has weakness of will *the incontinent character*. One who is capable of resisting temptation and does the right thing, he calls *the continent character*. Once this explanation of moral failure is clear, the class goes back to the novels and tries to find parallels between Aristotle's types of character and the characters of the novel. Students may comment that Cottard and Tayeb are good examples of vicious characters, Dr. Lazrak is an example of a continent character, and officer-cadet Hamlet is an example of an incontinent character.

4. *Care and justice*. To introduce the care/justice opposition, I ask students to look closely at Tarrou in *The Plague* and his political evolution and also to compare Dr. Lazrak's and Dr. Rieux's attitudes towards evil. The class goes over how Tarrou used to be involved in politics but became disillusioned when he realized that his fellow activists were willing to put people to death to realize their political agenda. He then decides to follow "the path of sympathy." I ask students to explain in their own words the difference between care and justice ethics explained in the textbook. While the ethics of justice stresses freedom, equality, and fairness in the application of universal norms, the ethics of care emphasizes compassion and empathy. I ask which character(s) embodies an ethics of care and which embodies an ethics of justice. While Tarrou and Dr. Rieux embody an ethics of care, Dr. Lazrak, Ali, and Omar embody an ethics of justice.

The discussion of care and justice provides the class with the opportunity to place moral theories in a larger political context by pointing out that for Dr. Lazrak and other Algerian militants, compassion alone is not enough to end colonialist injustice; if anything, it perpetuates the status quo. This will serve as a steppingstone to discuss the larger political implications of seemingly neutral moral theories.

5. *Religion*. Many students subscribe to the widely held view that what is good is what God approves of or commands and what is bad is what God disapproves of or forbids, known as *the divine command theory of ethics*. Whether morality needs to be based on religious beliefs or whether it is possible to act morally and determine what is good



and what is bad without God is one of the toughest issues the characters in *L'Opium et le bâton* and the *Plague* struggle with. To introduce the divine command theory and the key arguments for and against it, I ask students if any characters in the novels advocate it and if any oppose it and what reasons they have in both cases. Students usually have no difficulty pointing out the Jesuit Paneloux and the prayer leader as supporters of the divine command theory, as they interpret evil as a sign of divine displeasure. To help them answer the question of what kind of arguments the characters put forward in favor of their positions, I invite them to reflect on the passage of *L'Opium et le bâton* in which at a special meeting of the village to decide what to do after the French captain decided to bombard Tala, the prayer leader says:

A danger hovers on this village, Saints of Tala. May the call come from us and Rescue from you.

The chorus of the serious voices of the old men said Amen!

If we sinned, forgive us the faults that we committed more by weakness than by spitefulness. Don't measure your anger to our offence. Keep rather in the way of God those who are in it and bring back to the straight path those who strayed from it.

The entire assembly answered: Amen!

The women on the other hand brought the support of their worried agreement, and then in the returned silence the voice of the amin suddenly went up: Saints of Tala, if you are tired of us, we are also tired of this life, if this is to live! This whole country is suffering and struggling. Of the common trial we had more than our right share. Maybe it is time now that the evening would come and that we would live in peace. But, if the evening for us is not one of rest but of death, if the wing of your protection can no longer spread over these men who are gathered where their fathers used to gather, on the seated women in their anguish behind this wall, if it is written, finally, that we must end, make it that it is in dignity that we die and that it is not going to be said later that it is in disgrace that we perished. (Mammeri, 1965, p.334)

After analyzing this passage, I ask students to identify the passages in *The Plague* where Paneloux makes the same kind of appeal to religion. On a rainy day in the officially organized Week of Prayer, Father Paneloux delivers his fiery sermon to the people of Oran. The sermon begins with "Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it" (Camus, 1947, p. 94). Paneloux preaches that the plague has been sent by God to separate the good people from the bad, to harvest the "wheat" for heaven and leave behind the "chaff" for their punishment of horrible suffering. In a second sermon, however,



he changes his mind and sees the plague as a trial of faith. I ask the students to compare the two sermons. In the first, Paneloux shows little sympathy for the population of Oran. Finally, I ask them to compare Paneloux's and the prayer leader's attitudes and ask what they think of the belief that without religion to provide guidance, people are adrift, morally disoriented.

In the last part of the course, I ask students to compare what they have learned from moral theory and from literature respectively. We discuss what is called *anti-theory* in ethics, the idea that theories are neither necessary nor desirable because they are too abstract to solve moral problems, they do not reflect moral experience, and they prevent those who adopt them from leading full lives (Baier, 1985; Nussbaum, 1992; Williams, 1973).

## Conclusion

Using novels—preferably two that have different takes on the same issues—in conjunction with textbooks in moral theory makes teaching ethics effective, thought-provoking, and relevant. Not just because novels flesh out moral concepts, principles, and theory, although they do that too, but also because they attend to features of moral experience that theory does not address. Indeed, literature in general and novels in particular challenge ethical theory and moderate its pretensions to explain moral experience and solve moral problems. It shows that no normative theory is indisputably superior, none is equally appropriate to all kinds of moral problems, and none can anticipate all the complexities of particular situations. In dealing with moral problems, one ought to think of theories as heuristic devices only. Their role is to guide thinking, not to provide final answers.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *L'Opium et le bâton* by Algerian author Mouloud Mammeri has not been translated into English. I provide students with my own translations of relevant sections of the novel.

<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this article is not to advocate the use of these two particular works but to illustrate my case. There are many works of literature that would lend themselves to the kind of use I make of Mammeri's and Camus' novels, for example, *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton and *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser and *The Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe.

<sup>3</sup> "Thus we can experience fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and generally any kind of pleasure and pain either too much or too little, and in either case not properly. But to experience all this at the right time, toward the right objects,

toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner—that is the median and the best course, the course that is a mark of virtue” (Aristotle, 1999, p. 43).

<sup>4</sup> Feelings are, of course, an essential component of morality, as Nussbaum points out. But they are in no way the whole story because they can be mistaken, even dangerous, if they are not dealt with critically. As psychologist James Hillman explains:

The terrorist and the girl who kills for her cult hero (Charles Manson) also trust their feelings. Feelings can become possessed and blind as much as any other human function ... Feelings are not a faultless compass to steer by; to believe so is to make Gods of them, and then only good Gods, forgetting that feeling can be as instrumental to destructive action and mistaken ideologies as any other psychological function. (Hillman, 1975, p.182)

<sup>5</sup> David Hume held that moral judgments are not the “offspring of reason,” they are, rather, derived from the feelings of approval and disapproval people experience when they consider an action or a character trait. Kant, by contrast, thought that we can reason about morality, but that emotion must play no part in this reasoning.

<sup>6</sup> There is a great deal of disagreement about what the goal of teaching ethics ought to be. For some educators, that goal is character formation and the inculcation of a set of particular values. However, for others, prescription and moralizing have no place in college classrooms; the goal of teaching ethics is to develop students’ ability to think critically about morality and moral issues (Callahan, 1980). Among those who advocate character formation and the inculcation of values, some argue in favor of traditional virtues such as honesty and nonmaleficence (Putnam, 2003). Others maintain that the only values that are proper to teach are those necessary for democratic participation (Gutmann, 1987). While no approach to teaching moral philosophy is totally neutral, ethics instructors should eschew indoctrinating students to a particular point of view, including democracy. Indeed, moral instruction may be appropriate when dealing with elementary and high school students but it may not be appropriate for college students. To presume to teach college students to be moral is, to say the least, presumptuous: ethics instructors are not necessarily more moral than their students. In addition, it is not obvious that there is such thing as moral expertise, and it is a matter of controversy whether virtue can be taught.

<sup>7</sup> Set during the Algerian war, *L’Opium et le bâton* (Opium and the stick) is the story of Doctor Bachir Lazrak who is faced with two alternative courses of action. He can either let himself be co-opted by the colonial system and lead a comfortable life in Algiers—opium, or he can join the ALN (Armée de Libération Nationale) and risk being arrested, tortured, or even killed—the stick. Lazrak chooses to join the ALN. The story starts when an ALN messenger shows up at Lazrak’s door to ask for help treating a wounded militant. The doctor refuses. When he learns that the messenger is arrested and tortured, he returns to his native village for fear the messenger will denounce him. Lazrak has been away

from his village for ten years. During that time, his family and indeed the entire village have fallen on hard times. His sister, Farroudja, is widowed with three children to take care of; his brother, Ali, has joined the ALN; his older brother, Belaid, has apparently become an informant for the French army. Furthermore, the villagers are subject to the tyranny of the commander of the French garrison, Capitaine Delecluze, and the bullying of the local collaborator, Tayeb. Angered by what he sees, he comes to the realization that he cannot remain neutral and that true freedom consists in the commitment to a collective cause rather than individual pursuits. Lazrak takes to the mountains where he is put in charge of organizing the health care system for the ALN in the Kabylie region. *L'Opium et le bâton* describes, in realistic detail, the major events of the conflict such as the demonstrations of December 11, 1960, in Algiers in support of Algerian independence and important military confrontations. The novel also presents a vivid image of the plight of the civilian population during the war. It ends with the public execution of two Algerian combatants, Akli and Ali, and the evacuation of Tala and its subsequent bombardment as a punishment for the killing of a number of French soldiers by the ALN.

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