Who Teaches Ethics? An Inquiry into the Nature of Ethics as an Academic discipline

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Purpose and Research Questions

This paper explores the role of ethics in higher education by examining the academic training and departmental home of professors who teach courses in ethics. In particular, it examines the extent to which individuals teaching courses related to ethics have formal disciplinary education either in philosophy or in religion, the two academic disciplines that historically have been most closely associated with the formal study of ethics. Thus, our aim is empirical rather than prescriptive.

Academic disciplines provide an intellectual community for those engaged in similar research and sharing teaching interests. Disciplines serve a number of functions related to the support of the academics who participate in teaching within the discipline. The intellectual community typically sponsor leads to conferences and journals that further the knowledge base in the discipline, provide channels for the dissemination of knowledge among the practitioners in the discipline, and an opportunity for professionals to network with and learn from each other.

While many professors in the U.S. teach ethics, it is not at all clear whether those teachers are members of a common academic community. Our research explores the degree to which those teaching ethics are identified with a discipline such as philosophy or religion, or whether their primary professional identity lies in another discipline. Our hypothesis is that a significant number of those teaching ethics are primarily affiliated with an academic domain other than ethics, and simply teach a course or two in applied ethics problems within that primary academic domain.

By gathering data on the professors in American colleges and universities that contain the word "ethic" or "moral" in the title and collecting the terminal degrees of those professors and their current

"home" academic department, we inferred that a majority of ethics professors are primarily trained in areas other than philosophy or religion, and serve in departments other than philosophy or religion. More specifically, it appears from our research that there are two distinct kinds of ethics courses: those taught in philosophy or religion departments by professors trained in philosophy or religion and ethics courses offered through other departments, generally taught by faculty not trained in philosophy or religion.

The paper and its authors do not address the question of whether those teaching ethics in disciplinary-specific ethics classes should be trained in philosophy or religion. Some authors have adopted the view that philosophy- or religion-based education should be required for university-level ethics instructors. Most notably, the Hastings Center Study *"Ethics Teaching in Higher Education"* includes as one if its concluding recommendations that "as an ideal, those teaching applied and professional ethics . . . ought to have the equivalent of one year of training in [religion or philosophy]" (Hastings Center, 1980, at 301). Others, including Barry and Ohland (2009) put applied ethics in "an apparent gray area" in which some qualifications are necessary, but stop short of calling for a requirement of formal ethics instruction.[1]

The authors of this study acknowledge the obvious potential benefits of formal training in ethics (knowledge of standard terminology, connection with tradition, etc.) but do not explicitly address the question of whether such education is inherently valuable or should be required. Our focus is on the documentation of the differing educational backgrounds of those teaching ethics, thereby suggesting the lack of a common academic community of ethics instructors.

ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

To some degree, academic disciplines are complex and amorphous entities that defy precise definition. Merriam-Webster Online defines "discipline" as merely "a field of study." However, the use of the term in higher education in the United States is considerably more nuanced. Historically, modern disciplines have descended from medieval universities, which traditionally taught seven "liberal arts." These were divided into the Trivium (logic, grammar and rhetoric), and the Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music). The Trivium was seen as representing the "inner" realm (including notions of

spirituality and ethics), while the Quadrivium was the "outer"(one's connection to the world (Bernstein, 2000)).

Although disciplines change over time, each discipline relates to a distinguishable community of scholars (Becher & Trowler 2001; Toulmin 1972). In using the metaphor of "tribes," Becher states that each discipline has its own culture, defines its own identity, and protects against intrusions from those in other disciplines (1989; Becher & Trowler, 2001). Becher and Trowler describe the cultural elements of a discipline as including "their traditions, customs and practices, transmitted knowledge, beliefs, morals and rules of conduct, as well as their linguistic and symbolic forms of communication and the meanings they share." (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 47). According to Becher and Trowler, socialization into the discipline often occurs during graduate school, and membership in the discipline often requires a degree of loyalty to the group and acceptance of its norms.

The disciplinary status of ethics is unclear. Ethics has traditionally not been thought of as a discipline in its own right, but as a branch of other disciplines such as philosophy, or alternatively of religion. Philosophy is generally considered a discipline, (Hansson, 2008), although even this is disputed by some. William James referred to philosophy as "a collective name for questions that have not yet been answered to the satisfaction of all by whom they have been asked" (James, 1979, p. 23). Nevertheless, religion and philosophy have traditionally been considered disciplines, and ethics has been considered a sub-discipline of one or both of them. Hansson argues that disciplines can be differentiated either by differences in subject matter or by differences in methodology, and that philosophy's place among the academic disciplines is established primarily through its methodological approach (2008).

Becher and Trowler note that it is quite common for multiple disciplines to lay claim to the same intellectual territory, and that this does not necessarily lead to a conflict between them (2001). However, there is a common perception that philosophy is "losing territory" to other disciplines (Hansson, 2008). This can occur in many ways, but certainly one perceived loss of territory occurs when the term "ethics" is adopted within other disciplines, such as business, biology, journalism, law or medicine, and are taught with varying degrees of reliance on the methodological approaches traditionally claimed by philosophy.

In recent years there has been a widening gap between philosophical and theological ethics on the one hand, and applied ethics on the other.

These fields of "applied ethics" include bioethics, medical ethics, business ethics, legal ethics, journalism ethics, and engineering ethics. Some of these areas of applied ethics are described as disciplines—Enderle (1996) suggests that business ethics is, or should be, a discipline—or, specifically in the case of bioethics, "second-order disciplines" (Kopelman, 2006, Kopelman, 2009). Kopelman argues that bioethics is a second-order discipline because it addresses issues that are too broad to be claimed by any one discipline (Kopelman, 2009). Thus, there is an emerging tension between the view that all areas of applied ethics are rightfully sub-disciplines of philosophy or religion and the view these emerging fields are distinct second-order disciplines.

Professional disciplines are increasingly viewing courses in applied ethics as part of their own disciplinary territory. Many such disciplines include a course in applied ethics as an integral part of their own curriculum—which Barry and Ohland (2009) refer to as the "required course within the discipline" approach—and view the content of the course as having more in common with other courses in their own discipline than with courses in philosophy or religion. For example, Woody's (2008) analysis of the codes of ethics of academic disciplines finds that "requirements to present students with education in ethics exist across disciplinary codes (p. 50)." In other words, for example, engineers consider engineering ethics as a subset of the field of engineering, a part of the training required to become an engineer, and relatively unrelated to any other courses in ethics.[2] This view can lead to territorial disputes between departments of philosophy and application area departments over the content, pedagogical methods, and instructor qualifications of these applied ethics classes. There is much variability in the mechanisms for delivering ethical instruction within disciplines. Integrating ethics instruction into a range of courses represent a very different approach than stand-alone, ethics-specific course offerings, and poses particular challenges for achieving minimum levels of ethics training for instructors. Some are skeptical that the "integrated across the curriculum" approach produces strong results. (Nicholson & DeMoss, 2009)

The reaction of traditional philosophers towards the emergence of these new application areas has been varied. Rossouw notes that, when faced with the demand to teach applied ethics courses, "some simply reject this demand as inappropriate, others reluctantly agree to supply this demand, whilst still others embrace it (2008, p. 161)." The first observation is supported by the present research, which suggests that the

emerging applied ethics classes have little formal connection with the discipline of philosophy. Specifically, our research suggests that the majority of courses in applied ethics at American colleges and universities are taught by those without degrees in philosophy or religion.

One way to resolve the disciplinary conflict is through the use of team teaching. For example, both Heckert (2000) and Graber and Pionke (2006) describe an approach to teaching engineering ethics courses in which the course is team-taught by an engineer and philosopher. Barry and Ohland (2009) cite a similar practice in business programs in which ethics courses are team-taught with theology or philosophy faculty. Finally, Domino (2008) suggests a method of team-teaching in which philosophy professors "tour" the campus, team-teaching with professors in other disciplines. Our research, however, produced virtually no examples in which professors from different departments are officially listed as co-teachers of ethics courses, raising the question of how frequently the team-teaching approach is employed.

In 1980, the Hastings Center conducted a study of the teaching of ethics in American colleges and universities (Hastings Center, 1980). Among the findings in the series of reports produced were that, within professional departments in higher education (such as law, medicine, engineering, and journalism), there was a general concern for the moral education of students and that teaching ethics was seen as controversial, had little prestige, and was not given a central place in the curriculum. Thus, among the professors surveyed there was a considerable hesitation to teach the ethics courses in the curriculum and few of the professors teaching these applied ethics courses had graduate degrees in ethics or theology. They noted that the recent increase in the number of ethics courses offered had led to an increase in the number of professors teaching ethics courses without the academic credentials that have historically been expected for such instructors. In light of this finding, the Hastings Center recommended that the professor have a graduate degree in the home discipline (such as law, medicine, or engineering), and also a knowledge of philosophical and religious theories of ethics, as well as real-world experience and exposure to the kinds of ethical conflicts likely to arise in the profession. Importantly, however, the Center also suggested that firsthand professional experience was sufficient, though supplemental education was preferable. Also, the Hastings Center observed and lamented a lack of training programs in applied and professional ethics, which it saw as central to getting disciplinary experts prepared to teach discipline-based ethics courses.

In addition to providing a body of knowledge and methodological approaches to the study of their domains, academic disciplines serve a number of practical functions in higher education. By means of academic journals, newsletters, conferences, and workshops, academics working in a discipline learn from each other as they produce new knowledge and refine pedagogical methods. Due to the time and investment required to participate fully in a scholarly community, professors typically engage with only one such disciplinary community, though they might be active in one or more sub-disciplines within that community. Thus, whether an ethics professor is connected to other ethics professors through an academic community may have a direct relationship to the quality of instruction in ethics courses.

Furthermore, pursuing opportunities for information-sharing in ethics might effectively be discouraged among junior faculty. Since professors typically seek tenure within a single college or university department, junior faculty members often concentrate their scholarly efforts within the discipline of the academic department. Thus, for a professor outside of religion or philosophy department, attending an occasional ethics conference or pursuing scholarly work in ethics may be seen as counter-productive towards her career advancement. This might be particularly true in departments that employ journal rankings, as ethics articles may be less likely to appear in the top-rated journals in the field, which are typically devoted to topics in the core disciplinary area.

METHODOLOGY & RESULTS

To answer the question, "who teaches ethics?," the authors gathered information on the educational backgrounds of the instructors of ethics-related courses at a random sampling of colleges and universities in the U.S. We first randomly selected colleges and universities in the U.S. For each college or university in our sample set, we searched online databases for all courses offered within the past one-year period containing one of two character strings in the course title: "ethic" (to include derivations such as "ethics" or "ethical") or "moral" (to include derivations such as "morality"). For each course, we attempted to determine the graduate degrees earned (or in progress) by the instructor of record for the course, and the home department of that individual. We continued this data collection until we obtained 381 courses for which the instructor's departmental discipline and the disciplines of graduate degrees were known.

Once the data had been collected, we correlated the departments in which the courses were offered with the degrees earned by the course instructors. About 38% of the courses we surveyed were taught in philosophy departments, about 8% in religion departments, and about 54% were taught in other fields, most frequently a professional "application area" such as mass communication, business, the sciences, engineering, and nursing.

As seen in Table 1 and Chart 1, there is a high degree of correlation between the department of the course, and the degrees of the instructor. In particular, it is noteworthy that nearly all (98%) of ethics classes offered in philosophy departments were taught by professors who have degrees in philosophy (or who are currently working towards a graduate degree in philosophy), and all of those who do not have philosophy degrees have graduate degrees in religion. Similarly, for ethics courses taught in religion departments, most (85%) are taught by those with degrees in religion, and for those who do not, many (9%) have degrees in philosophy (see Table 1 and Chart 2).

Table 1: Instructor Degrees in Ethics Courses, By Department

	Course Offered in PHIL	Course Offered in REL	Course Offered in Appl Area	Total
Instructor Degree in PHIL	142 (98%)	3 (9%)	5 (2%)	150
Instructor Degree in REL	3 (2%)	27 (85%)	3 (1%)	33
Instructor Degree Other (no PHIL/REL)	0 (0%)	2 (6%)	196 (97%)	198
Total	145	32	204	381

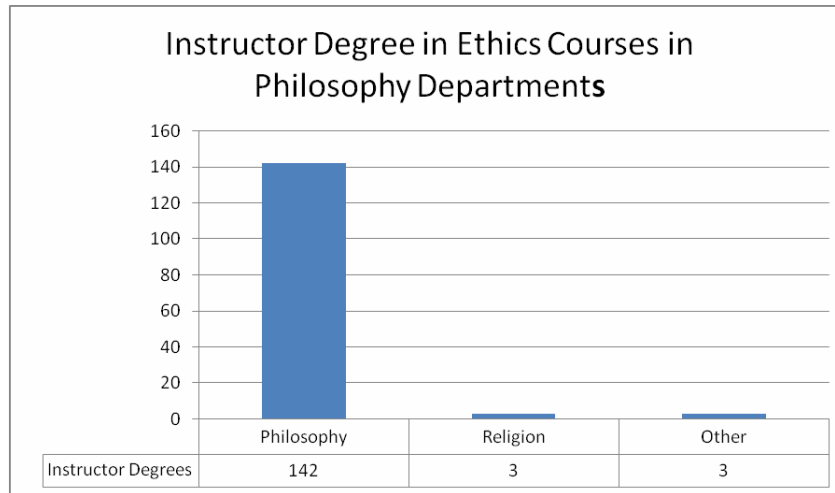**Chart 1: Instructor Degree in Ethics Courses in Philosophy Departments**
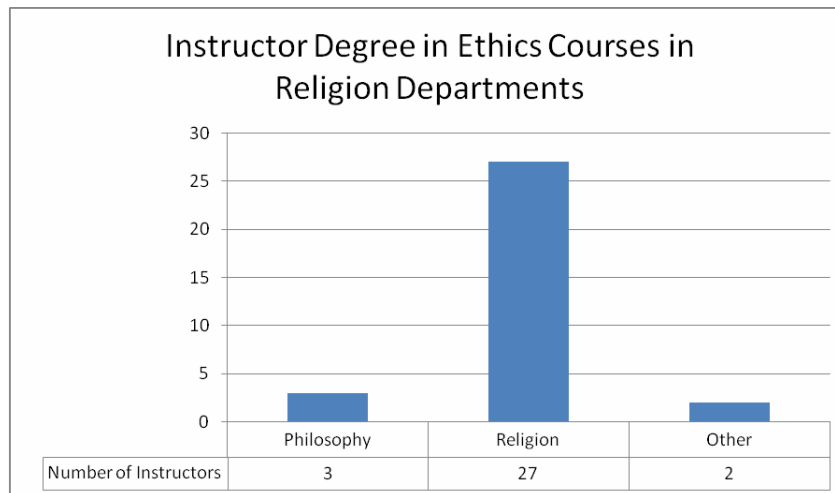

Chart 2: Instructor Degree in Ethics Courses in Religion Departments

On the other hand, very few of the professors who taught an applied ethics course within another department had graduate degrees in philosophy (2%) or religion (1%); the overwhelming majority had a degree in that professional area (97%) (see Table 1 and Chart 3). Among

these professors, the most common degrees held were: (1) law, (2) business, or (3) education (see Table 2). For the courses we surveyed, the most common "application areas" were: (1) journalism and mass communication, (2) engineering and the sciences, (3) accounting, business, and business administration, and (4) nursing (see Chart 4). The relatively large number of professors with law degrees can primarily be explained by their prevalence in the application areas of accounting & business, and journalism & mass communication. As would be expected, nearly all of the applied ethics courses taught in the sciences, engineering, and nursing were taught by professors with graduate degrees in those fields.

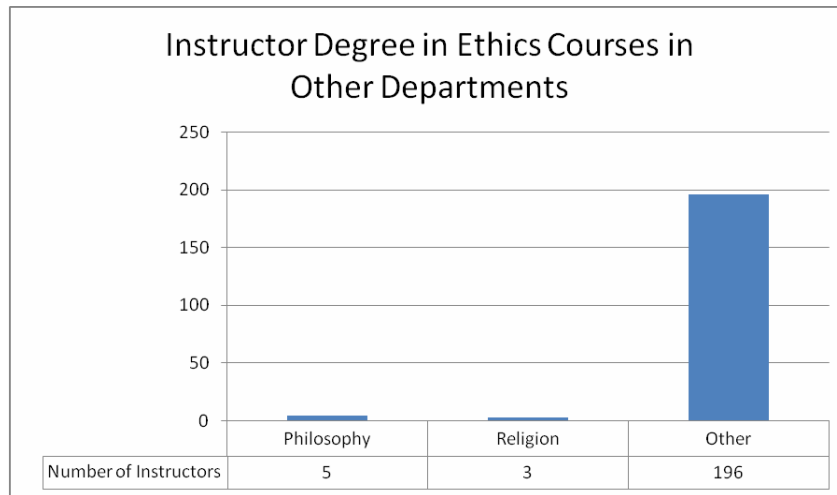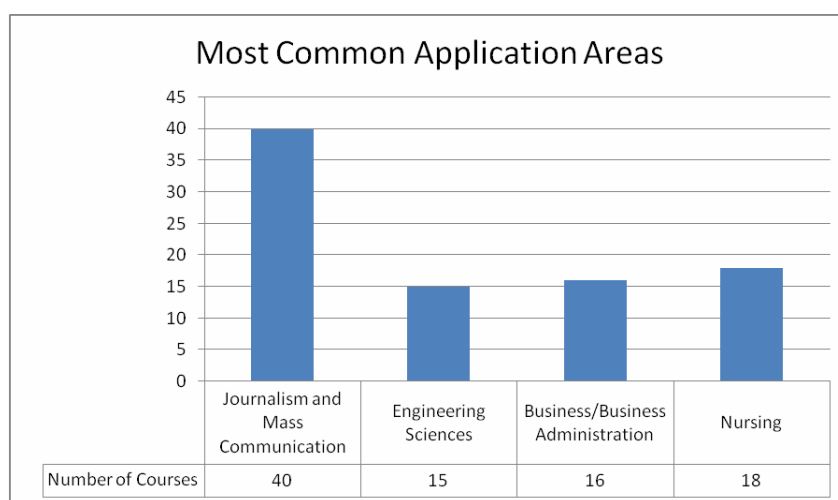**Chart 3:   Instructor Degree in Ethics Courses in Application Area Departments**

Instructor Degree in Ethics Courses in Other Departments

	Philosophy	Religion	Other
Number of Instructors	5	3	196

Table 2: Most Common Instructor Degrees in Application Area Ethics Courses

Degree	Number of Degrees
JD/Law	29
MBA/Business	14
EdD/Education	17
Total instructors	204

Chart 4: Most Common Application Areas

Most Common Application Areas

Number of Courses	Journalism and Mass Communication	Engineering Sciences	Business/Business Administration	Nursing
	40	15	16	18

CONCLUSION

Our research suggests that there are two very distinct kinds of ethics courses. About 46% of undergraduate ethics courses are taught in philosophy or religion departments, and for those courses, the instructors generally have graduate degrees in religion or philosophy, or are working towards such a degree. We would suggest that, for these courses, the professors likely have formal academic instruction in ethics and work in an academic community that directly provides intellectual support for the teaching of ethics through conferences and academic journals.

On the other hand, about 54% of ethics classes are taught outside of religion or philosophy departments, typically by professors without graduate degrees in religion or philosophy. Despite previously-referenced suggestions that applied ethics might be an interdisciplinary field amenable to team teaching, our research suggests that this is not occurring in most cases. Our research was not able to determine whether the professors teaching these courses have availed themselves of specific training in ethics outside of their home discipline, as recommended by the Hastings Center Report (1980). What we did find, however, is that these faculty are not pursuing or earning graduate degrees in philosophy

or religion, nor are opting to team teach applied ethics courses with colleagues who do have graduate degrees in philosophy or religion. That is, it appears that faculty in application areas perceive applied ethics to be a course that can be taught by faculty who have little or no formal training in ethics but who have graduate degrees in the relevant application area. What impact this has on the quality of applied ethics instruction lies beyond the scope of this paper, but our work suggests that additional research in the training of applied ethics instructors might be justified.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Frank et al. (2010)

[2] Woody does, however, comment on the lack of formal training in teaching ethics among discipline-based graduate programs, suggesting that the "ethics by 'osmosis'" approach was insufficient and that explicit training is needed. (51)

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