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Exploring the potential contributions of mindfulness and compassion-based practices for enhancing the teaching of undergraduate ethics courses in philosophy

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ABSTRACT

There are numerous ethical theories from which faculty may choose to teach in undergraduate philosophical ethics courses. Whether learning such theories results in ethical behavior change remains an open question. If one of the goals of teaching ethics is to support ethical behavior, then alternative approaches are merited. Within the past decades, there has been a growing emphasis on mindfulness and compassion-based practices in particular, as applied to psychotherapy in the field of psychology. Such findings have bearing on ways in which compassion-based practices might be fruitful in the philosophical ethics classroom. This article will identify issues with the dominant approach to teaching philosophical ethics, focusing on the need for a bridge between theory and action. It will also explore the potential benefits of utilizing mindfulness in the classroom, with a focus on compassion-based practices such as loving-kindness, to contribute to meeting this need to enhance the teaching of undergraduate philosophical ethics.

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1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, there has been extensive interest in, and research on, mindfulness practices. More specifically, there has been a focus on mindfulness techniques for cultivating compassion. This research has occurred primarily within psychology, with a particular emphasis on the utilization of these practices in psychotherapy. These approaches, while originally derived from the Buddhist tradition, have now been systematically developed for use in contemporary, scientific, and secular contexts (Sears, 2014). Psychology has provided a

platform for offering these practices and establishing their benefits in promoting factors associated with psychological well-being. Numerous outcome studies have shown these programs to be generally effective for improving a multitude of physical and psychological conditions across a wide variety of populations. The application of these approaches has now expanded to areas of study beyond psychological science, including the enhancement of relationships and personal well-being, improving career performance and satisfaction, parenting and elder care, and the field of education (Sears, Tirsch, & Denton, 2011; Tirsch, Silberstein, & Kolts, 2015).

While mindfulness has broad applications for all levels of education (Burke, 2010; Diamond & Lee, 2011; Greenberg & Harris, 2011; Napoli, Kretz, & Holley, 2005; Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller 2010), the focus of this article is the potential benefit of mindfulness practices in university

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classes, and more specifically in undergraduate philosophical ethics classes. There is a burgeoning literature on the intersection of mindfulness practice and enhancing the academic performance and emotional well-being of university students (Atkins, Hassed, & Fogliati, 2015; Byrne, Bond, & London, 2013; Ching, Koo, Tsai, & Chen, 2015). The focus of this article, however, is narrower in that it considers the potential benefit of mindfulness practice regarding teaching philosophical ethics. Moreover, it focuses on mindfulness practices oriented to developing compassion through, for example, loving-kindness techniques. The focus on compassion is due to the prosocial dimensions of this emotional orientation. The aim of this article is to illustrate that such practices warrant consideration as classroom tools for enhancing the efficacy and utility of philosophical ethics courses in higher education insofar as a priority or goal of such an education is to support prosocial behavior.

This article discusses current methods and measures for teaching philosophical ethics in academia. It goes on to illustrate limitations to current approaches and identifies potential methods for bridging to ethical behavior change. The article then focuses on providing a working definition of compassion and outlines techniques utilized to cultivate compassion; including loving-kindness and *tonglen* meditation. It then examines some of the psychological and psychotherapeutic benefits of these techniques and highlights the relationship between compassion practices and prosocial behavior. Finally, it considers future directions for integrating compassion practices into philosophical ethics education. The concluding discussion offers concrete suggestions for successfully integrating compassion practices in the classroom and discusses both the potential limitations of using such practices as well as areas for further investigation.

2. Teaching philosophical ethics in academia

2.1. Current methods and measures

Western philosophical ethics provides an array of theoretical approaches to ethical problems: feminist ethics, care ethics, virtue ethics, consequentialist ethics, and deontological ethics, to name but a few. In spite of this theoretical richness, there has been remarkably little focus on ethical behavior change in philosophical ethics. In philosophical ethics classrooms, abstract discussions of systems of ethics and their potential use for solving ethical dilemmas takes precedence over explorations of techniques or practices to support concrete behavior change in morally grounded directions. If universities in the West are interested in teaching not only a subset of theoretical ethical systems in philosophy classrooms common to the Western tradition, but also how to be ethical, then there needs to be a significant shift regarding current approaches to teaching ethics (Kretz, 2014). This does not imply that the theoretical study of moral theories is unnecessary. The study of moral theories serves multiple purposes, not the least of which is providing students with moral frameworks to help ground justification for both their own and other's particular approaches and points of view. However, the current

methods for teaching philosophical ethics in Western universities leave much to be desired in terms of facilitating ethical behavior change and empowerment.

The majority of current tools for measuring success in academic philosophical ethics rely on testing comprehension and application of theoretical ethics (Blizek, 2013). Philosophy students are primarily tested on their capacity to comprehend and apply philosophical moral theories, as well as construct arguments. Outside of philosophy classes, testing of student moral capacities often falls within the domain of psychology.

There are multiple tests available for testing moral reasoning capacities. The most widely used test of the moral capacities of university students is the Defining Issues Test (DIT) by Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, and Bebeau (2000). The DIT focuses on understanding moral development and function. It charts moral schemas and is recognized as being good at assessing the shift from a conventional/maintaining norms view to a post-conventional view of social cooperation (Thoma & Dong, 2014). Other domains, such as business and accounting, often adopt alternative methods of teaching and additional methods of testing are available. For example, the sensemaking method developed by Mumford et al. (2008) involves training scientists to use a specific set of metacognitive reasoning strategies and then testing for gains in these capacities—which are taken to indicate gains in ethical decision-making.

Rational development in schema use, and the ability to apply reasoning strategies, although very important, do not address in a robust way what many researchers suggest plays a key role in motivation for behavior—emotion. Although the DIT and sensemaking approach make room for emotion, specifically focusing on and harnessing the power of emotion for moral behavior is not the focus of that work. It also is worth noting that in ethics training generally, testing for behavior is not currently widely practiced. A meta-analysis of current practices in ethics training reveals that attempts to measure behavior represents only 3.1% of the criteria used to evaluate ethics training courses (Steele et al., 2016).

The connection between the capacity to articulate theoretical ethics, to rank at a certain level of moral development in the DIT, to correctly apply Mumford et al.'s (2008) sensemaking approach, and actually being or behaving ethically remains open to debate. Research in psychology and neuroscience reveals a dual processing approach to moral cognition, wherein both conscious and subconscious components play a role (Lapsley & Hill, 2008; Reynolds, 2006; Sloman, 1996). Affective systems serve as the substrate for distinctive, automatic processing, while higher cortical regions operate as the substrate for more controlled and effortful modes of functioning (Railton, 2014). Haidt (2001, 2006) hypothesizes that the motivating force of emotion is a primary driver of moral judgment and action. Regarding the relationship between moral reasoning ability and moral action, his research indicates that moral exemplars and non-exemplars had no significant difference in their moral reasoning ability. This suggests that additional factors beyond the ability to engage in moral reasoning set moral exemplars apart.

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