

Teaching note for
Philosophical Ethics or Moral Philosophy Class

Decoding the New Babel: Why Philosophers Should Teach Several Competing Moral Philosophies

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Should philosophers teach several competing moral philosophies? Shouldn't moral philosophy be more like the natural sciences where each discipline has a widely accepted framework and where debates occur on the outer edges of the discipline? After all, physics, chemistry, and biology are not characterized by disputes at the level of first principles. Shouldn't moral philosophy seek to imitate this feature of such disciplines?

In our essay, "[Teaching Ethics at a Catholic College of University](#)," we proposed that a course in ethics should cover a range of philosophies, including several approaches that differ in deep ways from one another. Isn't this an endorsement of relativism and a recipe for confusion?

One way to respond is to claim that it is important for students to be able to distinguish between "justice" and "justice" (so to speak), or between "freedom" and "freedom." What does this mean?

With regard to moral discourse, the contemporary context could be described as a sort of "new Babel," where the same words take on very different meanings in different philosophies, and where this frequently occurs in a manner that is subtle and hidden from view.

In the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, the people tried to build a city and a tower that rose to the heavens. In response to the human quest for pride, the story says that God introduced confusion by multiplying languages. Each language, with its own grammar and vocabulary, used different terms to describe the same (or similar) realities, so those who spoke Hebrew were unable to understand those who spoke Greek or Egyptian, and so forth. This was the problem of the old Babel.

In the new Babel, language is confused, not by a profusion of languages, but by the use of the same words to mean different things. One language (for example, English) contains terms and concepts that have more than one meaning; in other words, English has multiple grammars and vocabularies.

A story might help explain this problem. When I was a college student studying in Rome, I had an experience that reveals this kind of confusion with language. I was riding on a train in Italy. Across from me in our compartment was a young Italian woman in her 20s. We struck up a conversation in Italian. My Italian was good enough to carry on a conversation for a while. I knew simple phrases and basic grammar, but I was at a loss to talk about any subject that required a large vocabulary. After an hour or so of talking, the Italian woman suggested that we switch to English. She explained that she had studied English for three years in high school, but that she had never had the opportunity to speak English with a native English speaker. I gladly agreed.

Her first words to me in English were quite puzzling. She asked me, "Are you strange?"

I was stunned. Up to that point, I thought that we were having a very friendly and enjoyable conversation in Italian. I interpreted her to be asking if I was weird or unusual.

As I was thinking about how to respond, it dawned on me that, in Italian, a *straniero* is a stranger, that is, a foreigner, or someone from a different country. She was asking if I came from a different country. I was relieved.

This confusion in communication wasn't the result of our speaking two different languages. We were both speaking English. But she was using words in English to mean one thing, and I was interpreting them to mean something else.

Consider also the humorous example of King George I. He is said to have told architect Christopher Wren that his masterpiece, St. Paul's Cathedral in London, was "awful and artificial." Today, we interpret this as an insult. It sounds like the King was saying that the architect's work was terrible and phony. But in the context of the early 18th century, "awful" meant awe-inspiring, and "artificial" meant "full of great art"!

So, to avoid confusion, it is important that we become aware that terms in English can have multiple meanings. This is a pervasive feature, not only of modern English, but also of life in the modern world generally. Every major modern language faces this problem. The very words by which key concepts are expressed take on quite different meanings in diverse ideological systems.

In order to decode the confusions of the new Babel, it helps to be able to recognize and understand competing "moral grammars." But, just what is a moral grammar?

While the term "grammar" is usually associated with the rules embedded in language, some theologians, philosophers and social theorists have stretched the meaning of "grammar" to refer to the order inherent in human actions and a way of life.

In his *Grammar of Assent*, John Henry Cardinal Newman used the word "grammar" to mean the order implicit in various ways of affirming belief. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein also stretched the notion of a "grammar" to mean a network of rules that determine what does and doesn't make sense in a particular form of life. As a young scholar, Wittgenstein thought that science and logic could explain everything (so that

ethics and faith were unnecessary), but as he matured, he came to appreciate that modern science cannot explain everything. Wittgenstein suggested that we can understand the distinctive order in everyday, ordinary language. In his mature thought, Wittgenstein came to realize that moral traditions, like linguistic traditions, make sense, not according to the rules of modern science, but according to their own grammars. Wittgenstein's notion of a grammar has been very suggestive for later thinkers. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has spent his career criticizing the grammar of modern individualism and trying to retrieve the grammar of virtue. The sociologist Robert Bellah, in his book *Habits of the Heart*, argues that Americans tend to speak using the grammar of individualism while engaging in forms of life that unwittingly draw from the older moral grammars of civic virtue and biblical faith.

This expanded notion of a grammar as the order embedded in human activities or in a way of life has sometimes been thought to imply a kind of relativism. Considered this way, it appears that, just as there is no way to decide if English is better than French, there seems to be no way to tell right from wrong. But this sort of moral relativism is not implied in the notion of a moral grammar. Wittgenstein wrote of "the common behavior of mankind," implying that there is a moral order (a deep grammar) embedded in human activity as such. Pope John Paul II sometimes used the term grammar in this expanded manner. For example, in his message celebrating the World Day for Peace (on January 1, 2005), John Paul II spoke of the "common grammar of the moral law."

In the contemporary context, moral discourse is frequently disordered, especially when various parties in a debate unwittingly use the same words, such as freedom or justice, in very different ways. For example, when debating the justice of war, the topic of abortion, or the allocation of health care resources, disputants frequently appeal to utilitarian concerns or deontological principles without an awareness of the moral philosophies involved or of the history of the key concepts at issue. As a result, contemporary moral debates appear interminable: they seem to go on without any end in sight and they have no clear terminus, that is, no clear goal that the disputants are aiming at together. This is because the disputes rest on conceptual incommensurabilities such that each side presents arguments that are valid, but does so while employing concepts and premises not shared by opposing disputants.

For example, consider disputes about the topic of abortion. Each side seems to base its arguments on an appeal to freedom and justice. However, these terms are used in differing ways so that what one side means by freedom the other side interprets as constraint.

In Latin, there is a clear distinction between *libertas* (liberty, freedom for excellence) and *licentia* (license, freedom from constraint). However, in English, the term "freedom" is used for each of these. The English word "freedom" comes to us from Norse mythology. The goddess Fri (also called Frigg or Freya and for whom Friday is named) was believed to be the goddess of love. In the Teutonic myths, Fri remained with Odin, her husband, not because she was coerced, like Odin's slaves, but because she loved him. For this reason, freedom (from an Old English word meaning "love") originally connoted the bonds of love and friendship. The word "friend" also developed out of this connection

between freedom and love, in recognition that we feel most free with our friends and those with whom we share the bonds of love and family.

In the modern era, however, the meaning of freedom underwent significant changes. During the revolutionary period of the 17th and 18th centuries and with the rise of modern democracies, many thinkers began to view the traditional bonds of love and family as an infringement on freedom. Such thinkers used the term "freedom," in spite of its etymology, to signify a lack of constraints, or the ability to do whatever one wants. Influenced by modern individualism, the word "freedom" was sundered from its association with love and marriage; it came to mean the right to do whatever one wants—so long as that desire did not harm the freedom of others.

But because a word undergoes a change in definition, that doesn't always mean the older meaning is abandoned. Just as we use the word "keyboard" when talking about computers and when talking about pianos, the modern, individualistic understanding of freedom didn't wipe out the older notion of freedom. The idea that freedom flows from a properly ordered affection for those one loves still resonates with us, even as we find it natural for artists to depict freedom as a woman (such as the Statue of Liberty) who reflects the loving maternal devotion of the Norse goddess Fri. Despite our tendency to overlook those older meanings, the term freedom can still mean different things in English. Thus, in the new Babel, two people professing a commitment to "freedom" might have two different ideas in mind. One person's freedom is another's slavery.

Is there a way to overcome the confusion of the new Babel?

Let me try to outline the beginnings of a solution. Part of the task involves becoming "multilingual"—not in the usual sense, where a native English speaker learns Spanish or French, but in the sense that one is able to recognize how words apply amidst distinct ways of life. This may involve both gaining a deeper understanding of one's own tradition and making an effort to understand the grammar of another tradition.

It may seem that this awareness of multiple moral grammars inevitably results in a kind of relativism. However, that response is oversimplified in several ways.

We tend to assume (incorrectly) that languages are either identical or completely dissimilar. For example, when we learn another language, we commonly begin by assuming that the second language functions the same as the first, but with different words. But as we become more adept at a second language, we realize that certain expressions cannot be literally translated from one language into another. This does not mean that they are impossible to translate. It only means that to capture all of the subtlety in one language, we may need to explain much more in the second language. Sometimes, what is captured in a single word or phrase in one language requires a long explanation in another language.

This difference between languages is especially clear when translating stories and poems. To translate a poem from one language into another, the translator must have an excellent grasp of both languages. Frequently, the best translators of poetry are themselves poets.

For example, consider the work of Rhina Espaillat, a poet who was born in the Dominican Republic. Her native language is Spanish, but she now lives in the U.S., and most of the poetry she writes now is in English. She is an outstanding translator of the poetry of St. John of the Cross, the 16th-century Spanish mystic who reformed the Carmelite Order and who wrote beautiful Spanish poetry.

We might be tempted to think either that English is just as good as Spanish or that the two are incomparable (since some things can't be translated from one language to the other). Each of these views is partly correct and partly wrong. English is just as good as Spanish for some things, but not for everything. The literature of the great Spanish masters, including the books of Cervantes and the poetry of St. John of the Cross, is best in Spanish. Some phrases that St. John of the Cross masterfully turns in Spanish cannot quite be captured in English. But then, along comes a great translator who is herself a poet and a master of the English language; she stretches English poetically so that it captures some of the subtle beauty of the Spanish mystic's poetry. In the process, English is expanded.

When the task of translation becomes difficult, it may help to recognize that great translators need to be masters of both languages. In an analogous way, part of teaching an ethics course at the college level involves helping students gain proficiency in multiple moral grammars – not to promote relativism or confusion, but in order to decode apparent confusions in the new Babel. Of course, we cannot expect students who take one college level course in ethics to become masters of multiple moral grammars. However, we can aim to help our students become more proficient in the grammar of several moral philosophies. Doing so will help them engage in contemporary moral discourse with greater subtlety and proficiency, helping them find a way to rise above the apparent interminability of contemporary moral disputes.

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Much of the material in this essay is a revised version of "What Freedom Means in the New Babel," *This Rock* 18:9 (November 2007) 6-11.