

Aristotle Is Great—But Is He Enough? Expanding the Theoretical Grounds for Inquiries into the Moral Dimensions of Teaching

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Introduction

In the domain of philosophical ethics, as in other philosophical domains, the dominant model for scholarship is that of a contestation of theories. In normative ethics, this takes the form of trying to identify and establish a single, coherent and unified theory that can best offer practical guidance and justification for what we ought to desire, feel, be or do.¹ Over the past couple of millenia we have been offered a number of possible solutions to this basic practical question of “ought,” and these normative theories have been grouped into familiar categories such as “consequentialism,” “deontology,” “ethics of care” and “ethics of virtue.” Today they continue to be contested, elaborated, combined, reshaped, and offered as singularly superior practical grounds.

Noting this, when we then turn to the literature on the moral dimensions of teaching, we can discern both striking similarities and differences.² Unfortunately, the moral dimensions of

¹Darwall, Stephen L. *Philosophical Ethics*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998. We will ignore, for the time being, the arguments of various anti-theorists in ethics—see: Clarke, Stanley, and Eva Simpson. *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism*. New York: SUNY Press, 1989.

²Included in this literature are the following examples: John Goodlad, Roger Soder, & Kenneth Sirotnik (Eds.) *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990); Philip Jackson, Robert Boostrom, & David Hansen, *The Moral Life of Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993). Other titles include: R. Devries and B. Zan, *Moral Classrooms, Moral Children: Creating a Constructivist Atmosphere in Early Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994); Landon Beyer, “The Moral Contours of Teacher Education,” in *Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 48, no. 4 (1997) pp. 245-254; Pamela Joseph and Sara Efron, “Moral Choices/Moral Conflicts: Teachers’ Self-Perceptions,” in *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1993), pp. 201-220; Alan R. Tom, *Teaching as a Moral Craft* (New York: Longman, 1984); Kurt Aurin and Martina Maurer, “Forms and Dimensions of Teachers’ Professional Ethics—Case Studies in Secondary Schools,” in *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1993), pp.

teaching (henceforth MDT) literature often differs from its philosophical cousin in its frequent inattention to and lack of clarity in articulating its respective theoretical groundings. However, some of this work also shares some characteristics with normative ethics, which in this case, we have come to believe, is also unfortunate. Let us explain.

There is an understandable temptation to go from a belief in a normative theory—that is, a theory about what one ought to do—into the study of MDT, while preserving one’s normative commitments. For instance, one might believe that an ethics of care provides the most meaningful basis for human living in society and in turn use that same framework to analyze and illuminate the moral dimensions of teaching. We argue here that there is an important difference between the practical question of what we ought to do and engaging in an inquiry into what the morally salient aspects of teaching are and that a different theoretical orientation is needed.³ Prior to determining what it is that teachers ought to desire, think, be or do as moral agents and moral educators in classrooms, researchers and theorists need a better understanding of the morally salient features of teaching practice.⁴

The downside of applying a particular theory of normative ethics to describe what is moral about teaching lies in the fact that any one normative theory fails to capture all that may be morally salient in a given context. Thus, the competitive, monotheoretic model of normative ethics is a poor one for the inquiries into MDT because any one normative theory will only pick out, or focus on, say a benevolent character or a caring relationship or a universal principle of reason as morally salient, leaving other potentially salient features of the context hidden or less richly described. While we may believe one of these to provide the best practical grounds they all fall within the boundaries of the moral domain and need to be accounted for in a way that illuminates their significance for the practice of teaching.

The basic question this raises is at root one of the relationship between theory and practice. However, it is not about the typical one we turn to in the context of education, that of pedagogical or curriculum theory and the practice of teaching, but rather, the relationship of moral theory and the practice of inquiring into MDT. In inquiring into this relationship, we will continue to focus on the basic notion of moral salience—or that which is part of the moral domain, as opposed to something irrelevant to considerations of morality, moral education or moral

277-296. For a review of this literature, see David Hansen, “Teaching as a Moral Activity.” in V. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (4th Ed.) (in press).

³That is, unless one is a pluralist in their normative ethics, in the way described here. For more on pluralism in normative ethics, see Becker, Lawrence. “Places for Pluralism.” *Ethics* 102, no. July (1992): 707-719.

⁴ This is not to say that value plays no role in description nor that valuation is independent of some account of things in the world, but rather to point out that there is an opposite direction of fit between a descriptive account of the moral domain and our claims about what it is we ought to do or be. Further, we must point out that what we are distinguishing here might best be viewed as the distinction between normative and metaethics. That is, between theoretical issues regarding what it is we morally ought to do or be, and metatheoretical issues regarding the nature of morality. For a comprehensive treatment of metaethics, see the collection Darwall, Stephen L., Allan Gibbard, and Peter Albert Railton, eds. *Moral Discourse and Practice : Some Philosophical Approaches*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

development. Part of what we wish to understand in this inquiry is how moral theory plays a role in what we take to be morally salient in classrooms.

In what follows, we attempt to *illustrate* the downside of framing the MDT according to any particular normative ethical theory or school of thought. Toward this end we will not offer a literature review, but rather a study and critique of our own history of using, then coming to question the monotheoretic model of normative ethics, followed by a presentation of the pluralistic alternative we have come to follow over the past few years in the Manner in Teaching Project. So in a sense, this is a confessional paper about how we see our initial approach has inadequate for the task of progressing in our understanding of MDT.

An Aristotelian Approach: Manner and MDT

We began the Manner in Teaching Project with a conception of MDT strongly rooted Aristotelian thinking. As the second author introduced the concept of teacher manner a decade ago:

Every response to a question, every assignment handed out, every discussion on issues, every resolution of a dispute, every grade given to a student carries with it the moral character of the teacher. This moral character can be thought of as the *manner* of the teacher.⁵

The concept of manner was further distinguished by contrasting it with “method,” which referred to techniques, skills and tools used to foster effective content learning. The valuable point which this distinction brought out was that the preparation of teachers had been (and to some extent continues to be) dominated by an attention to teaching methods which had largely failed to address the moral virtues of the people doing the teaching, and the relationship between those virtues and the moral development of students. The concept of manner created a useful space for the consideration of these moral dimensions of teaching.

In doing so, the second author utilized an Aristotelian theoretical framework for making sense of what is moral, flagging certain elements of teaching as morally salient. As suggested in the quote above, the most salient moral aspect of teaching was the *character* of the teacher as she engaged in her practice.

Why the focus on character? First, the virtue ethics of Aristotle, which serves to ground this approach, carries with it a view of morality that takes character to be the object of moral judgement, or the basic unit of moral analysis. When we ask about the moral worth of a person, we do so in reference to their character: a good person is one with virtuous character, who performs actions and leads a life that reflects such a character. When we ask how we ought to act in a given situation, the answer is to act as one who has a virtuous character would act.

⁵ Gary D Fenstermacher, "Some Moral Considerations on Teaching as a Profession," in John Goodlad, Roger Soder, & Kenneth Sirotnik (Eds.) *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990) p. 134.

Hence actions are called just or temperate when they are the sort that the just or temperate person would do. But the just and temperate person is not the one who does these actions, but the one who also does them in the way in which just or temperate people do them.⁶

Along with this view of what is morally salient is a set of empirical assumptions about the determinants of character. Aristotle believed that the way that one becomes virtuous is to have a certain type of upbringing—one that allows one to be in the company of virtuous others and engage in virtuous activities under their guidance.⁷ As the second author has put it in the context of teaching:

The teacher is a model for the students, such that the particular and concrete meaning of such [character] traits as honesty, fair play, consideration of others, tolerance, and sharing are “picked up,” as it were, by observing, imitating and discussing what teachers do in the classroom.⁸

In this sense, virtue cannot be taught as can the capitals of the fifty states in the Union. Rather, students become virtuous by having a teacher with a virtuous character as an exemplar and a guide for engaging in their own virtuous actions, shaping their character. This involves the development of virtuous habits and skills, emotional sensitivities and dispositions, as well as the motivational characteristics that lead one to do what is virtuous, with the appropriate attitude and emotions. The virtuous teacher, as moral educator, provides a model for all of these things, as well as instruction and guidance in their development.

Here we can see another important reason why the character of the teacher is taken to be of primary importance. It is not only that that is what is taken to be the basis for moral judgement of that teacher, but also because of its practical implications for the moral development of her students (who will live lives and be judged according to their character as well).

This theoretical framework has several advantages. It directs us to examine not just teachers’ actions, or reasons but all of the aspects of character that ground those actions. It also helps us to make sense of a teacher’s character in a way that also attends to students via the aspects of virtue that they are exposed to via the character of their teacher, the virtuous activities and practices they participate in, and the affective and conative habits and dispositions that are modeled, fostered and reinforced. These constitute the morally salient features of classrooms, viewed through the Aristotelian lens of manner.

We will return to Aristotle shortly, to further explore the theoretical basis for these views, but with this brief account of our Aristotelian roots in hand, it might be well to turn now to

⁶See 1105b7-10 of: Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985. (Henceforth NE.)

⁷ See especially Book i, Chapter 13, Section 2 of *NE*.

⁸ Fenstermacher, “Moral Considerations” p. 133. See also *NE* book ii chapter 4.

consider the question of how this approach has contributed to, colored and limited our understanding of the moral dimensions of the teaching practice in our study. To do so, we will describe two routes that have led us to conclude that a theoretically pluralistic approach to understanding MDT is needed. The first is an empirical one that tries to make sense of all of what is morally salient in the classrooms we observed, and our discussions with teachers and students. The second route towards theoretical pluralism proceeds through an examination of the philosophical literature on ethics, which we will briefly look at in terms of the morally salient features a few theories “pick out” and how those theories illuminate those features.

Applying Aristotle to the Classroom

Coming into this project, we took not only character, but virtue to be of primary moral salience. Virtue is another basic element of Aristotle’s ethics, and he took both the content and the transmission of any virtue to be dependent upon a particular community constituted by virtuous individuals.⁹ Thus a primary focus we took in our conversations with teachers and the study of their practice was to “find” the implicit and explicit virtues of their classroom communities.

We understood virtues to be ideals of character in the classroom, reflecting Aristotle’s aretaic approach that seeks what is excellent, noble and fine in human character and human life.¹⁰ Since we took the character of each teacher to play the central role in transmitting the virtues of their respective classroom communities, we tried to get to know the motives, intentions, habits, dispositions and ideals of each teacher to better understand who they were. Further, we sought to capture the particular ways in which the virtues were embodied in each classroom community, to specifically identify and open for investigation the means by which those communities passed on their virtues. That is, we wanted to see how the character of the teacher was able to “do its work” in defining and transmitting the virtues. Here our primary data source was classroom video-tapes which we examined, and used to inform our interviews and group discussions with the teachers.

What we found was a range of virtues across classrooms, many of which were shared, but even virtues with common labels took on a somewhat different character in each teacher’s classroom.¹¹ Aristotle helped us here in directing us to look for ideals of human character, both in terms of what teachers sought for their students and how that came out in their practice. After taking some time getting to know them and their classrooms, we were able to support the identification of a number of such virtues.

However, we found that besides those practices that appeared to be dependent upon or reflective of a particular teacher’s character, we noticed identifiable *methods* of instruction used

⁹ See *NE* 1103a-30; 1105b1-20.

¹⁰ To get a sense of Aristotle’s notion of excellence, see, for example: 1122b15 of *NE*.

¹¹ Sanger, Matthew. “Talking to Teachers and Looking at Practice in Understanding the Moral Dimensions of Teaching.” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* (In Press).

to indicate what was expected, valued and disvalued in terms of action and character on the part of students.¹² These methods were:

- 1) Constructing classroom communities
- 2) Didactic instruction
- 3) Design and execution of academic task structures
- 4) Calling out for conduct of a particular kind
- 5) Private conversations
- 6) Showcasing specific students to illustrate preferred conduct

We will not review these methods here, and instead focus for a moment on the point that these seem to be methods, at least in part, in the sense that the second author originally suggested as a contrast with the manner of the teacher enacting them. That is, the use of these methods did not seem to rely exclusively upon, nor necessarily embody, the character of the teacher using them, but at the same time, they appeared to be used to define and facilitate virtuous conduct in the classrooms in which they were used.¹³

This realization (along with others described below) was both exciting and disquieting, for we realized that our data had extended beyond our theoretical framework for understanding them. Thus, it provided us with a possibly richer and more complex story to tell about MDT, but also required us to look beyond Aristotle in order to develop additional theoretical grounds to support that story, towards a more theoretically pluralistic approach. This brings us to our second route to theoretical pluralism, one that travels through the domain of moral theory itself.¹⁴

Expanding the Theoretical Grounds for Understanding MDT

Even before we began to see the limits of our own theoretical grounds to effectively facilitate an understanding of our data, we were gaining a greater appreciation of the possible alternatives for theoretically grounding our work. It is quite simple to see the limitations of an Aristotelian approach to understanding the moral domain by noticing it as one of many approaches in the normative ethics literature. This may seem so obvious as to not warrant notice, but there is ample evidence that suggests that the implications of this fact are not always fully appreciated.¹⁵ The primary implication of interest here is again that following one or another

¹²Fenstermacher, Gary. "On the Concept of Manner and Its Visibility in Teaching Practice." Paper presented at the A Symposium Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, CA, April 19 1999.

¹³By conduct, we mean behavior and its motivational, affective or attitudinal constituents. Conduct over time then, serves as an indication of "virtuous practice," and potentially of character.

¹⁴Note here that we use the term "moral theory" here inclusively to refer to philosophical work in the field of ethics, realizing that this use is contrary to some philosophical applications that use it to refer particularly to metaethics.

¹⁵In addition to our own early work, those who take an approach to understanding MDT that seem to be anchored in a particular theory of normative ethics include Landon Beyer, "Moral Contours," who takes a rationalist deontic approach; George W. Noblit, "Power and Caring," *American Educational Research Journal* 30, no. 1 (1993): 23-38, whose affiliations are clear; and Jane Fowler Morse, "Fostering Autonomy," *Educational Theory*, vol. 47, no.1 (1997): 31-50, who explores the application of Kant's ideas of freedom and application of the categorical imperative.

school of thought in normative ethics picks out some aspects of what one is studying, and not others, as morally salient.¹⁶ Augusto Blasi has made this point well in the context of moral psychology:

A definition by necessity has the double effect of unifying and differentiating: as it brings certain objects or events together, it separates them from other objects or events. The psychological study of morality is no exception: whether it starts from explicit definitions or from an implicit, unarticulated understanding of its domain, it must exclude certain phenomena as being irrelevant to moral functioning...I am suggesting a definition of morality is too restrictive when it excludes phenomena that according to common understanding and ordinary language, many would consider to be moral or morally relevant.¹⁷

The claim we make here is that the monotheoretic model of normative ethics can lead us into restrictive definitions of what is moral, and hence limit the scope of what is morally salient. But this is merely to assert our conclusion, and what is needed is a substantial argument and evidence to support it.

To provide these, we shall continue our efforts to highlight the theoretical basis for the limitations we have found in our efforts to use Aristotle to make sense of the moral aspects of our data, and then briefly sketch the additional grounds that have expanded those limits. In doing so, we do not reject Aristotle's views, but suggest that additional views of the moral domain are needed to fully account for it. This analysis provides an example of what can be gained by adopting a more theoretically pluralistic approach to understanding MDT.

Aristotle, Embodied Virtue and Conservatism

While there is an extensive literature that expounds, expands, and critiques various aspects of Aristotle's ethics, we will ignore many of those aspects here—his teleological

Finally Valli describes a number of normative theoretical approaches that shape the account of the moral domain presented by their subscribers: Valli, Linda. "Moral Approaches to Reflective Practice." In *Encouraging Reflective Practice in Education*, edited by R. T. Clift, W. R. Houston and M. C. Pugach, 39-56. New York: Teachers College Press, 1990.

¹⁶Stephen Darwall calls the overlapping domain of normative and metaethics "philosophical ethics." See Darwall's *Philosophical Ethics*.

¹⁷Blasi, Augusto. "How Should Psychologists Define Morality? Or, the Negative Side Effects of Philosophy's Influence on Psychology." In *The Moral Domain: Essays in the Ongoing Discussion between Philosophy and the Social Sciences*, edited by Thomas Wren, 38-70. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.

metaphysics, his doctrine of the mean, and his belief in the unity of the virtues—and focus on virtuous character as the object of moral judgment and the necessary role it plays in developing the character of the young.¹⁸ In particular, we flesh-out the theoretical underpinnings of the embodied nature of virtuous character and its associated conservative elements, and its aretaic focus on ideals and excellence.

As noted above, on the Aristotelian model, both the content and the transmission of virtue depends on a virtuous community. There are a number of reasons that Aristotle seems to have for this view, one of the most important for our purposes here is his belief that what virtue requires in any given circumstances requires *judgement* particular to those circumstances:

...let us take it as agreed in advance that every account of the actions we must do has to be stated in outline, not exactly...the type of accounts we demand should reflect the subject-matter; and questions about actions and expediency...have no fixed and invariable answers...the agents themselves must consider in each case what the opportune action is...¹⁹

One of the implications of this view is that we cannot distill virtue or practical wisdom down to a concrete set of rules or principles and passed on indirectly—they can only be learned via apprenticeship. The virtues that are to guide us are embodied in the practically wise person, who must be engaged by her students in order for them to acquire the proper perceptivity, judgement, habits, and emotional dispositions and capacities to in turn become virtuous. On this view, virtue is a contingent aspect of particular human beings, embodied in their character and it is demonstrated through virtuous conduct of particular individuals applying wisdom and judgment to the particular circumstances that they find themselves in.²⁰ Further, as mentioned above, Aristotle's virtue ethics is focused on excellence and wants of ideals of human character and a picture of a good human life. Virtuous persons and their life provide us with concrete models of what to aspire to in work to become.

In the remainder of this section we note three dimensions of the teaching practice we observed in the Manner Project that have standing as morally relevant, but that we believe fall beyond the boundaries of the illumination that Aristotle's views provide.²¹ The first of these provides a direct contrast to the Aristotelian model, supporting a basis for understanding the practice of moral education that in some sense *is* independent of the character of the teacher, and

¹⁸For one of the definitive collections of essays on essential elements of Aristotle's *NE*, see: Rorty, Amelie O., ed. *Essays on Aristotle's ethics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

¹⁹*NE* 1104a1-4.

²⁰For a nice treatment of particularism in Aristotle (and how it compares to Kant's work) see Chapter 6 of Sherman, Nancy. *Making a Necessity of Virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

²¹ We do not mean to suggest that these are the only three morally salient features of classrooms not captured by Aristotelian approach.

in particular, seeks to follow universal principles that apply across particular circumstances. Such an approach finds its grounds most prominently in the work of Immanuel Kant.²²

The second dimension of morality to be found in classrooms that is not supported by Aristotle's thinking, but has been extensively developed throughout the modern period of ethical scholarship is the notion of duty and obligation as a fundamental moral concept, rather than excellence or virtue.²³

The third moral dimension we briefly explore draws our attention to and grounds value and understanding in the relationships between teacher and student and between students in a classroom, rather than the character of the teacher or universal principles. The ethics of care that provides the foundation for this moral dimension of teaching has been developed most prominently in the work of Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan, and Lawrence Blum.²⁴

Principles and Moral Obligation

Besides the moral methods that we observed teachers using they also appeared to employ principles in such a way that an understanding of their use does not sit comfortably within our original Aristotelian scheme. For instance, Margaret, a third-fourth grade teacher at Jordan elementary, frequently appealed to the principle of not putting other people down. This "no put down" principle was certainly reflective of the considerate and respectful character that Margaret embodied in her teaching practice. Further, she sometimes appealed to this principle that suggested its justification resided within the identity and embodied virtue of that classroom community and her judgment as a teacher/authority. For instance, we can hear her say "I expect that when I am not here that I can trust you to be polite Jordan students."

However, the way in which this same principle, along with a number of others, were frequently appealed to suggested that its ultimate justification was *not* in Margaret's own virtue, nor that of their shared local community. She also discusses these principles in terms that sought a more general justificatory basis. In an interview with Margaret about her beliefs regarding the

²²Our understanding of Kant's moral theory draws most prominently from the following three texts: Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of practical reason*. Translated by Beck, Lewis White. Edited by Lewis White Beck. New York: Macmillan, 1993. Kant, Immanuel. *The Doctrine of Virtue: Part II of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Mary Gregor. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971. Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the metaphysic of morals*. Translated by Paton, H. J. Edited by Paton and J. H. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.

²³For a comprehensive history of the development of modern moral philosophy, see Schneewind, J. B. *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

²⁴See especially: Noddings, Nel. *Caring, a feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982. Gilligan, Carol. "Moral Orientation and Moral Development." In *Women and Moral Theory*, edited by Eva Kittay and Diana Meyers. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987. Blum, Lawrence. *Moral Perception and Particularity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

moral dimensions of her own practice, she discussed the roots of her beliefs about respecting others in reference to her own religious background. This was her explanation for *how* she developed such a belief, but she felt unsatisfied justifying her use of it in the classroom with her own particular religious affiliations. Rather, she sought to ground it in “[something] that we all are,” something or general, that would justify *anyone* in following that principle.

Further, the appeal to the “no put downs” principle also seemed to be used to demonstrate not (only) what it was fine, noble or excellent for a person to be, but rather a basic moral obligation to others. The idea is that regardless of our own particular ends or our character, we are obligated to those around us to not put them down. In trying to account for this appeal to general principles and moral obligation, we once again began to strain our Aristotelian framework, and eventually turned to the ethical theory of Immanuel Kant to help us better understand these aspects of Margaret’s practice. We briefly turn to Kant now to demonstrate how another theoretical approach can complement that of Aristotle in understanding MDT.

Counter to the Aristotelian notion of particularity and the uncodifiable nature of what it is we should do, Kant sought to codify principles of moral conduct. Rather than basing decisions on what it is we should do or be on embodied local virtues and contingent human characteristics, Kant sought to ground actions in universal reasons that all rational agents could accept, as such. He thought that practical rationality itself was law-like and that by examining the nature of rationality we could determine universal principles that all rational beings should follow on the basis of their rationality alone. Of course, these principles, for Kant, were the various formulations of the categorical imperative (the most common of which is the universal law formulation, “act only on a maxim that you can at the same time will that it become a universal law”).²⁵

Without going into too much depth regarding Kant’s ethics, we simply highlight two crucial elements of it that contrast with the ethics of Aristotle. The first is the notion of a universal principle or reason. As suggested above, Kant’s notion of a universal reason is based upon that which can be accepted by all rational agents, as such. Rather than Aristotle’s reliance upon actual communities in which virtues are embodied, Kant suggests that there are reasons that transcend the contingent virtues that may be present in any given actual community. These are reasons based upon the nature of practical rationality itself, and thus hold for all rational beings.²⁶ Kant believed that such reasons could be learned and followed in practice even where many Aristotelian virtues do not exist. That is, in principle, reason alone can provide sufficient guidance for our practical deliberations and action. Under Kant’s model, universal principles of practical reason rather than the character of the members of a community serve as the determining moral compass. Rather than the first-person perspective we find Aristotle, Kant’s universalization procedure forces us to take the perspective of no particular person, but rather that of *any* rational agent. This is not say that contextual factors, including the identity of others, cannot play a role in our deliberations. It simply means that we question our practical alternatives

²⁵See Kant’s *Groundwork*.

²⁶ See Kant’s *Groundwork*, and especially his *Critique of Practical Reason*.

by asking, “could what I propose to do, and the reasons I have for doing it be accepted by any rational being?”

The second element to note is not unique to Kantian ethics but is illustrated well by them and that is the notion of moral obligation. While Aristotle looks for what is noble and fine, or the excellences of human character, Kant wants to identify what our obligations to other rational beings are. This aretaic/deontic contrast is exemplified in both the respective words of Aristotle and Kant as well as in the so-called “ethics of virtue/ethics of duty” debates in normative ethics.²⁷

Margaret’s “no put down” principle now seems to have a more commodious theoretical home. She often appeals to it as a categorical maxim of action, a general principle of conduct that articulates a moral duty that we all have to each other. It may also reveal a virtuous character, but it seems that in many cases the idea that Margaret tries to get across is that it is anybody’s duty to follow this.

Lest one be led to the conclusion that we are trying to show that Kant provides a superior theoretical basis for understanding MDT, remember that our argument is for theoretical pluralism. Relying solely on Aristotle, these elements of Margaret’s practice either remained hidden or as inchoate figures on the periphery of our vision, or they were simplified and subsumed under the closest approximate category available in our own mental scheme of Aristotelian virtue. A more theoretically pluralistic approach allows us to actually see in more detail and richer color these aspects of Margaret’s practice, in addition to providing a richer framework for then exploring, analyzing and illustrating those elements.

To illustrate this further, while looking for the virtues and inquiring into the character of teachers, it did not take us long to see that many of them seemed heavily invested in their relationships with their students and demonstrated a very parental caring for the individuals they taught. In doing so, we could say they were providing a model for the virtue of “caring,” but an ethics of care both captures what we observed more effectively, and allows us to see a richer story unfolding before us in our observations.

For instance, while Aristotle is known for his particularism as well as his writing on friendship, his ethics remains rooted in a first person perspective.²⁸ An ethics of care takes us beyond that perspective to look at relationships themselves as well as a particular person’s “engrossment in the other,” that allows for true responsiveness to the particular needs of another. This account of caring relationships not only allows us to see and make sense of a dimension of most all of the teacher’s practices in the Manner Project, but also distinguishes Hanna at Jordan Elementary as she exemplifies what can only be justly described as an “engrossment” in her students, their well-being and their needs.

²⁷See: Baron, Marcia. “The Ethics of Duty/Ethics of Virtue Debate and its Relevance to Educational Theory.” *Educational Theory* 35, no. 2 (1985): 135-149.

²⁸For more on Aristotle’s account of friendship, see: Cooper, John M. “Aristotle on Friendship.” In *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, edited by Amelie O. Rorty, 301-240. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

With these albeit brief examples in hand we can now return to our basic argument for theoretical pluralism with a better understanding of its practical applications.

The Argument for Theoretical Pluralism in Inquiring into MDT

Theoretical pluralism begins with the claim that inquiring into MDT first requires that we *identify* all that is morally salient in teaching practice.²⁹ Identifying or describing aspects of teaching and classrooms as moral is a different task than deciding what to do or be. If we are to remain open to all of the possible moral dimensions of teaching, our efforts may be facilitated by a theoretically inclusive description of morality, one that goes beyond the boundaries of any particular theory of what is good or right to desire, think, be or do. In other words, we can be Aristotelians, Kantians or care ethicists with regards to what we consider to be morally good and what we ought to do, but to describe the moral domain we must be all of the above and more. The moral domain of classrooms is more complex, diverse and varied than any typical normative theory can account for in a rich and sensitive way. Thus, in order to see all of what is morally salient we cannot rely solely on any particular normative theory, and instead must extend the boundaries of what is morally salient (and our understanding of why) by maintaining a plurality of theories active as we inquire into MDT.

In addition, we would like to draw attention to the fact that just as description is theory laden, and thus interpretive, the process of making sense of what we take to be morally salient and how we present our understandings to others will also depend upon the conceptual tools that we have at our disposal.³⁰ Our work is not finished with describing the moral domain, as if we could write it all down in a book with a clear meaning for all to simply read. We must be able to re-interpret and represent what we understand in dialogue with others, and open our understandings to collective scrutiny.

In particular, we must be able to productively engage teachers and teacher educators, not as providers of information but as fellow inquirers.³¹ Just as there are many theories about how we ought to guide our lives there are many different beliefs about what it means for something to be moral (in the descriptive sense). We cannot afford to miss, ignore or run rough-shod over these beliefs about morality that teachers hold, nor should we limit the range of materials and tools to recognize, acknowledge, and collaboratively unpack and discuss them. Thus, there

²⁹In distinguishing description from evaluation, we do not mean to place too much weight on the fact/value distinction. This distinction has been drawn into question on a number of grounds, including the reliance upon value judgments in identifying facts as well as the factual properties of values. See Railton, Peter. "Facts and values." *Philosophical Topics* 24, no. 2 (1986): 5-31. We do not see our inquiries as a purely descriptive and thus value free endeavor, but aiming at describing what is, rather than one ought to be the case regarding MDT.

³⁰ Our thinking on the interpretive nature of observation and description is largely influenced by the hermeneutic tradition. See: Palmer, Richard E. *Hermeneutics; Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer, Northwestern University studies in phenomenology & existential philosophy*. Evanston [Ill.]: Northwestern University Press, 1969. Bleicher, Josef. *Contemporary Hermeneutics : Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy, and Critique*. London ; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.

³¹See Sanger, "Talking to Teachers."

promises to be a discursive and a pedagogical utility in maintaining a plurality of ways of representing various aspects of the moral domain.³²

Some Possible Counter-Arguments and Protests

Finally we must consider two counter arguments and a third, general protest, that might be leveled at our efforts here. The first might come from those of an atheoretical bent that see this push for theoretical grounding as an unnecessary and perhaps oppressive constraint on work in this domain. They might claim that theory is not necessary for helpful and insightful accounts of the moral domain of teaching. Further, they might add that relying heavily upon theory, even on multiple theories as we suggest, will actually limit our view by defining the possibilities before the fact.

Our response to such claims is a qualified agreement. We agree that a sophisticated knowledge of the philosophical literature is not a prerequisite for work on MDT. However, we believe that a more systematic and explicitly grounded account of this domain, informed by the many rich elaborations and distinctions to be found in the philosophical literature, will benefit our understandings. In our view, any research into MDT will necessarily draw upon some theory or theories of what is morally salient, even if they are tacitly held and based on intuitions. But in order to progress in our understanding of this domain we feel that these theories must be made explicit and critically assessed to determine whether we endorse them and their implications. Moral philosophy provides us with both a resource for the possible content of theories of what is morally salient, as well as analyses of their implications, and questions and problems to pose to our own theoretical prospects.³³

These same points help to answer the second objection above that a heavy reliance upon theory might predetermine what is we see. If we recognize that all observation is theory laden, this objection loses much of its force and directs us to ask whether the theories we wish to rely upon are tacit and unacknowledged, or a diverse array of explicit ones that have been articulated, systematically developed and debated. We clearly advocate the latter, regardless of whether or not those theoretical grounds come from the philosophical canon on ethics, even though we believe that literature to provide many useful insights into the moral domain.

A second counter-argument might come from the anti-theoretical camp. Anti-theorists in ethics claim that theorizing in hopes of providing a single, consistent, rationally determined basis for deciding what we ought to desire, feel, be or do, is not only futile but misrepresents the complex, multifaceted, necessarily conflicted nature of the moral domain.³⁴ Thus, the project of theoretically grounding our inquiries into MDT faces parallel problems, and therefore, the argument goes, we should abandon systematic theorizing about morality. However it now should

³² Though for an important consideration of the difficulties of presenting a variety of moral approaches of teaching practice to preservice teachers, see: Hansen, David T. "The Moral Is in the Practie." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 14, no. 6 (1998): 643-655.

³³ For more on the role of moral philosophy in moral education, see the introduction to Chazan, Barry I., and Jonas F. Soltis. *Moral Education*. New York,: Teachers College Press, 1973.

³⁴ Again, see Clarke and Simpson's *Anti-theory*.

be clear that we can not only grant this point, but use it to support our argument, for it is based on the same essential belief about the complexity of morality. That is, as we have argued all along, that the mono-theoretic model, which anti-theorists decry, fails to account for the complexity and range of the moral domain. But we see this not as a reason to abandon systematic theorizing but rather a reason to become more pluralistic in theoretically grounding our understanding of the moral domain—a conclusion made possible by again distinguishing between the practical task of normative ethics and the descriptive one that is the topic of this inquiry.

One final protest might come from psychologists who could readily point to their own theories regarding the moral domain, asking why they haven't been given standing in this discussion.³⁵ We would welcome the effort to put psychological theories on to the table in hopes of further enriching our understanding, and we are working to include them in our own thinking on the matter. But we would be remiss as philosophers were we not to point out that all such theories eventually need to answer the philosophical question, “what makes *that* conception particularly *moral*.”

Conclusions

In closing we note that recent work in the educational literature on ethics calls for theoretical pluralism, even as a basis for action, let alone a descriptive account of the moral domain.³⁶ The basic argument provided is that, in this case, an ethics of duty or an ethics of care alone cannot provide sufficient practical resources to guide moral action in all circumstances. This same logic holds even more strongly in the case of trying to describe the entire moral domain of teaching. Theories of morality can provide resources for understanding, if we can see past our normative commitments and cast our gaze beyond their traditional foundations.

To summarize our position on the theory-full, pluralistic approach we advocate, we encourage you to think for a moment about morality. In doing so, one might think about the ideals that we aspire to as human beings. How might we go about developing our understanding this dimension of morality? Our suggestion would be to turn to two places: first, we could look to aretaic theories, such as Aristotle's, and the associated literature on what the nature of our ideals are. Second, we can look to what teachers are doing in classrooms, the ideals that they have and the way in which they are enacted in their practice. Both are essential.³⁷ However, this does not even begin to provide a complete account of the moral domain, for morality is also

³⁵ For the survey of psychological approaches in the context of moral development, see Kurtines, William M., and Jacob L. Gewirtz. *Moral development : an introduction*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995.

³⁶ Strike, Kenneth A. “Justice, Caring and Universality: In Defense of Moral Pluralism.” In *Justice and Caring: The Search for Common Ground in Education*, edited by Michael S. Katz, Nel Noddings and Kenneth A. Strike, 21-36. New York: Teachers College Press, 1999.

³⁷ We thank David Hansen for his eloquent contributions to our understanding of the importance of teaching practice in understanding MDT—a concern we whole-heartedly share. See Hansen's “The Moral is in the Practice,” for a more practice-based view, especially in the context of teacher education. We do, however, have some reservations about the possibility of using the practice of teaching as the exclusive source of a definition of the moral domain of teaching, while acknowledging Hansen's caveats regarding the way that moral theory has been used as basis for a program of teacher education in this area.

about duty and obligation, reasons, relationships, principles and values. Here again, we suggest that in order to progress in our understanding of all of these dimensions of morality in a way that is explicit and thus open to scrutiny, conversation, and debate, that we look toward both a plurality of theoretical resources and the practices going on in classrooms so that our understanding of each may enrich the other. Doing so is one of the most significant and fascinating challenges we face working at the nexus of theory and practice in the moral domain of teaching.