

Emma

DAVID KARIMI



WRITER'S COMMENT: As a general rule of thumb, philosophers are rather inept at writing pretty prose. Their mode of discourse has become technical and esoteric, and this hasn't been a big hit with lay readers. Needless to say, I had a tough time trying to ride the line between academic rigor and readability. But I soon discovered that the dialogue was pivotal for the reconciliation of these two seemingly incompatible ideas. The dialogue allowed me to take my time—to saunter along, like Emma and the Professor—toward the destination that is a philosophical truth. These days, unfortunately, it's all about the answer; “how?” and “what?” are the only questions asked by the West. The philosopher, on the other hand, is a saunterer: she takes her time to ask, “why?” because she realizes that there are always new questions to be asked. She understands that the truth—be it moral or otherwise—is not a destination with a definite set of rules but a journey with no finish line.

—David Karimi

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I teach advanced composition with a focus on creative approaches to traditional assignments, encouraging students to break the mold of the staid undergraduate essay and instead find a way to tell an interesting story. Still, I was unprepared for the creative and intellectual audacity of David Karimi. He brought to every class a delighted (and delightful) embrace of challenge—accepting the challenge of the course and demanding his right to challenge it in return. His joyous striving for intellectual growth was apparent in everything he did. As a philosophy major, David had long enjoyed the traditional Socratic dialogue while lamenting its abandonment by modern academics. He wanted very much to resurrect it in an explanation essay. While the piece is rigidly logical, the goal was ultimately not argumentative. In its execution, David takes risks few students are willing to take, making “Emma” a highly original approach to an otherwise traditional assignment.

—David Masiel, University Writing Program

ETHICS IS A BRANCH OF PHILOSOPHY *that deals with morality. Morality is a man-made construct that assigns what is right and what is wrong. Right and wrong are sometimes as arbitrary and whimsical as man himself; they are polarized value judgments that vary depending on the person or society doing the judging. Nevertheless, philosophers tirelessly pursue an ethical system that is both logically sound and applicable in the real world. Philosophers of Ethics remove themselves from the hypothetical, dry philosophical world and instead plant themselves in the shoes of moral agents—like you and me—to find the most elegant ethical system that serves us all.*

One method that ethical philosophers use to teach one another about pressing moral issues is the Socratic Dialogue. The Socratic dialogue teases out our intuitions regarding ethics, specifically our view on the morality of any difficult choice, in a manner that is most accessible to anyone reading the conversation. The conversation has historically been, and still is, the primary mode by which philosophers communicate with one another. While the “classic” dialogue form has all but died out in academic philosophy papers, this in no way means the Socratic dialogue has been removed from the classroom; even the most difficult philosophical concepts are taught in the Socratic Method.

In the following example I have taken no liberties with regard to the form of the Socratic dialogue. It flows in the manner Plato saw fit: Question→Hypothetical→Crux→Arguments→Conclusions. It is important to note that the Socratic dialogue is not an argumentative piece. Of course, as with all philosophy, there is an argument involved, but the upshot of the Socratic dialogue sheds light on a philosophical concept—expands it, understands it and analyzes it—this may invariably include arguments from both sides, but they are never given a full depth of treatment as they are in arguments—instead, they are fused together. Ultimately, this is the beauty of the philosophical dialogue—Plato’s Republic is one such example: it is an explanation of the world if we lived in a Philosopher-King utopia.

I aim to do something similar in this piece. In the following dialogue, we see a Philosophy professor is concluding a lecture on morality and religion when one of his students, Emma, bids him to take a stroll on the quad so they can discuss some matters of importance. He packs his briefcase and tells Emma to wait outside the door. She is anxious.

EMMA: I realize this may be outside the scope of your duties as a teacher, but I want to know if it would be ethical for me to get an abortion.

PROF. LAYTON: What do you think of abortions?

EMMA: I believe that our society today casts it in an unethical light. They take something that should be a woman's right, and instead portray it as a right of "unborn" people. I don't know what is more ethical—to take advantage of my right as a woman, or to answer to a higher calling that the religious tend to.

Every Socratic dialogue needs a spark—a question—that sets the course for the conversational journey. "What do you think of abortions?" is the central question of this Socratic dialogue—Professor Layton seeks to tease out Emma's moral underpinnings regarding this loaded subject. As with all Socratic dialogues, there is a natural, conversational back and forth between inquisitor (the one questioning—Professor Layton) and interlocutor (the one responding to the questions—Emma). Most professional philosophers today find this style unnecessary due to clutter and lack of depth. I disagree with the academic philosophers in this regard because there is a dramatic element to any philosophical discussion: if there wasn't, then wouldn't the issue, like abortion, have already been solved? Regardless, in the following movements the dialogue will shed its dramatic elements—it will stick to the heart of the matter.

PROF. LAYTON: Consider a God-fearing Christian pharmacist—he follows his religion according to how the Church commands him to—he is an honest, fair man who has commanded much respect in his community. This is a fair hypothetical, is it not?

EMMA: It is.

PROF. LAYTON: Let's further say this pharmacist follows all the laws that the state has enacted. Isn't that also reasonable?

EMMA: Very reasonable.

PROF. LAYTON: Excellent—so in this scenario a young woman, like you, goes into the pharmacist's store to buy a morning-after pill. The pharmacist sees the woman trying to purchase the morning-after pill and tells her "I am not filling out this prescription." Stunned, the woman asks the pharmacist why he would do such a thing. The pharmacist replies, "If

I were to fill out this prescription, it would violate my ethical code as a Christian.” Furthermore, he would direct his patient to a pharmacist who *would* fill out the prescription; he would not be violating his pharmaceutical code of ethics. The pharmacist would be ethical here, would he not?

EMMA: No, because he should not let his personal beliefs get in the way of the health of a young woman. If my religious code of ethics is in conflict with the well-being of another person, I would have to reevaluate it so it no longer does that.

PROF. LAYTON: So wouldn't that be your new code of ethics? You are essentially violating your original ethical code for a revised version, are you not? Wouldn't the Christian community excommunicate you as a result?

EMMA: I suppose.

The hypothetical is the most elegant, artful part of the Socratic dialogue: from the Chariot Allegory which describes the soul's path to enlightenment to the Myth of the Cave which represents how little we actually know of the world, the hypothetical is the main tool philosophers use to understand problems. The scientific method is based on this principle—a testable hypothesis is required before any empirical tests are run. Professor Layton artfully lays the foundations for the rest of the dialogue here—he provides a generic, realistic hypothetical. The hypothetical is meant to set a real-world standard for ethical debate; we have all heard news stories that report on pharmacists who refuse to give morning-after pills. It is important to note that Emma assents to all assertions made by Professor Layton's hypothetical: there is a mutual understanding of terms that is necessary in any philosophical debate, removing any confusion. By asking poignant questions, Professor Layton forces Emma to come to her own logical conclusions regarding the morality of abortion. Like Socrates, Professor Layton understands that the truth of any ethical matter is not apparent prima facie (on the first appearance). From here, we move onto the crux of the Socratic dialogue.

PROF. LAYTON: Who's being ethical here? Is it the pharmacist, for changing his ethical code to meet the health needs of his patient, or is it the Christian community for sticking to its religious ethical code? What are ethics? Are they immutable or impermanent? Are they rooted in fact

or culture? Are they personal and impermanent, like you've just argued, or are they global, logical, and immutable?

EMMA: Ethics are a personal thing—a response to how we feel regarding a situation. The pharmacist is obligated to fill the prescriptions out because the well-being of others is important.

Here we have the crux of the Socratic dialogue: "Are [ethics] immutable or impermanent?" Professor Layton pares down the superfluous part of the dialogue to show that there is a fundamental dilemma in ethical theory: is it rooted in fact or culture? Can philosophers seriously assume there is a logical conclusion to be reached when discussing morality, or is it something that is at the whim of the society in question? Emma responds by saying that it is rooted in a "feeling"—of course, Professor Layton will not let her off the hook, as "feelings" are far too vague for a philosophical discussion. There is something deeper that Professor Layton wants to uncover, and this is where the argumentative part of the dialogue begins. Professor Layton will continually question the validity of Emma's stances until a mutual conclusion is reached.

PROF. LAYTON: Interesting—what if you were born in another country, say, in Saudi Arabia? You would be a Muslim born in a radically Islamic world dealing with other Muslim people. You would not even understand the concept of a morning-after pill because they are illegal. Am I not right in asserting this?

EMMA: You would be right. But that doesn't mean that I can't take the well-being of others into consideration within the context of my religion.

PROF. LAYTON: True. But wouldn't that still force you to deny patients the morning-after pill? You see, your feelings have changed—they no longer coincide with what you feel here, now. They coincide with what you'd feel if you were a Muslim living in Saudi Arabia. These are two different things.

EMMA: What's more, the logic behind my motives would be the same—I would seek to affirm the well-being of my patients, but instead of prescribing morning-after pills, I would direct them to an adoption center. I understand now, Professor Layton.

PROF. LAYTON: Good! You knew this all along. Now, who is being ethical in the pharmacist allegory?

EMMA: Both the pharmacist and the woman are being ethical.

PROF. LAYTON: How can both be ethical?

EMMA: Well, they're operating within different ethical contexts. One is a Christian pharmacist and one is a secular young woman. They were brought up to feel differently about various ethical issues. Thus, they clash on ways to *best carry out* an otherwise common ethical backbone.

PROF. LAYTON: Fair enough. But what if the "common ethical backbone" is different? What would we say to someone who asserts that "my well-being is more important than all others?"

EMMA: We'd have to tell them that their ethical system has long been considered inefficient.

PROF. LAYTON: Why is it inefficient? If I get *my* share of the pie, then everything is right with the world. This is how our economic system is set up, correct?

EMMA: Decisions that seek to maximize the good of all are much more efficient than ones that maximize utility for merely one moral agent—these are conclusions drawn by game theory. People buy SUVs in hopes that they'll be "safer," but they ultimately endanger other drivers because they are populating roads with bigger and more dangerous vehicles. It is a flawed logic that is costing us dearly.

PROF. LAYTON: What's wrong with that? Who's to say that's an irrational logic?

EMMA: Well, you're not making decisions on a rational basis. You're being irrational out of laziness or whatever it is that compels people to buy SUVs. Given that we want to have an efficient ethical theory, it would serve us better if we had a rational system.

PROF. LAYTON: So we are aiming for a rational system?

EMMA: Correct.

PROF. LAYTON: What about anti-prostitution laws? Are they aiming to be rational?

EMMA: No—they are aiming to enforce an arbitrary ethical law that invariably changes depending on time and geography.

PROF. LAYTON: So rationality is dependent on those who deem what is rational and what isn't, and this can change depending on the era and culture, correct?

EMMA: It would seem that you are right, Professor Layton—I do not understand the implications, however.

The argumentative dance between Emma and Professor Layton has reached its final throes—Emma is dumbfounded. Emma realizes that her ethical system will not work in Saudi Arabia. How can she reconcile the human search for a rational system of ethics when we have anti-prostitution laws that are based on our cultural beliefs regarding sexuality? As with all Socratic dialogues, the interlocutor reaches a point of confusion that can only be cleared up by the inquisitor: in this case, Emma does not realize that the “backbone” of ethics that she is so tirelessly searching for does not exist. The conclusion of the dialogue consists of Professor Layton explicating his theory regarding ethics and Emma deciding whether or not to get an abortion.

PROF. LAYTON: The implications are vast. What may seem blasphemous during one era may be considered an act of ultimate good in another. The “backbone” of ethics that we spoke of earlier is meaningless given that our ethics change so rapidly over the course of history. With that in mind, a system of ethics that advises the moral agents to make decisions based on functionality would be the soundest one.

EMMA: Since that is the case, Professor Layton, I believe the right decision for me would be to get an abortion. Abortion may be seen as an unethical act today, but that doesn't mean it always has been or always will be. Any judgment values that we place on actions are only as reliable as the current system they borrow from. And when pro-lifers call abortions “evil” I realize that they are narrow-minded in their analysis of my ethics; they (most often) use Christianity as their “backbone.” And Christianity, as we know, is not a static religion—it is one that has evolved greatly since the coming of Christ. If it was static, then we would

still see the stoning of women and children—and that is most certainly not the case. Christianity has a system of ethics that I do not need to adhere to because it does not serve me. Maybe some day it will, but in the meantime I can get my abortion and lead my life comfortably. I can find solace in the fact that ethical systems change—the only thing we can do is find the right blend that serves us the most and is, as you say, the most “functional.”

PROF. LAYTON: You have answered your own question: ethics are a fragile and malleable human creation. A system of ethics is “functional” when its core principles—the backbone—allow us to change what is moral and what is not. This may seem like a useless and relativistic ethical system, *prima facie*, but if we allow ourselves to change our ethical system we’ll have room to become *more* moral. A good system of ethics is like a novel that will never be published—we revise it to make it better, but we will never have a final copy. If I got to Nevada, I can purchase services from a prostitute and be fully “moral” in the eyes of the law. If I go to Salt Lake City and try to do the same thing, I will be arrested. Humans have not reached, and will never reach, a consensus on morality—and it would be unreasonable for us to assume that there are ethical principles that can apply to everyone.

Professor Layton gently guides Emma to her conclusion regarding abortion. This is the beauty of the Socratic dialogue—instead of delivering a polemic, Professor Layton questions Emma until she realizes what she knew all along. Plato firmly believed that all knowledge exists within us—we need only tap the hidden reservoir in the right manner in order to access it. According to Plato, this is achieved by the Socratic dialogue. Emma realizes there is no ethical “backbone” at all, and she shouldn’t regret getting an abortion if it serves her. Influential systems of power have historically been the designators of right and wrong. Much of the debate against abortion has come from religious Christian activists—the “sanctity of life” being their primary argument. Emma understands that “sanctity of life” is a religious creation: if we replaced Christianity with an equally-influential, hypothetical religion that mandates abortions—because they view fetuses as globs of cells—then the people who argue “sanctity of life” might very well be seen as immoral. In order to solve this problem, Professor Layton takes the path of least resistance: he grants that humans will have an ever-changing ethical code, and he affirms that position by arguing for an evolving ethical system that is rationalized by the needs

of the users. One may say the ethical system proposed by Professor Layton is no different than utilitarianism—this is up for debate, in my opinion. Utilitarianism determines the rightness or wrongness of actions by assessing their utility for the whole. What Professor Layton concludes is a little more nuanced: he allows for the calculations within the ethical system to vary. The utilitarian would agree with the pharmacist's decision to deny the patient of her morning-after pill—because his life would be ruined if he was excommunicated. Professor Layton would disagree: he would expect the pharmacist to understand that Christianity's unchanged and strict moral codes should not guide his judgment. Any ethical system which claims to be immutable is one that should be avoided, according to Professor Layton. The pharmacist is therefore obligated to discard the illogical, whimsical moral codes that he's chosen to follow with an ethical system that is more malleable. According to Professor Layton, all ethical systems are relativistic. Even ethical concepts that we believe are broad enough to apply to everyone like "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" are relativistic. How can we know what others want? And for that matter, can we generalize this for entire populations of people across all time? Humans will rationalize anything to suit their needs—slave owners in the South believed they were playing a divine role in history even though we now view them with contempt. Any ethical decision we make today may be seen as blasphemy in the future. As a result, we should not adhere to any system of ethics that claims to have immutable principles. We should act with the greatest good in mind, understand that our system of ethics is not the "best" or "correct" one, and realize that we may need to change our concept of "good" if more functional alternatives present themselves.