

The premise of practical ethics is that we are searching for the (or a) right thing to do. Challenging this premise is unhelpful in this context.

## Teaching Practical Ethics as Philosophy

It is easy for students, when dealing with issues in practical ethics, to focus on the ‘practical’ and neglect the ‘ethics’. I suspect that this is in large part because empirical material is easier to handle than philosophical, and that it is difficult to see how to apply theory to practice. What can teachers do to help? Here are some tips.

1. Repeatedly separate empirical material from philosophical, emphasising their differences and reminding the students they are doing philosophy, not social science.
2. Stress the conditional nature of philosophical arguments. It is not just acceptable, but good, to say ‘if it turns out like this, then this follows’. Avoiding lengthy and irrelevant discussions of whether the antecedent actually holds is important. To help with this, work with conditionals: communicating the message that the truth and importance of a conditional does not depend on the truth and importance of its antecedent is very difficult!
3. Warn students off oversimplification wherever possible. It is difficult at this level to engender a sense of the complexity of moral issues, even in cases in which you take a particular moral theory for granted. However, it is possible by spending some time with one issue and one theory as an example. When a theory is being evaluated by its success in practical cases, the complexity is crucial to a fair evaluation; and when more than one theory is being compared, the complexity is compounded.
4. Related to this, invite discussion of whether practical ethics ‘ought’ to be easy or not. Can we expect clear rules and algorithmic decision procedures in life? Obviously, this is a live issue for people of this age, as they start to move away from the clear rules of childhood into a more complex and uncertain world. What should the aspirations of ethical theory be? Is the presence of grey areas really a failure?
5. Likewise, warn students off the ‘don’t know, can’t tell’ style of discussion, as this move is simply a refusal to do philosophy (see also 2 above). For example, ‘who knows what consequences follow from an abortion?’ or ‘who is to say what is right?’ is not helpful. A consequentialist will quickly reply that we must simply do our best; and the student *qua* philosopher is to say what is right (this is not arrogance, but the contribution of a rational human being to a rational debate).
6. Make a distinction between morality and legality. Whether a practice should be legalized is a separate debate from whether it is morally acceptable. There are many legal practices that are not morally acceptable (betraying your friends), and there may well be illegal practices that are morally acceptable (euthanasia). Discuss why these are separate issues.
7. It is important to separate metaethical issues from normative issues. So relativism and subjectivism should be kept out of discussions of practical ethics as far as possible (although practical ethics need not be kept out of discussions of metaethics).