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61. Normativity in applied ethics teaching: not to have, nice to have, or need to have?

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Abstract

Arguing for mitigation/adaptation to counter risks to food security, agricultural production and environmental protection caused by climate change is, although based on (sound) science, at the core a value-based argument. Therefore, at many universities, applied science students now have mandatory and/or elective BSc and MSc courses which put their discipline into a wider social context, including ethical analysis and reflection. Such courses thus deal with normative questions. However, it is necessary to ponder what to do with the normativity in applied ethics teaching, including how to deal with the values of the teacher whilst ensuring the best learning outcome. We analyse the role of normativity in ethics teaching drawing upon, respectively, the stance on conflict of interests found in codes on responsible conduct in research (RCR) and an adapted version of Pielke’s science-policy interface framework to bring out different types of ethics teachers. We find that not disclosing one’s normative position as teacher within applied ethics can be seen as lack of transparency, and may result in being, or being perceived of being, an act of (hidden) persuasion. We argue that teacher’s normative positions should be disclosed, to some degree, to enact, what we call responsible conduct in teaching (RCT). We conclude that there are a number of challenges associated with the normativity of teachers in relation to RCT and best learning outcome and suggest that having a teaching team that represent different normative positions may be of benefit to students and deflect criticisms of bias.

Keywords: responsible conduct of teaching, science-policy interface, responsible conduct of research, best learning outcome

Introduction

Strategies to counter the effects of climate change on food security, agricultural production and environmental protection include mitigation (minimizing possible impacts) and adaptation (reducing the negative effects), and seek out opportunities. Coming professionals and actors in the food chains are often taught about these strategies and their implementation as part of their university curriculum. In such contexts, science and technology are often promoted as important tools to help society in a situation where climate change, loss of biodiversity, widespread hunger and pollution threaten the lives of billions of people now and in the future.

Arguing for the mitigation of climate change or adaption to changes to safeguard food security and ensure environmental protection evidently builds on insights from e.g. biology and food science, but is at the core a value-based argument. In this context, almost any choice of action has effects that raises ethical questions related to e.g. social equity or environmental justice. It also relates to how to prioritize efforts in a situation where ‘facts [are] uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high and decisions urgent’ (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993: 744).

Moreover, future professionals studying and working with climate, food, nature and environment will often be faced with disagreement and dilemmas instead of clear-cut decisions between e.g. protection...
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of the natural environment and the realization of human interests (or the interests of some at least); or whether societies should aim for environmental or ecological justice, taking into account also non-human species? In response to these challenges, these coming professionals and actors within the food sector (from farming to governance to research) are often introduced to courses putting their knowledge into a wider societal context, including reflection on values and how these values should be handled (ethical theories) in their curricula. For example, being educated to work with food production technologies, an ethical question is whether it is morally permissible to eat food based on animals, and if so, under what conditions and why; or if one specialises in food science, a question could be whether it is morally acceptable to use palm oil in food products – and when/when not?

Inclusion of applied ethical issues in applied science curricula have come in waves. The first struck the world of medicine in the 1970s, the second biotechnology in the 1990s and since the 2000s food production and climate and biodiversity management. Rationales probably range from a genuine recognition of ethics as part of finding socially robust solutions, over to a kind of greenwashing of certain professions, production paradigms and/or technologies. Whatever the rationale, applied ethics acts as the bridge between practical problems and conceptual critical analysis, analysing the presuppositions of different kinds of arguments being used in academic and societal discourses on e.g. climate, society, nature and the environment.

The authors of this paper teach ethics at a (mostly) natural science faculty at BSc, MSc and PhD level to students of whom many after graduation will contribute with scientific and technological knowledge to address the abovementioned societal challenges. Teaching ethics in such a setting obviously raises many questions (Gjerris, 2006; Stumann and Gamborg, 2013). Here, we will focus on two intertwined questions: What should the aim of such teaching be, and what to do with the normativity of the teacher in relation to the taught subjects and cases used? In short: how to deal with the values of the teacher to ensure the best learning outcome?

The issue of how to deal with the normativity of researchers is integral to being a researcher when reporting on possible conflicts of interests when communicating research in both the academic and the public context and when engaging in advisory work in both private and public policy processes. However, it is noteworthy that normativity in teaching has not been the subject to the same scrutiny as the other tasks – even though teaching is a huge part of the professional life of many university researchers. We will analyse the role of normativity in ethics teaching in the context described above, drawing upon, respectively, the stance on conflict of interests found in codes on Responsible Conduct in Research (RCR) and a science-policy framework developed by Roger Pielke (2007). At the same time, we develop a sketch of what the goals of said teaching should be. We ask: should the normativity of the researcher as teacher in ethics teaching be seen as something – as far as possible – to shun, as a regretful necessity or a positive contribution to reach the best learning outcome?

Normativity

Let us begin by acknowledging that although environmental decision-making, sensu lato, can be based on science, it cannot be left to science alone:

If you leave decisions about nature and environment to ‘the experts’ within science and technology, it does not mean that these decisions will be objective and neutral. It only means that the values and ethical assumptions that will shape the decisions are the ones held by the experts. (Des Jardin, 2013: 7)
The same can be said in relation to teaching applied ethics to applied science students at university level (by teaching, we also mean supervision on projects, theses, etc.), as values influence pretty much all aspects of a course. Here, we will flag three aspects: (1) ‘course design and planning’, that is decisions on how to prioritize the course: selection of theories, concepts, texts, and cases; and how the role of ethics is presented overall (meta-ethical questions) like: is ethics a ‘hammer’ or a ‘torch’ (see e.g. Gjerris, 2009). (2) ‘course execution’ e.g. choice of lecture format, guest lecturers; whether the emphasis is on discussions, exercises, or project/group work, etc. (3) ‘course examination’, e.g. formulation of exam questions, choice of exam format; and assessment of student performance. Thus, we can link normativity to course organization, didactics and curriculum. The first place to find inspiration on how to deal with this normativity will be in the concept of Responsible Conduct of Research.

Normativity and responsible conduct of research (RCR) in relation to teaching

Since the 1970s, there has been a growing interest in responsible conduct of research (here seen as the same as research integrity) both within the research community and society as such caused by, among other things, a number of high-profiled scandals (Jensen et al., 2020). In a Danish context, this has resulted in ‘The Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity’ where three principles that should govern all aspects of research are stated: Honesty, transparency and accountability. This mirrors to a large degree other international endeavours such as e.g. The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2017) and The Singapore Statement on Research Integrity (WCRI, 2010). By following these principles when planning, performing, and communicating research the aim is to ensure the trustworthiness, credibility and reliability of research, researchers, and research institutions. In turn, this should result in better research as well as continued societal support for research (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2014).

One area where the importance of these principles is very visible when discussing the normativity of researchers is ‘conflicts of interests’. Most will readily agree that economic interests can influence the way research is planned, performed and/or communicated. However, it seems just as obvious that values can play a role e.g. if an ethicist provides an analysis of the ethical issues related to stem cell research and at the same time holds values that are against the destruction of early foetuses. This is not the place to take the discussion of which conflicts of interests should be reported (Jensen et al., 2020). Yet, it shows that if the overall aim is to follow acknowledged principles of RCR then one needs to consider how to be honest, transparent and accountable in one’s communication of research, both in an academic and a public setting. This also goes for the communication of science that takes part when researchers are involved as advisors in policy processes.

An ideal of university teaching is that it should be research based. It seems to us that reflection on responsible conduct is just as relevant when teaching, not least when seen as a form of research communication. Thus, the RCR principles of honesty, transparency and accountability can serve to maintain trust in the knowledge that the teacher present to the students, and trust in the teacher and/or the university as an institution. Another justification is that it reflects seeing students as citizens, respecting their integrity and the democratic processes as such, as well as treating students as ends in themselves. This opens up for a discussion of what role the teacher should be and how the inherent normativity should be dealt with.

Normativity and teacher roles

We will describe four archetypes of ‘the ethics teacher’ based on Pielke’s (2007) framework for science-policy interface that deals with the issue of normativity. According to Pielke’s model, there are four possible main roles of the researcher in the interface with policy and politics (here only briefly
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(1) ‘Pure scientist’, assuming a distanced role, being passive or pursuing no targeted policy communication, not helping applying results to specific societal problems and indifferent about the use of her research in policy making. (2) ‘Science arbiter’, eliciting no specific recommendations to policymakers, consider herself a resource, giving answers when (factual) questions are asked by policy makers, but is not active in framing the issues. (3) ‘Issue advocate’, providing specific recommendations, and, importantly, making the case for one alternative over another based on own values. Finally, (4) ‘Honest broker’, serving balanced information about the range of options facing the policy maker, and clarifying choices to facilitate the process of decision-making. In real life, in different situations or across time, the same person might adopt one or more roles. Pielke identifies issues of normativity in all four roles. However, the fourth type, the honest broker, which Pielke endorses, seems to be the one closest to the RCR principles described before and the best way to ensure a legitimate democratic process.

We can translate the four roles into the domain of teaching applied ethics to applied science students: (1) ‘The neutral presenter’, not offering any normative ethical position, not targeting communication to the applied science audience, and indifferent about the usefulness for the students’ future context. Focus will be on presenting ethical theories or history of philosophy. (2) ‘The ethics arbiter’, providing no specific normative position as the basis for teaching, and expressing no opinion on own ethics preferences. Teaching here becomes kind of a Q&A session with the teacher not providing any framework to help the students create a comprehensive understanding of the field. (3) ‘The issue advocate’, having an articulated position that is promoted, and giving specific recommendation on the choice of ethical positions to students. Goal of teaching is to instil specific normativity in students, e.g. in the shape of own values or a professional or institutionally instilled code of conduct. (4) ‘The honest broker’, presenting a broad portfolio of positions and values which are perceived to be relevant for the students and their future work, giving balanced information about the positions’ strength, weaknesses and applicability seeking to help the students shape their own informed opinions, as well as challenging positions to make students reflect on their own view.

We can – admittedly somewhat speculative – try to link these types with how normativity is seen in teaching. Here, most likely the neutral presenter would see normativity in teaching as something to stay completely clear off, insisting on that he or she and the applied science students remain objective. The ethics arbiter would presumably see normativity as a regret, perhaps realizing the inevitability of normativity but only let it surface, if directly approached. The issue advocate would likely view normativity as unproblematic as the goal is to make the students adopt specific values, be it those of the teacher or more institutionally based values. The honest broker would, having the end goal of making students reflect, not be interested in forcing his or her own normativity on the students. Nonetheless, she will have to figure out how to deal with it as it will inevitably be part of the teaching process from course organization, to didactical choices, choice of curriculum and so on, as we argued earlier in this paper.

Adopting these roles or types of the ethics teacher – regardless of how realistic they are seen to be – present some challenges in relation to normativity, the RCR principles and as seen from a didactic perspective. The ‘neutral presenter’ runs the risk failing to engage the students as there is no attempt to show the relevancy of ethics to their context. More importantly in this context, there is a risk of lack of transparency, e.g. if failing to account for the selection of texts or explain that the history of philosophy looks different depending on where it is told from. At a more profound level, this type begs the question of whether it is at all possible to be neutral or objective, and by trying to come across as such, it may be interpreted as a lack of honesty. The ‘ethics arbiter’ (perhaps unintentionally) risks limiting the menu of ethics options offered and considered. Moreover, students may be never challenged on their value assumptions and the teacher’s normativity will partly shape her answers, whereby certain positions will carry an undue weight. Hereby, she risks slipping into the role of the issue advocate, and this may be seen as a lack of honesty and transparency. The ‘issue advocate’s’ own normative views may
fill everything, as the goal is to teach students ‘the right view’. Normativity might also come through in a more subtle way, e.g. by (mis)representing her favoured ethical theories, through text or case choices and unfairly representing alternative options. It may also be difficult for students to judge when the teacher is actively trying to persuade students to a certain view or merely provoke as a vehicle for learning. Thus, there are issues of missing transparency and credibility when/if it not made clear where the line is between ethics teaching and personal opinions, or, even worse, if it goes to serve her special interests. Finally, although we find that the honest broker is the right role model for an applied ethics teacher, challenges with normativity are still abundant. Ensuring balance and avoiding any form of bias is extremely demanding – and may be seen as an unattainable ideal rather than reflecting actual practice. As such, she may (unwillingly) slip into the role of issue advocate. This, obviously, will a problem in relation to accountability and transparency. Moreover, avoiding presenting own views to avoid charges of this – to not seem unduly provocative, or to appear as balanced and credible as possible – may in the end not foster enough critical reflection among students, leading to students failing to both catch interest and develop their own views.

Inevitably, normativity is present in all of the four idealized roles. This should not come as a surprise as all communication is, to some extent, coloured by values. However, by carefully formulating and presenting what the strived for learning outcomes are while maintaining the ideals of transparency, honesty and accountability as the basis for Responsible Conduct of Teaching this challenge can, at least to some extent, be addressed. In the final section, we will come with suggestions to learning outcomes.

**What to aim for – best learning outcome**

Based on the above analysis and based on our experience as applied ethics teachers for almost two decades as well as leaning on an ideal of teaching of developing and supporting independent, informed, empowered citizens and professionals, we suggest the following learning outcomes when teaching applied ethics to applied science students.

**Knowledge**
- understand the relationship between ethics and science;
- understand different applied ethical theories and concepts;
- understand the complexity and value-ladenness of concepts such a, sustainability, integrity and nature.

**Skills**
- analyse discourses and policies relating to one’s profession/academic discipline for implicit ethical aspects;
- analyse societal ethical dilemmas related to one’s profession/academic discipline and suggest ways to include them meaningfully them in decision-making processes;
- use knowledge of ethics in relation to other curricular activities, including MSc thesis.

**Competencies**
- develop and maintain an informed ethical perspective regarding professional/academic discipline issues, and practice;
- critically reflect on different views/discourses on the use of the profession/academic discipline;
- structure and participate constructively in discussions between different value perspectives related to one’s professional issues/academic discipline.

Clearly, these learning outcomes are broadly formulated, but it should be evident that the overarching goal is to challenge students, provide them with opportunities for critical reflection, and supply them
with knowledge and ‘tools’ to engage with value-based issues. Finally, we find it is vital that they realize how normativity is present in their own professions/academic disciplines.

In our view, achieving these goals requires a plethora of didactical and value-based choices. Two important aspects, as we see it, which are part of responsible conduct in teaching in applied ethics at university level, are: (1) ‘Normativity disclosure’. The teacher’s own normative position should be disclosed through active use as an inspiring provocation/devil’s advocate approach to ensure student engagement and maintain honesty and transparency. Moreover, although aiming at a balance in course organization, didactics and curriculum, dialogue with students on these issues should always be encouraged to safeguard transparency and accountability. (2) ‘Heterogenous teaching teams’. Teaching in teams where different normative positions are present can be of benefit to students, both in terms of achieving the best learning outcome and to be able to highlight unwarranted normative biases in all aspects of teaching. Through this we believe that applied science students will be better equipped to identify, understand and engage with questions about ethics and values in relation to their professional agendas, e.g. in relation to identifying well-founded, transparent and socially robust strategies with regard to climate change – not least in relation to food security, agricultural production and environmental protection.

References