

HONORABLE MENTION

PRE-COLLEGE ETHICS EDUCATION:  
APPLYING A TRI-LEVEL MODEL

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B.J. Hunnicutt: *“Doctors aren’t supposed to take bodies apart, they’re supposed to put them together.”*

Hawkeye Pierce: *“Why, so guys like that can take them apart again? You heard him, he’s going to take those kids up that hill tomorrow and send them back to us in pieces.”*

(M\*A\*S\*H, ‘Preventative Medicine’, 1979)

I. INTRODUCTION

As philosophers and ethics educators at the college level, we have found that pre-college level ethics education poses certain philosophical as well as instructional challenges and opportunities. In addition to more than two decades experience with college level ethics education, over the past three summers (since 2005) we have been participants in the Summer Honors Institute (SHI) that our institution hosts. The SHI’s purpose is to expose high school sophomores and juniors to college-level courses. In each institute that we have taught, ethics has been either the exclusive focus or it has been a principal concern.

It is all too possible in ethics education to intimidate students through too much exposure to abstract ethical theories or on their application to problems that students have little direct knowledge about or experience with. While knowledge about the theories and their general

application is crucial, we believe that it is essential to be able to connect both the theories and their application to problems and situations that students are familiar with. To this end our approach relies upon popular culture (in particular television and film), classic literature and philosophical texts in more-or-less equal measure. These elements are linked through a distinctive tri-level model of ethical reasoning that distinguishes between the social, role, and individual levels.

The idea here is to use film, television and literature – which deal with common situations and problems – to illustrate the main ideas in the various ethical theories. The students can relate to these illustrations in a more visceral and intuitive manner. We then use the tri-level model to aid the students in moving to the more philosophical texts. The model provides them with a structure through which to process and analyze the situations that arise in the films, television episodes and short stories. It is worth noting that the model’s design is modular, thus it can accommodate changes in content as well as course length.

The basic pedagogical format that we use to structure classroom instruction follows this format:

1. Introduce the tri-level model
2. View the film or television episodes.  
Discuss the ethical problem(s) that arise in the piece and determine the level(s) over which the problem(s) operate.
3. Introduce the short stories or excerpts.  
Use the stories or excerpts to elaborate on or further refine the previous discussion’s conclusions.
4. Introduce the philosophical texts
5. Introduce the ethical tradition that is appropriate to the level  
Discuss the tradition’s basic insight and its general structure.
6. Use the ethical tradition to describe, analyze and resolve the ethical problem(s).

## II. *THE THREE LEVELS OF ETHICAL REASONING*

Ethical problems, whether personal or professional, operate at and over three distinct levels.

1. The Social Level
2. The Role Level

### 3. The Personal Level

While it might be possible to analyze and resolve some problems on a single level, more complex problems can operate on more than one level. To be able to analyze ethical problems then it is essential to determine what considerations are appropriate on each level.

#### *Level 1: The Social Level*

At the social level the focus is on entire societies. Societies exist to promote and to ensure the common welfare. Thus to appreciate the ethical problems that arise at this level it is essential to recognize the complex interactions and negotiations that occur between social institutions, the manner in which these influence the individual's decisions and behavior, and the consequences the individual's decisions and behavior will have on these institutions. Since resources are finite, at the social level the principle concerns are the competition between social goods and the need to establish policies to govern their allocation and access to them as well as general social behavior.

#### *Level 2: The Role Level*

Throughout their lives individuals will assume, or in some instances acquire, certain roles. We are children, sisters, brothers, parents, spouses, friends, students, educators, soldiers, politicians and so on. Since we possess and act within numerous roles at the same time our interactions with others can become quite complex. We might interact with individuals in the same role, or with individuals in other roles. We can also move between roles within the same interactions. Thus to keep all these roles, as well as their obligations and constraints, straight can be quite difficult. In ethical terms though there is a common denominator – all these roles and the interactions within and between them involve relations with other individuals.

#### *Level 3: The Personal Level*

In order to negotiate the complex moral decisions that our various roles generate requires more than social policies or moral rules. At the personal level the individual must develop the judgment and character that is essential in order to be able to make appropriate decisions, engage in productive interactions with others and live a good life. Each role the individual assumes imposes certain obligations and constraints. To be able to balance these and do justice to each

role the individual must possess and cultivate certain basic character traits or virtues. These virtues provide (1) the general motivation to be moral in the first place and (2) the qualities the individual needs to be moral in specific situations. Besides this more general function, the virtues also represent specific qualities the individual will need throughout their lives – courage, compassion, intelligence, patience and so on.

### III. *ETHICAL THEORIES AND THE THREE LEVELS*

In formal courses on ethics, whether at the college or pre-college level, the most common approach is to introduce one or more ethical tradition – the principal contenders being consequentialism, deontological ethics and virtue ethics – describe each tradition’s basic moral insights and then instruct the students in their application.

In principle it is possible to use each ethical tradition on all three levels. The general welfare that is the focus at the social level is an obvious concern in consequentialism. At this same level though deontological theories might focus on rights or justice as a means to achieve ends that require social collaboration. Virtue ethics in turn might highlight the demands that virtues such as justice or fairness will have on the individual’s character on the social level. Similar points can be made about each tradition on the role and personal levels.

To be able to use each tradition on all three levels though requires that one develop each one in considerable detail. The problem though, as all educators will appreciate, is that time constraints mean that it is often impossible to do more than present each tradition in a rather coarse-grain version.

The tri-level model provides an alternative means to introduce ethical theories in ethics courses at the pre-college level that overcomes the need to explicate each tradition in detail. The critical point is to realize that even coarse-grain ethical theories provide a valuable insight on at least one level and these insights have clear relevance to our ethical lives. *Ceteris paribus*, it is clear that when one action creates much more happiness or satisfies more interests than alternative actions, that represents a justifiable moral reason to choose that action. It is also undeniable that, *ceteris paribus*, one should respect other moral agents and treat them as ends. And it is also, *ceteris paribus*, unquestionable that a virtuous ethical character is essential to being a moral person. In the tri-level model, we map these three theoretical insights onto the three levels of reasoning. A coarse-grain consequentialism has clear applications at the social

level, and the same is true for deontological theories at the role level, and virtue theories at the personal level (see Figure 1).

LEVEL	ETHICAL TRADITION	CONSIDERATIONS	ILLUSTRATION
<i>Social</i>	<i>Consequentialist ethics</i>	<i>Social policies and the competition between social goods</i>	<i>Preventative Medicine (focus on individual vs the social)</i>
<i>Role</i>	<i>Deontological ethics</i>	<i>The roles that individuals assume and the relationship between individuals in these roles</i>	<i>A Horseman in the Sky (focus on duties)</i>
<i>Personal</i>	<i>Virtue Ethics</i>	<i>The individual's character traits and conflicts between social, role and personal commitments</i>	<i>Groundhog Day (focus on Phil's personal development)</i>

Figure 1.

#### IV. ILLUSTRATIONS

In this section we will explore how the various elements – popular media, the tri-level model and the ethical theories – come together in classroom.

##### *Linking the Social Level to Consequentialist Considerations*

The epigraph to this article appears in a critical scene in the M\*A\*S\*H episode ‘Preventative Medicine’ which illustrates ethical considerations that occur at the social level.

Hunnicutt: “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Pierce: “I’m taking out that guy’s appendix in there. You gonna get into your whites or what?”

Hunnicutt: “You’re talking about removing a healthy organ.”

Pierce: “No, I figure his appendix is about as sick as his mind.”

Hunnicutt: “Doctors aren’t supposed to take bodies apart, they’re supposed to put them together.”

Pierce: “Why, so guys like that can take them apart again? You heard him, he’s going to take those kids up that hill tomorrow and send them back to us in pieces.”

Hunnicutt: “That man is crazy, that doesn’t make this right. Somethings are wrong, and they’re always wrong.

Pierce: “Fine, its wrong. But there are going to be a hundred boys still alive tomorrow. Go tell them how wrong it is.”

Hunnicutt: “Damn it! Why don’t you just stab him! Cutting into a healthy body is mutilation.

Pierce: “Don’t give me that. There aren’t doctors back home who do unnecessary operations? You haven’t heard of that? And for what, a few bucks.

The episode focuses on a combat Colonel who has little concern about his soldier’s lives. The Colonel’s objective is to capture a particular hill that has no real strategic value other than that its capture continues to elude him. MASH surgeon Hawkeye Pierce gives the Colonel a drug that causes intense abdominal pains that he then diagnoses as appendicitis. Hawkeye proposes to remove the Colonel’s appendix in order to prevent the attempt to capture the hill, which will result in numerous casualties. This proposal horrifies the other surgeon, B.J. Hunnicutt, who considers the action immoral. Hawkeye’s defense is a classic utilitarian justification. What makes the episode valuable though is that Hawkeye’s defense mirrors the justification would be given in situations where the hill’s capture did have actual strategic value. At the social level there are numerous situations in which a small loss is justifiable when there is a larger benefit, and war is one such situation.

Students recognize Hawkeye’s justification, and in most cases agree with it, but when the connection is made to the same justification’s use in larger social policies and practices it becomes apparent that such defenses come at a price – the individual’s rights and protections. This is an uncomfortable choice. No one doubts the greater social welfare’s importance, but ought this welfare be bought at the individual’s sacrifice?

Situations like that which ‘Preventative Medicine’ depicts are even more appropriate and evocative given current debates about the appropriate ethical responses to terrorism. The difference is that the terrorist is seen as being evil and thus their sacrifice seems more palatable. What ‘Preventative Medicine’ requires the student to consider is whether the sacrifice is also justifiable when the individual in question is an average decent person. Through the connections the M\*A\*S\*H episode has with these more recent ethical issues the students are able to appreciate how basic ethical assumptions underlie and influence our social decisions.

*Linking the Role Level to Kantian Considerations:*

Ambrose Bierce's 'A Horseman in the Sky' illustrates the central concepts in Kantian ethics that are appropriate considerations at the role level. Through the tale's narrative a dilemma arises that illustrates, in visceral manner, the Kantian conviction that rational beings have moral duties that bind them. During the Civil War a young Southerner, Carter Druse, informs his father, a Confederate, about his intention to join the Union forces. His father's response is, "Well, go, sir, and whatever may occur do what you conceive to be your duty." Sometime later, while on watch on the ridge above the Union encampment, Druse awakens to discover a man on a horse on the same ridge. At first all that Druse can determine is that the man is a Confederate soldier. Druse realizes that his obligation is to prevent the soldier's escape with information about the Union encampment, since given their location that would mean the regiment's certain death. Druse calculates though that, since the regiment is in the forest below the ridge, the Confederate soldier cannot have seen the encampment. At which point a Union soldier leaves to forest. With no other choice Druse shoots the horse which causes both horse and rider to plunge over ridge's edge. To the soldier below it appears as though the horseman is riding through the air. It is when Druse later meets with the soldier that we discover that the Confederate horseman was Druse's father.

While such ironic contrivances are classic Bierce, the moral dilemma that Druse faces is as horrific as it was plausible during the Civil War. And given their age, it is a dilemma that pre-college students experience on a visceral level. Their immediate response when Druse confesses that it the horseman was his father is 'That's horrible, I could never do that!' Nevertheless once the students begin to examine what duties are and the differences between the duties that life imposes upon us and the duties that we assume through conscious choice, there is a realization that the situation is less simple than their initial response presupposes. Perhaps the most valuable realization though, and the precise point that Kant insists upon, is that there is an important moral difference between duties and personal inclination.

*Linking the Personal Level to Virtue-Theoretic Considerations:*

In the movie *Groundhog Day*, Phil O'Connor is trapped in a time-loop, continually repeating the same day. No one else notices the repetition, but Phil remembers all of the previous days. This film can be used to illustrate a number of critical points about virtue theory and the personal level of moral decision making. Students identify with Phil's initial impulse toward hedonism,

and follow his journey through despair toward the development of a genuinely virtuous character.

Perhaps the most fundamental point here involves the mechanisms that underlie character change. One cannot simply wish to be courageous or compassionate – one has to cultivate and nurture these character traits over time. The gradual changes that Phil undergoes make this dimension of personal development quite evident to the students. A second critical point that the film illustrates is the importance that genuine relationships have in our lives. As Aristotle's extensive discussion about friendship in *The Nicomachean Ethics* reflects, friendships which are based simply on mutual pleasure, like Phil's initial relationships, cannot endure. A meaningful life is based on a shared sense of a good or flourishing life, a concept which is also illustrated effectively in the film. Phil's love interest, Rita, is portrayed as a decent and loving person, while Phil's defining characteristic at the film's start is his ego-centric nature, so no genuine friendship is possible. As he despairs of achieving a valuable life, and realizes there is no escape (even through suicide), he decides to make the world that he is trapped in the best that it can be. Even here he is forced to recognize his limitations, as the old man whose time has come dies in every repetition. Though he cannot save the old man, Phil provides assistance to a wide range of his fellow citizens. Just as important to a flourishing life, Phil comes to recognize the value of artistic expression. In the end, his conception of the good life has developed sufficiently that he is capable of genuine love and friendship with Rita.

## V. CONCLUSION

Space and time constraints mean that we have been able to do no more than outline our approach to pre-college ethics education in this paper. Despite these limitations though our hope is that we have been able to illustrate its potential.

Our own experiences as educators have led us to believe that ethics education is more art than science; with pre-college students it is essential to mediate the more technical and theoretical material with content that connects with their own experiences. Even this is inadequate though unless it is possible to provide them with some means to structure those experiences in order to highlight the ethical elements. To paraphrase Kant, content without structure is simple entertainment, while structure without content mere abstraction.

What it is crucial to realize is that there is a difference genuine ethics education and ethical indoctrination. Throughout their educations, indeed throughout their lives, individuals will be taught what is right. What ethics education ought to do is provide the means to analyze and evaluate what one has been taught. Moral opinions that one refuses to questions become little more than dogma. To be a responsible moral individual one must be a reflective individual.

To suppose that their age and limited experience means that pre-college students have no ethical problems or concerns is naïve. Human beings grapple with ethical problems at all ages. Which explains why ethical issues are such prominent features in literature, film, television and even music. What often *is* missing though is the means to process, analyze and resolve these problems. The approach that we have sought to describe in this paper aims to provide these abilities. Our suggestion is that the tri-level model, in conjunction with film, literature and other popular cultural media, provides a bridge that allows these students to use common life experiences to appreciate the most fundamental issues in ethics.