

## **Classroom Uses for *Morality's Critics and Defenders: A Philosophical Dialogue***

The organizing idea of the dialogue is a deliberative committee, which has the power to determine the kind of society everyone will live in going forward. The key question is whether the members of the deliberative committee will publicly endorse the moral system (here broadly construed) or one of the alternatives to it. The major alternatives discussed in the dialogue are religious systems, some version of moral relativism, moral nihilism, or “ethical” egoism (here treated as an alternative in opposition to the moral system – see the book pp. 46-47).

Unlike the veil of ignorance that restricts the sort of knowledge Rawlsian deliberators can have about themselves, there are no such restrictions placed on the deliberative committee members under the procedures described in this book. Deliberators can be ordinary people from all walks of life, deliberating just as they are, with full knowledge of their ethnicity, gender, political and religious beliefs and values, social and economic status, and historical and cultural location.

This open feature lends itself well to classroom use. Students can be grouped into small teams of three or four students. Each student can be asked to deliberate on which system or systems it would be rational for her to publicly endorse as part of the deliberative committee. That she can deliberate using her actual beliefs, values, and awareness of her social and economic standing makes this a much less abstract exercise than one imposing a veil of ignorance. (It is essential that the specific understanding of rational and irrational actions used in this book be conveyed to the students. See pp. 33-36, 98.)

Role-playing within these small teams is also an informative exercise. The students can be asked to play the role of one of the characters in the book. They could deliberate as the character Charlie (representing an ethical egoist perspective), Christine (representing a moral relativist perspective), Sharifa or Matt (representing Muslim and Catholic religious perspectives, respectively). Alternatively, other roles can be invented – for example, a ruthless dictator of a small country, a gay rights activist in a homophobic country, a religious leader in that country leading the effort to prosecute homosexuals, an immigrant from Mexico living illegally with her children in the U.S. These features can be combined, so that one member of a team plays a character from the dialogue, another an invented character, while a third deliberates as herself.

If students deliberate according to the procedures outlined in the book (see p. 36), the typical outcome will be that the committee will find no rational bar to publicly endorsing the moral system and that it will very often be blocked from endorsing any of the alternatives. However, this is not a foregone conclusion. In a few cases endorsement of the moral system will be blocked, in others the outcome may be indeterminate. These outcomes are themselves sources for further discussion and reflection (see p. 118).

It can be useful to prepare for the deliberative committee exercise by devoting an earlier class meeting to the Cooperation Game (described by Sinclair A. Macrae in *Teaching Philosophy* 37, 2014). The cooperation that often fails in that exercise is typically secured in the present one.

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