

Walking the Walk

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Abstract: Ethicists who advocate moral principles without trying to live by them will generally have a deficient understanding of what they recommend, for two reasons. First, abstract mottos like “act on the maxim you can will to be a universal law”, “maximize good consequences”, or “be generous” lack specific practical content without an array of concrete examples to flesh them out. For broad principles that can be lived by, everyday choices are generally the best source of such examples. Paragraph-length thought experiments are impoverished in comparison. Second, even a principle with fairly specific practical content, such as “don’t eat meat”, is difficult to fully understand without living by it: A meat-eating professor who recommends vegetarianism will generally have only a thin grasp of the way of life they recommend. These limitations give us reason to discount the understanding of ethicists who don’t attempt to live by their principles, even when their arguments are beautiful on the page.

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1. Max Scheler Points to Boston.

There's a story about Max Scheler, the famous early 20th-century Catholic German philosopher.¹ Scheler was known for his inspiring moral and religious reflections. He was also known for his horrible personal behavior, including multiple predatory sexual affairs with students, sufficiently serious that he was banned from teaching in Germany. When a distressed admirer asked about the apparent discrepancy, Scheler was reportedly untroubled, replying, "The sign that points to Boston doesn't have to go there."

Let's think about why that's a disappointing answer. Of course it's generally disappointing when people behave badly. But it seems especially troubling when an ethicist does. If a great chemist turns out to be a greedy embezzler, the world just has one more greedy embezzler, who happens also to be a great chemist. But when a great ethicist turns out to be a greedy embezzler, something deeper seems to have gone wrong – something, perhaps, that bears on our assessment of their ethical views.

I will argue that – with caveats – ethicists who espouse a way of life without trying to live it lack the main source of knowledge that gives their claims concreteness, specificity, and epistemic weight. Maybe Scheler can wave vaguely in the direction of Boston, but he doesn't really *know the way there*. He doesn't have a full-bodied understanding of what he's recommending.

¹ This version of the story is from Kimball 1999, drawing on a long oral tradition about Scheler. Other versions include Blei 1940, p. 114; Rothacker 1963, p. 30; Gadamer 1963/2007, p. 278. Scheler appears to have repeated versions of this saying often, probably derived from the old German proverb "Der Wegweiser geht nicht mit" (the signpost doesn't come along). A similar remark is sometimes attributed to Schopenhauer (e.g., Guenther 1918, p. 209), as Scheler might have known (Inciarte 1994, p. 27).

2. *Three False Starts.*

(1.) A natural first thought is that what's wrong with Scheler is simply *hypocrisy*: He surreptitiously violated moral standards that he publicly espoused, posing through his writings as a person of great moral concern and integrity, while revealing through his actions that he was no such thing.²

To see that this isn't the core issue, consider the following case:

Cheeseburger ethicist. Diane³ is a philosophy professor specializing in ethics. She regularly teaches Peter Singer's arguments for vegetarianism to her lower-division students. In class, she asserts that Singer's arguments are sound and that vegetarianism is morally required. However, she also openly emphasizes that she herself is not personally a vegetarian. She declares in no uncertain terms that vegetarianism is not ethically optional, then announces that after class she'll go to the campus cafeteria for a delicious cheeseburger.⁴

Diane isn't a hypocrite, at least not straightforwardly so. We might imagine a version of Scheler, too, who was entirely open about his failure to abide by his own teaching, so that no reader

² I assume that surreptitiousness is essential to hypocrisy, without committing to the view that hypocrisy need always involve intentional pretense or deception. For pretense and deception accounts of hypocrisy or hypocritical blame, see Kittay 1982; McKinnon 1991; Piovarchy 2026. For other approaches, see Crisp and Cowton 1994; Wallace 2010; Isserow and Klein 2017. Even if we allow that in some sense of "hypocrisy", Diane and the imagined candid Scheler are hypocrites, we can still ask what bearing that hypocrisy has on the epistemic standing of their philosophical moral claims.

³ Name chosen randomly from a list of lower-division students in my classes, excluding Jesus, Mohammed, and very uncommon names.

⁴ I also discuss this case in Schwitzgebel 2014, 2019, ch. 4. Many ethicists in the U.S. appear both to think that regularly eating factory farmed mammals is morally bad, while personally eating meat: Schwitzgebel and Rust 2014.

would be misled. Yet it is plausible that something remains fundamentally amiss, in a way that is importantly unlike the embezzling chemist.

(2.) A natural second thought is that Scheler *fails to apply his expertise*. If a research chemist thoughtlessly mixes ammonia and chlorine bleach at home, producing toxic fumes, there's an irony: A chemist, of all people, should know better. We shouldn't expect ethical expertise from a chemist, but we should expect chemical expertise. Maybe there's a similar irony in Scheler's case: We should expect him to have ethical expertise that he applies to his daily life.⁵

To see that this isn't the core issue, note that Scheler is acutely aware that he isn't traveling to Boston. The thoughtless chemist is different. The thoughtless chemist isn't saying "I know that mixing these substances produces toxic fumes, but I'll do it anyway." Unlike the chemist, Scheler sees the road to Boston, but he actively chooses not to take that road. He accurately applies his expertise to the situation, but then doesn't act upon it.

(3.) A natural third thought is that Scheler might just reasonably hold that ethical norms aren't *overriding*. According to overridingness, if an action is ethically required, it is also required full stop, all things considered. To deny overridingness is to allow that we can sometimes reasonably say, "although ethics requires X, all things considered, it's better not to do X."⁶ We might imagine Diane concluding her lesson "— and thus ethics requires that we stop eating meat. So much the worse for ethics. Let's all go rationally enjoy some cheeseburgers!" We might imagine Scheler writing a preface: "If you want to be ethical and full of good religious

⁵ See the educational psychology literature on the often weak "transfer" of classroom knowledge to analogous real-life situations: Barnett and Ceci 2002; Perkins and Salomon 2012; Caplan 2018.

⁶ See for example Scheffler 1992; Stroud 1998; Portmore 2008.

spirit, this book offers excellent advice; but for myself, I think it's better to laugh with the sinners."

These are interesting cases, but they are not my target. We can imagine Diane and Scheler sincerely saying that all things considered, everyone should follow their ethical recommendations. They espouse the overridingness of ethical considerations, insisting that such-and-such really is the best thing to do overall, while not doing it themselves – perhaps through weakness of will, bald inconsistency, personal policy, or disregard of the force of their own conclusions. People don't always act in keeping with what they intellectually affirm as best. We are all, perhaps, somewhat blameworthy for this. My question is: For Diane and Scheler, does this render their arguments or assertions less trustworthy or compelling? Or in evaluating their philosophy, should we ignore such facts about their personal lives?

3. The Aims of Academic Ethics and Some Considerations Favoring Schelerian Separation.

Scheler and Diane might plausibly defend themselves as follows. The job of an ethics professor is to evaluate ethical views and ethical arguments, produce research, and educate students in the ideas of their discipline. In this respect, ethics is no different from other academic disciplines. Consider astronomers, Shakespeare scholars, metaphysicians. What we expect is that they master an area of intellectual inquiry, teach it, and contribute to it. We don't demand that they also live a certain way. Ethicists are scholars, not saints.

On this view, ethicists succeed without qualification as practitioners of their discipline if they find sound arguments for interesting ethical conclusions, which they teach to their students and publish as research, engaging capably in this intellectual endeavor. How they live their lives matters as little to the merits of their thinking as how research chemists live theirs. We should

judge Scheler's ethical writings by their merit *as writings*. His life doesn't come into it. He can point the way to Boston while hightailing it to Philadelphia.

Aristotle held that the aim of studying ethics "is not, as it is in other inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge" but "to become good" (4th c. BCE/1962, 1103b, p. 35). Many other philosophers have similarly focused on personal improvement, for example, the ancient Stoics and Confucians.⁷ Some people study ethics in part because they want to become more ethical. But this might seem quaint and naive in a university context. At least this much is true: People reasonably approach academic ethics with different aims. Some are drawn primarily to the intellectual challenge, some to the prestige. Others seek principles with which they can critique others and society in general. Self-improvement might be far down the list. Professional ethicists needn't be motivated as Aristotle suggested, and if they decline to apply their academic ethical thinking to their personal lives, this needn't mean abandoning the project of academic ethics.

We might also reasonably mistrust our academic ethical thinking – sufficiently so that it's reasonable to quarantine it from our everyday lives. If you're metaphilosophically skeptical enough to suspect that common sense and tradition are a more reliable guide to life than academic ethics, you might reasonably adopt a policy of *not* letting your possibly weird and radical ethical conclusions change how you treat the people around you. Radical utilitarian in the classroom, conventional friend and husband at home. Nihilist antinatalist in the journals, loving mother of three at home. Thank goodness.

Furthermore: If there's no expectation that ethicists live according to the norms they espouse, that frees them to explore radical ideas which might be true but which might be hard to

⁷ As portrayed especially in Hadot 1995 and Ivanhoe 2000, respectively.

live by or require great sacrifice. I can conclude that property is theft, or that it's unethical to enjoy any luxuries while anyone is starving, without taking my conclusions to settle what I should do with my minivan or my children's college fund. If the college fund really were at stake, I would be highly motivated to conclude that ethics does not require me to sacrifice it. That would likely bias my reasoning. If I treat ethics as an intellectual game, I can follow the moves wherever they lead without worrying that I'll need to upend my comfortable existence. A policy of separation might then generate better academic discourse, in which researchers are unafraid to pursue their thinking to radical conclusions.

Undergraduates are often curious whether Peter Singer personally lives as a vegetarian and how much he gives to charity. His arguments seem to demand immense personal sacrifice. But Singer's academic critics focus on his arguments, not his personal life. It would be strange if Singer were a double-bacon-cheeseburger-eating Maserati driver draped in gold and diamond bling; but from a purely argumentative standpoint such personal habits seem irrelevant. His principles concerning the prevention of suffering stand or fall on their own merits, regardless of how well or poorly Singer himself embodies them.⁸

So there's a case to be made for *Schelerian separation*, let's call it – the view that academic ethics and personal life are and should be entirely distinct matters, and in particular that if an ethicist does not live according to the norms they espouse in their academic work, that is irrelevant to the assessment of their work. There is substantial truth in this idea, I suspect. Yet pure Schelerian separation is too simple, as I will now endeavor to show. To see why, we need to detour through some philosophy of language and epistemology.

⁸ See the demanding arguments for helping others in Singer 1972 and vegetarianism in Singer 1975/2009.

4. Love Is Love and Slogans Require a Context.

Several years ago, signs like this began to sprout up in my neighborhood:



Figure 1: Some political beliefs.

In this house, we believe:

Black lives matter

Women's rights are human rights

No human is illegal

Science is real

Love is love

Kindness is everything

If you know the political scene in the United States – especially circa 2018 – you’ll know that the first five of these slogans have meanings much more specific than is evident from their surface content. “Black lives matter” conveys a belief that great racial injustice against Black people persists in the U.S., perpetrated especially by police. “Women’s rights are human rights” conveys a similar belief about gender inequality, especially regarding reproductive rights, including access to abortion. “No human is illegal” expresses concern over the mistreatment of undocumented immigrants. “Science is real” expresses disdain for mainstream Republicans’ perceived dismissal of scientific evidence in policy, especially concerning climate change (and later, vaccines). And “love is love” affirms the equal standing of homosexual and heterosexual relationships, especially with regard to the rights of marriage. “Kindness is everything” is also interesting, and I’ll come to it in a moment.

How opaque and confusing all of this would be to an outsider! Imagine a time traveler from the 19th century. “Love is love.” Well, of course! Isn’t that a tautology? Who could disagree? Explain the details, however, and our 19th-century guest might well disagree. The meaning of this slogan or “belief” is radically underspecified by its explicit linguistic content. Notice also that these claims sound less controversial in the abstract than they do with contextual specification. The surface content of both “Black lives matter” and the opposing rallying cry “all lives matter” is unobjectionable. However, whether to give special attention to anti-Black police violence, or instead to resist the demands of pro-Black protesters – that’s quite a different issue.

The last slogan, “kindness is everything”, is to my knowledge less politically specific, but it illustrates a related point. Clearly, it expresses support for being kind. But kindness isn’t

literally everything, certainly not ontologically, nor even morally, unless something very thin is meant by “kindness”. If a philosopher were to espouse this slogan, I’d immediately want to work through examples with them, to assess what the claim amounts to. If I give an underperforming student the D they deserve instead of the A they want, am I being kind in the intended sense? How about if I object to someone’s stepping on my toe? Of course, these sketchy questions lack detail, since there are many ways to step on a toe, and many ways to object, and many different circumstances in which toe-stepping might occur, and not all D-grade situations are the same. Still, working through sketchy examples starts us exploring what counts as “kindness” and what priority it deserves when it appears to conflict with other values.⁹

Here’s something that could make the slogan much clearer: a life lived in kindness – an observable pattern of responses to a wide range of complex situations. How does someone who embodies the slogan “kindness is everything” react to having their toe stepped on, in this particular way, by this particular person? Show me specific kindness-related situations over and over, with all the variation life brings. Then I will begin to understand the practical content of the ideal. We can do this sometimes in imagination, developing a feel for some actual or hypothetical person’s character and way of life. In a richly imagined fiction, or in a set of stories about Confucius or Jesus or some other sage, we can begin to see the substance of a moral view

⁹ For defenses of the high context sensitivity of many of our utterances, see Searle 1980; Carston 2002; Recanati 2003; Travis 2008. One needn’t hold that sentence meaning is highly indeterminate in mundane utterances of, say, “the sky is blue” to hold that the normative, philosophical, or political content of these slogans, and others like them, and abstractly stated ethical principles (as discussed below) is highly indeterminate. Nor, indeed, need one be a contextualist about semantic content to accept the thesis here. Even radical semantic minimalists such as Cappelen and Lepore (2005) can allow that such utterances may have very different *meanings* or *speech act contents* in different contexts, even if the sentences’ strict semantic content remains constant.

and set of values, going beyond the slogans. This idea is of course central to exemplar-based ethics and exemplar-based moral education.¹⁰

In the U.S. Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson – patriot, revolutionary, and slaveowner – wrote “All men are created equal.” This sounds good. People in the U.S. endorse that slogan, repeat it, embrace it in all sincerity. What does it mean? All “men” in the old-fashioned sense that supposedly also includes women, or really only men? Black and cognitively disabled people too? And in what does equality consist? Does it mean that all adults should have the opportunity to vote? Equal treatment before the law? Particular rights and liberties? What is the function of “created” in the sentence? Do men start equal but diverge? We could try to answer all these questions, and new more specific questions would spring forth, hydra-like – which rights specifically, under which conditions? – until we begin to tack it down in a range of examples. The framers of the U.S. Constitution certainly didn’t agree on these matters, especially the question of slavery. They could agree on the slogan while disagreeing radically about what it amounts to, because the slogan is neither as “self-evident” as advertised nor determinate in its practical content. In one precisification, it might be only some banal thing that even King George III would have accepted; in another precisification, it might entail universal franchise and the immediate abolition of slavery, in which case Jefferson himself would have rejected it.

Kant elevated abstract principle over casuistry – the study of ethics through the examination of cases (“Nor could one give worse advice to morality than by wanting to derive it from examples”; 1785/1996, 4:408, p. 63).¹¹ It’s understandable why. When he attempted to

¹⁰ For example, Nussbaum 1985; Olberding 2012; Zagzebski 2017.

¹¹ Kant did recommend casuistry in a secondary and educational role, e.g., 1797a/1996, 6:411, p. 528 and 1797a/1996, 6:483-484, p. 596.

apply his general principles to cases, he embarrassed himself. You should not lie even to the murderer at the door chasing down your friend (1797b/1996). Masturbation is “contrary to morality in the highest degree”, a horror akin to murdering yourself, only less courageous (1797a/1996, 6:425, p. 529). It’s not an act of murder to kill children born out of wedlock (1797a/1996, 6:336, p. 477). Women fleeing abusive husbands, and servants fleeing abusive masters, should be returned home even against their will (1797a/1996, 6:278 and 6:283, p. 427 and 431). Women and servants should not vote because their “existence, as it were, is only inherence” (1797a/1996, 6:314, p. 458). Kant preferred beautiful abstractions: Act on that maxim you can at the same time will to be a universal law. Treat everyone as an end in themselves, never merely as a means (1785/1996). Sympathetic scholars can accept these beautiful abstractions and ignore Kant’s foolish treatment of cases. If they work through the cases themselves, reaching different verdicts than Kant himself did, they put flesh on the view – but not the flesh that was originally there. They’ve converted a vague slogan, compatible with a wide range of precisifications, into a more concrete position, compatible with a much narrower range. As with “all men are created equal”, this can be done in many ways. Even if Kant himself meant a single precise thing by these slogans, by virtue of his inner intentions in writing those words, or through social and linguistic context, or through disambiguation by the rest of his written work, his formulas considered in isolation do not settle the concrete applications.

So as not to poke only at Kant, similar considerations apply to consequentialist mottoes like “maximize utility” and virtue-ethical mottoes like “be generous”. Only when we work through involuntary organ-donor cases, and animal cases, and what to do about people who delight in others’ suffering, and what counts as utility, and what to do about uncertainty, and what to do about future people, etc., do we have a real consequentialist view instead of an

abstract skeleton. It would help to see a breathing example of a consequentialist life – a consequentialist sage, so to speak.¹² Might that person look like a Silicon Valley effective altruist, wisely investing a huge salary in index funds in expectation of eventually purchasing a continent's worth of mosquito nets? Or will they rush off to aid the poor, one by one, in the streets of Dhaka? Will they never eat desserts or will they allow themselves indulgences to sustain their good work? Will they pay for their children's college? Will they donate a kidney? An eye? What considerations do they appeal to, pro and con, and how much depends on which particulars? The more specific, the more we move from a diffuse slogan to determinate practical content.

5. The Concretizing Power of Walking the Walk.

One great advantage of walking the walk is that it gives your slogans practical specificity. Nothing is more concrete than particular responses to particular cases. Kant never married. (He had a long relationship with a valet, but I'll assume that was a rather different thing.) If Kant says "don't deceive your spouse", well, I'm not sure he really ever confronted the reality of it or worked through the cases. On the other hand, if your father-in-law, happily married for sixty-plus years, says "don't deceive your spouse", that's different. He'll have lived through a wide range of temptations, with a well-developed sense of the boundaries of honesty and how to manifest it – what exceptions there might be, what omissions and vaguenesses cross the line into unacceptable dishonesty, how much frankness is really required, how to weigh honesty against other values. This background of long marriage provides context for him really to mean

¹² Maybe the ancient Chinese philosopher Mozi was one. See also Colby and Damon 1992 and MacFarquhar 2015 for descriptions of lives of exceptional moral commitment, though not necessarily consequentialist.

something specific when he says “don’t deceive your spouse”. I might not immediately understand what he means – the words could mean so many different things coming from different mouths – and he himself might struggle to articulate the specifics. But we can look to his life as an example, and I can trust that he has grappled with many difficult cases, which ideally we could discuss. His words have a depth that will normally be absent from similar advice from an unmarried person.

Ethics can be abstract. Kant was, perhaps, a great abstract ethicist. But if you don’t apply your ethics to cases, over and over, if you deal only in slogans and abstractions and a few tidy paragraph-long thought experiments, then your ethics is spectral, or at best skeletal. It will be very difficult to know what it amounts to – and it might not amount to anything very precise. Just as with “All men are created equal” or “maximize utility”, it remains obscure or indeterminate in content, absent specification by cases. Maybe in private study you work through ten times as many cases as you publish in your articles and present in class. That’s still a tiny fraction of what someone confronts who attempts to live by a broad-reaching ethical idea. And what you privately imagine (forgive me) will probably be simplistic compared with the tumult of life.

Contrast this with Gandhi’s ethics of non-violent activism or Confucius’s ethics of duty and propriety. We who never met them can only glimpse their fully embodied ethics, as enacted in their lives. My point is not that they were saints. Gandhi, and probably Confucius, were flawed characters. But when Gandhi endorsed non-violent activism, and when Confucius said “do not speak unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not move unless it is in accordance with ritual” (5th c. BCE/2003, 12.1, p. 125), they had confronted many real cases and thus more fully

grasped the substance of these slogans than it's realistic to expect ordinary humans to obtain simply from reading and reflection.

The ethicist who does not attempt to live by their principles – if they are principles can be lived by and not, for example, reflections about rare or remote cases – thus abandons the best tool they have for repeatedly confronting the practicalities, the limits, the conflicts, the disambiguations, which force them to work out the specific, determinate content of the principles they endorse.

Now there is a sense in which a view could have a very specific, determinate content, even if we don't know what that content is. Consider simple act utilitarianism, according to which we should do what maximizes the total sum of pleasure minus pain. Arguably, every time you act there is a single specific act that would be right according to this standard – though also, arguably, it's impossible to know what that act is, since every act has numerous, long-running, complicated consequences.¹³ In a way, the principle has specific content: Exactly act A is correct and no other, though who knows what A is? But this is not specific, determinate content in the practical sense I mean. To have a livable ethical system, the act utilitarian needs to develop estimates, guesses, more specific principles and policies; and different act utilitarians will approach that problem very differently. It is these actionable specifics that constitute the practical substance of the ethical view.

Could an ethicist delegate the job of walking the walk to someone else? Could they say, “the specifics of my view can be understood by examining so-and-so's life”? Live like Jesus, or Confucius, or like my saintly cousin? While this is a coherent ethical approach, to stop with only pointing abandons the job of being an ethicist. Central to ethics is articulating principles and

¹³ See Lenman 2000; Greaves 2016; Schwitzgebel 2026.

policies, or traits and patterns of action, that are ethical and unethical. This requires understanding and articulating *what is good* about Jesus or Confucius or your cousin. When you say “live like Jesus”, presumably you don’t mean “imitate his footwear”. When you say “live like Confucius”, presumably you don’t mean “gather disciples to whom you speak in classical Chinese”. The pointing means little unless there’s a specific aspect, or set of aspects, you intend to highlight.¹⁴

The better you know those exemplars, the more you’ve seen their ethics in action, the more you understand the implicit or explicit thinking behind their choices, the closer you can come to understanding what is admirable about them. But such understanding will inevitably be indirect, incomplete, and second-hand. It will be severely limited by your historical distance, your incomplete knowledge of their lives, and by a tendency to think very differently than they do. (After all, if you thought as entirely they did, you would act as admirably.) “Turn the other cheek” doesn’t mean the same thing when Jesus says it as when you say it, even if you say it while pointing to Jesus. While pointing to exemplars can be powerful, it is powerful only in the way that a slogan can be powerful: It can get you *started* on understanding, but it radically omits the specifics.

The hard work of trying to live out your values – that’s how ordinary mortals discover the substance of their principles, ideals, and commitments. Otherwise, those principles, ideals, and commitments risk being as empty as “love is love” removed from its political context.

¹⁴ Thus Zagzebski’s (2017) exemplarist ethics *starts* with pointing and is grounded in pointing, but goes far beyond that, requiring appreciation of the relevant particulars of the exemplar. Similar remarks apply to ethical examples developed in fiction, e.g., Murdoch 1970; Nussbaum 1985.

6. *Vegetarianism, and the Epistemic Power of Walking the Walk.*

From all of this, it follows that – normally, with exceptions, and to some degree – if you espouse an ethical slogan without actually trying to live by that slogan, you literally don’t know what you’re talking about. Your slogan might be so radically underspecified that there is no specific ethical life toward which you are gesturing (e.g., Kant’s lawgiver maxim or a utilitarian maxim considered purely abstractly). Or you might have some guess or inkling – a glimpse of the approximate shape – without full-blooded knowledge. If an unmarried person tells someone “don’t deceive your spouse”, they almost certainly don’t grasp the significance and practical shape of this policy as applied in a married life; only long experience can realistically be expected to reveal what’s really involved. If a philosophy professor sitting comfortably in their office who has never been to a chaotic protest and who has never tried to face down violent authority says “non-violence is the best approach to political protest” – even if they’ve read a biography or two of King and Gandhi – there’s a sense in which their understanding of the slogan will almost inevitably be impoverished. When the truncheon cracks against their skull and they are dragged bleeding over rough concrete, then they will more vividly appreciate what a commitment to non-violent protest really involves.

In this section, I will address a hard case for my view as described so far: vegetarianism. The lesson will be that even when the ethicist’s motto has concrete practical substance specifiable independent of a rich array of examples informed by their own lives, *knowing* that practical substance typically requires attempting to live that way.

We’ve already met Diane, the cheeseburger ethicist, who publicly asserts that vegetarianism is ethically and all-things-considered mandatory, while unabashedly continuing to eat meat. You might object to the arguments so far as follows: Diane *knows perfectly well* what

her ethical position involves. Its content is simple and highly determinate: Do not eat meat. Maybe there are gray-area cases of “meat” (vat-grown chicken flesh? sea cucumbers?). Maybe there’s a range of permissible exceptions (accidental road-kill? conditions of near-starvation?). But we can stipulate that these are only marginally important – and anyway, Diane, being a careful philosopher, might already have thought them through reasonably well. Her slogan “don’t eat meat” is not objectionably indeterminate. She knows what she is advocating.

I reply that in an important sense Diane does not know what she is advocating. Unless she has tried living as a vegetarian, she does not know what it’s like to crave meat and refuse it on ethical grounds. She does not know what it’s like to arrive as a vegetarian at a traditional Thanksgiving dinner hosted by conservative relatives. She does not know what it’s like to read ingredient labels and put an item back on the shelf because it contains rennet. She does not know what it’s like always to order from the sometimes paltry and unappealing vegetarian options at a restaurant. She does not know what it’s like to remember joyful evenings of eating chicken wings with friends, knowing she will never do so again and will now always be slightly alienated in this respect from her friend group. She also doesn’t know what it’s like to experience the benefits: membership in a new moral community, entrance into a different kind of relationship with animals. So although Diane in some sense knows what she is promoting in saying “don’t eat meat”, in another sense she has very little idea. She doesn’t really grasp the full practical content of her advice. “Don’t eat meat” might follow straightforwardly from abstract propositions she accepts, it might flow easily off her tongue, but without the requisite experience, its practical import remains unseen. Diane lacks the understanding that comes with experience.

In attempting to live by a motto (precept, policy, ideal), we attempt various actions in conformity with the motto; we discover what the world returns to us in consequence; and we discover our reaction to those consequences. The fallibility of human foresight makes the world's reactions and our reactions to those reactions extremely difficult to know in advance. We learn best by trying over and over, in different conditions. And until we know the world's reactions and our reactions to those reactions, we don't know the practical content of life according to the motto. This is the pragmatists' wisdom about thinking and education (e.g., Dewey 1916/2024, ch. 11). We might learn that the motto (precept, policy, ideal) is less appealing than it seemed, or more appealing than it seemed; or that it generates objectionable consequences we had not foreseen or had foreseen but not vividly appreciated; or that it generates benefits even greater than we imagined, for example as our attraction to old habits falls away. We might find that the motto needs refinement. We might find that it synergizes with other principles in a manner we hadn't anticipated, or conflicts with them, or on reflection deserves more or less weight in our thinking than we had originally given it. We might discover previously unnoticed exceptions. And the livability of a motto is relevant to its acceptability (especially if ought implies can). An omniscient god or LaPlace's demon might be entirely unsurprised, but we mortals should expect only an inkling of all this to be knowable before venturing in. It presumably helps if our engagement is reflective, but that doesn't mean reflection can replace engagement (Dewey 1916/2024; Annas 2011). The resulting knowledge might defy explicit formulation, rendering the motto an imperfect approximation that can be left behind (Dancy 2001/2017; Dreyfus and Dreyfus 2004).

Work in standpoint epistemology emphasizes how social position affects one's evidence and understanding. It is difficult to know what it's like to be Black in the United States unless

one actually is Black, difficult to know what it's like to be confined to a wheelchair unless one actually is confined to a wheelchair, difficult to know what sexual harassment is like unless one has been sexually harassed. People in these positions typically have an epistemic advantage over those who have never been Black, wheelchair-bound, or sexually harassed.¹⁵ While living according to a moral ideal isn't the same as being socially marginalized in these ways, the practicing vegetarian has an epistemic advantage in knowing what it's like to be a vegetarian, the profoundly generous person has an epistemic advantage in knowing what it's like to be profoundly generous, and the pacifist activist has an epistemic advantage in knowing what it's like to be a pacifist activist. This is especially so for less common moral practices. First-person knowledge, perhaps of sensory details or of one's own emotional reactions, can also supply a direct and vivid appreciation of rightness or wrongness that might or might not be transmissible to others.¹⁶ Work on transformative experience (Paul 2014) suggests a similar conclusion: Just as it's difficult or impossible to know in advance what one will believe, value, and experience after becoming a parent (or a vampire), it may be difficult or impossible to know in advance what one will believe, value, and experience after a long moral journey. Even if the motto survives untarnished, it may have a very different look. Even if it retains almost exactly the

¹⁵ Toole (2024) distinguishes the possible epistemic advantages of a marginalized social location from the epistemic privileges of standpoint that one can achieve after "consciousness raising", explicitly allowing that people outside the relevant group can also achieve that standpoint. Collins (1986) emphasizes that people occupying marginalized perspectives must often learn to see the world both from their own perspective and from that of the non-marginalized, while the non-marginalized can often blithely ignore the perspective the oppressed. Arguably, those who abide by culturally unusual ethical standards, such as vegetarianism, do have an analogous advantage, since they must negotiate a world mostly dominated by those with different standards.

¹⁶ See discussions of the value of first-person knowledge in the literature on moral testimony, such as Jones 1999; Sliwa 2017; Lord 2018.

same practical content, due to its precise specification in advance (such as “don’t eat meat”), your practical and experiential knowledge of that content will be profoundly different.

Still, I don’t want to overstate the case against indirect knowledge. Through imagination, wide reading, careful listening to others, and consideration of analogous aspects of their own lives, most people can probably obtain an inkling of forms of life very different from their own. Through hard enough work, some people may so thoroughly understand forms of life other than their own that their knowledge exceeds that of an unreflective participant. But this is rare, impractical to expect, and not the type of skill in which philosophers are typically well trained. Furthermore, unlike with understanding across differences of race, if Diane or Scheler really wanted the knowledge, they could begin without needing to turn to second-hand sources and sympathetic imagination. There’s a more direct expedient: Attempting to live according to their own advice.

I also don’t want to overstate what experience teaches. A Black person in the United States directly, experientially knows only some ways of being Black – very different in suburban California than in downtown New Orleans, and very different if wealthy than if poor. The successful vegetarian knows only some ways of being a successful vegetarian – very different in Bangalore than in Houston. The honest spouse knows only some features of being an honest spouse, depending on their nature of their relationship, the nature of their spouse, and the situations they have endured. So although the honest spouse has a substantial epistemic and content-specifying advantage over Kant with respect to the slogan “don’t lie to your spouse”, their perspective will inevitably be in some respects narrow.

Despite these qualifications, it’s reasonable to expect meat-eating Diane to have a much thinner practical understanding of the vegetarian path she is recommending than does a

practicing vegetarian. She has (in all probability) only a hazy, indeterminate, and inaccurate grasp of it. She doesn't really know what she's talking about – not in the same, full-bodied way that a practicing vegetarian knows.

Let's call the specific choices advised by a fleshed-out motto the motto's *practical content*. Failing to live by a motto you endorse normally leaves you with only a thin grasp of the motto's practical content. As I suggested in Sections 4 and 5, the motto, in your mouth, might lack specific practical content – wraith-like, absent the diverse array of concrete applications necessary to give it specific shape. Or, as suggested in this section, your motto might have precise enough practical content, while you remain substantially ignorant of that content, because you haven't experienced or adequately imagined the specific consequences and costs.

7. Why Not Knowing the Practical Content Diminishes One's Epistemic Authority.

Scientists needn't always believe the conclusions they publish. They might regard their conclusions as tentative, as the best working model, or just as views with enough merit to be worth exploring. But if they have doubt, they shouldn't be surprised if their readers also have doubt. And if a reader learns that a scientist has substantial doubts about their own conclusions, it's reasonable for them to wonder why – to suspect that the scientist is responding to limitations in their methods and gaps in their reasoning that might be invisible to non-specialists. Imagine reading a scientific article, finding the conclusion wholly convincing, then learning that its author thinks the conclusion is probably false. Absent some unusual explanation, you'll probably want to temper your belief. You'll want to know why the scientist hesitates, what

weaknesses and objections they see that you've missed. Maybe the scientist is just irrationally unconvinced by their own compelling reasoning, but that's not how scientists usually work.¹⁷

Something similar is true in ethics. If Scheler paints a picture of a beautiful, ethical, religious way of life which he personally scorns, it's reasonable for the reader to wonder why he scorns it, what flaws he sees that you might have missed in your first reading. If he hasn't actually tried to live that way, why not? If he has tried and failed, why did he fail? If Diane says that ethically and all things considered one should be a vegetarian, but isn't one herself and has (she confesses) no special medical or other excuse, it's reasonable for her students to wonder why not and to withhold belief until that question is resolved. It's reasonable to wonder if there's some thinking behind her choice, which she has not yet revealed to her students, which tempers or undercuts her reasoning.¹⁸

The relevant thinking might be invisible to Diane herself. As Nomy Arpaly (2003) especially has emphasized, our gut inclinations are sometimes wiser than our intellectual affirmations. The student who tells herself that she belongs in graduate school, that academia is the career for her, but who procrastinates, self-sabotages, and hates her work – maybe the part of her that is resisting the career is the wiser part. When Huck Finn tells himself that the right thing to do is to turn in his friend Jim, a runaway slave, but can't bring himself to do it – again, his inclinations might be wiser than his explicit reasoning. If Scheler's or Diane's intellectual arguments aren't penetrating through to their behavior, maybe there's a reason that they

¹⁷ For defense of a "belief norm" in academic publishing on these grounds and others, see Buckwalter 2023; relatedly Basu 2025 against "bullshit philosophy".

¹⁸ A "pragmatic" account of belief (Zimmerman 2018; Schwitzgebel 2021), which treats believing as more about what tends to do and how one tends to reason than about what one sincerely endorses, might provide grounds for doubting that Diane or Scheler even genuinely believe the ethical claims they (I've been assuming) sincerely assert. This provides another possible epistemic ground for criticizing them, which I won't explore here.

themselves can't articulate. If you can't, or don't, live what you intellectually endorse, your intellectual reasoning might be omitting something that your less intellectual parts refuse to abandon. Frankness with readers enables them to decide whether to somewhat discount your arguments in light of it.

Also, in the pragmatists' sense, Scheler and Diane haven't tested their recommendations against the complexities of life. We don't know if Diane's intellectual commitment to vegetarianism would have survived the attempt at practice, what adjustments it might have undergone, what weight she would have been inclined to give it as she found it conflicting with other things. We don't know if her *modus ponens* would have become a *modus tollens*, leading her to rethink the premises that brought her there. She can point to someone else and say that *they* have tested it. But then it is the other person who is the more direct authority, and Diane's epistemic standing is derivative.

Conversely, if we see someone who reasons to a certain ethical conclusion, and their reasoning seems solid, and they consistently live that way without ambivalence, we have fewer grounds for suspecting that their gut might be wisely fighting them or that their precepts wouldn't survive practice. Figures like Confucius, Jesus, and Gautama Buddha were inspiring in part because they showed what their slogans amounted to in practice, in part because they showed that real people could live in something like the way they lived, and in part because they showed how practically embodying the ethics they espoused could be attractive and fulfilling, at least to certain groups of people.

Presenting an argument and endorsing its conclusion is a social action. You are communicating that you stand behind it, that you've thought about it, that you've tested it, that you know what you're talking about, that you've considered non-obvious problems, and – if

you're an ethicist – that you have substantial expertise that others should take seriously. Diane can still present her argument. If vegetarianism follows straightforwardly from premises she endorses and she has brought some of her professional expertise to bear in evaluating the arguments, she has some epistemic authority. But that epistemic authority is substantially diminished if she hasn't also tried living according to the motto.

8. The Wisdom of the Unethical, and Radical Incompleteness.

I don't want to conclude without acknowledging the wisdom of the unethical. We can learn part of the substance of norm by defying it and experiencing what follows. The unfaithful husband also vividly understands part of the meaning of "be honest with your spouse" through experiencing the consequences of violating that maxim. "Oh miserable me!" he might say. "The affair was nothing, meaningless, a moment's vapid pleasure, and now my marriage is ruined, the one person I really loved is filing for divorce. Be honest with your spouse!"

We can gain a partial, practical knowledge of a maxim through its violation. We can come to understand what violation entails – or, rather, what one way of violating it entails for one person in one set of circumstances. Those who consistently honor the maxim never fully know this. They might fantasize, unrealistically, about what a secret affair would be like; they might imagine, naively, the benefits of corruption, of indifference to others' suffering, of a life deliciously free of conscience. But it's unlikely they will have a fully realistic understanding.

Those who waver also don't know: They don't know what it's like to be consistently honest, or consistently generous – the purity and innocence of it. Those who know only one way of being a vegetarian, or one way of being a pacifist, or one way of being generous, or one way of being an effective altruist kidney donor – they also have incomplete knowledge.

As mentioned, we can gain some knowledge through fiction, history, imagination, thought experiment, the testimony of others, and abstract reasoning. These aren't useless. In some cases, knowledge acquired this way might exceed that gained through unreflective practice or practice with little meaningful variation.

Furthermore, some ethical conclusions are practically unwalkable: No Anglophone philosopher in 2026 knows what it's like to live in a true communist society, or to welcome future conscious robots into our world as equals, or to decline radical eugenic gene therapy for one's children if it becomes available. And yet we can reasonably argue about such matters. Few directly know what it's like to have incurable cancer or to lose a child; they might still offer some wisdom in an applied context.

So you can talk without the walk (Dover 2019) – and as with the cheating husband, you might even have some special insight that the walkers lack. But it's nonetheless reasonable for your interlocutors to consider your life and grant more credibility to those who have had more practical engagement with the norms they recommend.

9. Schelerian Separation Revisited.

No one has anything like the full picture. We see only pieces. But to point vaguely in what you think might be the direction of Boston, without even trying to go there, satisfied that abstract words and arguments deliver knowledge enough – this is like trying to understand a great painting by second-hand report and general principles, without bothering even to look at it. It's like writing travel advice for a place you've never visited. You might get some things right. “Try the local falafel, it's delicious!” and “be careful of pickpockets in the plazas” might both be good advice – but you lack full-blooded knowledge of the falafel and the plazas. What even

counts as a “plaza” and what constitutes appropriate carefulness might be largely beyond you, except in vague outline. Someone who has been there is a better authority, with more specific and better tested knowledge.

The reasons for Schelerian separation still stand. An ethicist’s professional contributions consist mostly of writing and teaching. We ordinarily assess these without peering into their private lives for disambiguation or undisclosed reservations. An unlike in small-scale societies – and perhaps ancient Athens and Lu – such inspection would be impractical and invasive. There’s nothing wrong with studying ethics from pure intellectual interest or with the aim of changing others rather than oneself. It’s metaphilosophically reasonable to mistrust academic philosophical arguments, in a way that justifies insulating your life from your argumentative conclusions; and such insulation can free you to explore radical positions you would otherwise be motivated to avoid. For all these reasons, academic ethics is fine as an intellectual enterprise divorced from the ethicist’s life. We might consider adding a norm of candor and extended practical engagement to the extent feasible.

Yet we should acknowledge that if we do not walk the walk, our understanding of what we are saying is generally impoverished compared to those who do walk the walk – indeterminate or skeletal in content, perhaps, or laden with some specific content of which we remain substantially ignorant. If all we have are abstract slogans and simple examples, we cannot both mean and comprehend anything very specific. Either there is no specific practical content, or there is some, but we have only a thin grasp of it. Scheler’s glibness reveals his ignorance of his own ignorance. We might talk beautifully, but if we don’t live accordingly, our

readers and students would be wise to doubt our practical comprehension of the principles we advocate, preferring the reflections of someone who has actually been to Boston.¹⁹

¹⁹ For helpful discussion, thanks to Brice Bantegnie, Matthew Lindauer, Coleen Macnamara, Erich Reck, Eyob Zewdie, and audiences at MIT, UC Irvine, Trent University, CUNY, and Ruhr University Bochum.

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