Converging Theory and Practice: example selection in moral philosophy

WILLIAM VITEK

ABSTRACT   *There is a growing trend in moral philosophy that reflects a return to a more ancient perspective of the subject matter wherein moral theory and moral practice are thought to converge. Like their Greek and Hellenistic predecessors, contemporary moral philosophers are again analysing virtues and character traits, drawing normative conclusions at the end of arguments, and testing their theories against examples from common life. Unfortunately, this literature is still cluttered with abstract, general, unlikely, and cleverly-constructed examples that are more apt to draw both reader and author away from the various moral issues under consideration. This paper argues that the selection of examples drawn from literature, history and common-life experiences offers the following advantages: (1) such examples better serve the purpose of illustration; (2) they function as projects for moral inquiry; (3) they better connect both reader and author to the moral issues being discussed; (4) they help prevent the dichotomisation of moral philosophy into meta-ethics and applied ethics; and (5) they help make it possible again for moral philosophy to have the relevance and importance it once enjoyed in previous periods of history. Selection criteria are outlined, and examples are provided that satisfy them.*

There is a growing trend in moral philosophy that reflects a return to a more ancient perspective of the subject matter wherein moral theory and moral practice are thought to converge [1]. Like their Greek and Hellenistic predecessors, contemporary moral philosophers are again analysing virtues and character traits, drawing normative conclusions at the end of arguments, and testing their theories against everyday human experience. Professional philosophers in good standing have even taken to boasting of philosophy's appeal to non-philosophers. In a recent *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* [2] Frank Dilley describes all three enclosed APA Presidential Addresses—two of which concern ethical topics—as careful, non-technical and enlightening. He adds: 'If you have friends who still think philosophy is nothing but an arid, highly abstract, logic-chopping discipline, you might consider introducing them to these Presidential Addresses as antidotes' [3].

   Those of us who welcome this shift have good reason to applaud, but it is premature to rejoice in earnest. Unfortunately, there is still too often in the ethics literature the use of examples that lie outside what David Hume called common life: the everyday experiences of human beings in communities, as well as the less common but more vivid experiences of the heroes, villains and victims of history, literature and the news [4]. A case in point, and by no means the worst example of this lingering practice, is found in one of the very presidential addresses recommended to our philosophically minded friends [5]. In an otherwise careful and enlightening article about the nature of

luck, and containing a number of morally relevant and vivid cases, Nicholas Rescher employs the following examples:

> **The Lucky Villain.** A lucky villain burgles the house of his grandfather, whom he knows to be on a long journey. Unbeknownst to him, however, the old gentleman has meanwhile died and made him his heir. The property he 'steals' is thus his own—legalistically speaking, he has in fact done nothing improper ... In his soul or mind—in his intentions—he is a wicked thief, but in actual fact he is quite guiltless of wrongdoing under the postulatedly accurate description of his act as one of 'taking something that belongs to oneself.' [6]

> **The Hapless Benefactor.** To do a friend a favor, he undertook to keep her car for her during an absence on a long journey. At around the expected time, the car is reclaimed by the friend's scheming identical twin—of whose existence our good-natured helper had no inkling. With all the goodwill in the world he has—by a bizarre act of unhappy fate—committed the misdeed of giving one person's entrusted property over to another. In intention he is as pure as the driven snow, but in actual fact he has fallen into wrongdoing. [7]

> **Brave Woman in Raging Waters or Flaming Inferno.** A brave woman leaps into raging waters (or the flaming inferno) to save a trapped child. Only after the fact does she learn that it was her own. Had she known it all the time, she would indeed have got full marks for motherly solicitude— since in the circumstances we would have to presume that it was this, rather than some disinterested humanitarianism, that provided the motive. But once we establish that she had no way of realising this at the time, we have to award her full moral credit. [8]

> **Simple Simon.** Thinking to cure Grandmother's painful arthritis, Simon bakes her for twenty minutes at 400 degrees Fahrenheit in the large family oven. He labors under the idiotic impression that prolonged exposure to high temperatures is not only not harmful to people but actually helpful in various ways—curing arthritis among them. His *intentions* are nothing other than good. Yet few sensible moralists would give Simon a gold star. For he should know what any ordinary person knows: that broiling people medium well by prolonged exposure to temperatures of 400 degrees is bad for them. We base our moral judgement on the ground rules of the ordinary case, and Simon's good intentions do not get him off the hook here. [9]

In each example the author is making a point about the role of luck in normative situations, and it is difficult to deny that they ably illustrate his claims. But these examples have certain qualities that make them uninteresting—and in some cases irrelevant—from a moral point of view. The Simple Simon example is the worst offender of the four. It is likely to make our philosophically minded friends sceptical of philosophy's new-found relevance. Dark humour, yes; relevance, no. Not only is it inappropriate and demeaning for those who have direct experience with cognitively impaired children or the Nazi holocaust, but its fairy-tale like quality renders it inert as a moral example. It draws both the author and the reader away from the sometimes well-meaning, but tragic, acts of impaired children.

The lucky villain is an oddity constructed to make a logical, not a moral claim. He is

lucky not to be a villain only because he ends up stealing from himself. The hapless benefactor's actions, on the other hand, misfire thanks to an evil twin: a possible but highly unlikely state of affairs. The brave woman example is slightly more probable, though it still represents a state of affairs that is somewhat removed from our daily experiences. Parents are rarely challenged to go charging into burning buildings or raging waters to rescue children, their own or others. Why not choose an example from the mainstream of parental experience so that the example, and the point being made by it, resonates both for moral philosophers and parents?

With so many actual ways to be well or ill-intentioned and lucky, one wonders why these types of examples are used. They are neat and tidy, not to mention clever, but they diminish the important ways in which luck can affect the outcomes of our decisions, intentions and actions. In each instance above, a far-fetched and morally distant example is constructed to illustrate an important, morally charged point. All of them lie outside the range of common moral experience that is the very domain of moral philosophy: a domain of human action and experience that serves either to illustrate the philosopher's claim or as a project for moral inquiry. What is missing from each of these examples is a narrative, a story that will better connect the reader and the author to the complexities, ambiguities and richness of human life. If we agree with Aristotle that the fundamental question to be answered by moral philosophy is 'How should one live?', then the subject matter to which philosophers make reference should be the actual lives that human beings are living or can easily imagine living [10]. Aristotle does claim that the science of ethics can be only as precise as the subject matter allows [11], but surely he does not mean that it should be less engaging or vital than the subject matter itself. There is a whole world of flesh and blood villains and heroes, and ordinary folks in extraordinary situations, whose moral lives are the proper subject of the philosophical enterprise.

If moral theorists expect to make perceptive and important claims about the moral life, it behoves them to use examples that support their claims. Such support is more likely to come from examples drawn from actual or probable human experience. There are at least three reasons for this. First, moral theorists will be prevented at the outset from making questionable or false claims if they immediately test their intuitions against common life. Why construct a theory of intentionality that refers to no actual living person or an account of luck that cannot describe a real-life instance of it? Like architects and engineers whose designs are constrained by the laws of motion, the structural properties of materials, and the actual locations of their projects, moral philosophers are so constrained—indeed more so—by human experience. Knowing this at the outset, and using appropriate examples to illustrate one's claims or to initiate moral inquiry, saves the moral philosopher from dead-ends and irrelevance. Second, in so far as moral philosophers seek to persuade their readers of the correctness of their views, good example selection increases the success of persuasion. Remote and far-fetched examples, even if they are clear and carefully constructed, are less likely to persuade than are less tidy examples drawn from everyday life because it can always be claimed that remote examples fail to adequately test the theoretical claims. Again, a good bridge design is tested against an array of actual conditions, both unusual and commonplace [12]. Finally, if we accept that all moral philosophy—even the most theoretical—must be capable of offering some insight or advice into how one should live, then good example selection will help maintain and preserve the convergence between moral theory and moral practice. Such examples both anchor the theorist prone to abstractions and coax the applied philosopher beyond the mere giving of advice.

This will not be the first time philosophers have used the types of examples being recommended here. In the *Euthyphro* Plato creates a scenario that demonstrates the ambiguity of moral situations. In bringing his father to trial for manslaughter, Euthyphro is acting with certainty at an uncertain time. After an irksome dialogue with Socrates, Euthyphro is no longer certain about what he should do. His doubts are clearly expressed when, as Socrates tries to start the inquiry again from the beginning, Euthyphro replies: 'Another time then, Socrates; at the moment I have an urgent engagement somewhere, and it is time for me to be off' [13]. This ending is extremely important to the moral nature of the dialogue because it shows clearly Socrates' effectiveness: Euthyphro is now an uncertain man in an uncertain situation who decides, at least for the moment, to leave the courthouse rather than prosecute his father. In the *Crito*, Plato takes a historical event that can reverberate in all of us: Socrates, a condemned man—perhaps wrongfully so—on the eve of his execution with an opportunity to escape. There is no better moment, and no better person on whom to test the Socratic method.

In both cases Plato the playwright creates realistic and relevant moral scenes wherein Plato the philosopher can operate. Once he attracts readers with experiences to which they can relate, he has a captive audience to whom he can philosophise. Plato's examples illuminate the problem of resolving moral dilemmas and illustrate the method that he and Socrates are espousing. It is not necessary that his readers believe each of these events occurred, anymore than readers are to believe that the events of the *Odyssey* or *Oedipus Rex* actually occurred. Both fact and fiction, when they serve as touchstone moral experiences, illuminate and validate the philosopher's claims.

Plato is not the only moral philosopher who employs these types of examples. Aristotle's frequent use of alcohol-influenced actions and of adultery, as well as frequent citations from Homer, are examples as relevant today as they were when he was writing. His examples serve to connect the reader to the subject matter and to illuminate his theoretical approach to ethics, what Nussbaum refers to as focusing on the particular [14]. His historical and literary examples make perfect sense to his Greek audience, and connect them to his philosophical claims in ways that more contrived examples could not. Hellenistic philosophers like Epictetus and Sextus Empiricus use practical examples from everyday life to illustrate the conclusions of their applied, eudaemonistic philosophy. Medieval casuists have as their starting point the actual situations of everyday life. David Hume and Adam Smith frequently refer to common life and to their favourite examples from history, examples with which their contemporary readers were familiar. Even Kant's four examples to illustrate the categorical imperative draw upon the everyday experiences of his audience. Applied philosophers now working in the fields of medicine and the environment have no shortage of moral experience upon which to draw. Paul Taylor's theoretical work, for example, tests itself against the competing environmental claims of cutting down a woodland to build a medical centre and ploughing up a prairie to plant fields of wheat and corn [15].

Surely there are alternative examples to Rescher's four that better illustrate the nature of the moral life. Why use examples that are extremely unlikely, bizarre or ridiculous when personal experiences, and experiences from people in the news, history and literature are there for the taking? Moral philosophers surely have personal experiences of their own from which to draw. If they are uncomfortable referring to their own experiences they can third-personalise them. But even without personal experiences, examples drawn from modern medicine, the environment, addiction,

Western social and political institutions and marital relationships, to name a few, give moral philosophers more than enough material to choose from [16].

In his story *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, Ernest Hemingway has a vignette about a cognitively impaired boy that affects the reader in ways that Simple Simon cannot. Here it is in its entirety:

> Now he remembered coming down through the timber in the dark holding the horse's tail when you could not see and all the stories that he meant to write. About the half-wit chore boy who was left at the ranch that time and told not to let any one get any hay, and that old bastard from the Forks who had beaten the boy when he had worked for him stopping to get some feed. The boy refusing and the old man saying he would beat him again. The boy got the rifle from the kitchen and shot him when he tried to come into the barn and when they came back to the ranch he'd been dead a week, frozen in the corral, and the dogs had eaten part of him. But what was left you packed on a sled wrapped in a blanket and roped on and you got the boy to help you haul it, and the two of you took it over the road on skis, and sixty miles down to town to turn the boy over. He having no idea that he would be arrested. Thinking he had done his duty and that you were his friend and he would be rewarded. He'd helped to haul the old man in so everybody could know how bad the old man had been and how he'd tried to steal some feed that didn't belong to him, and when the sheriff put the handcuffs on the boy he couldn't believe it. Then he'd started to cry. [17]

In a single paragraph Hemingway provides a character and a narrative that vividly illustrates Rescher's point and draws the reader closer to the moral problem being discussed. The boy is shocked at being arrested. His friend turns him in; he cries. In feeling the emotions that this story generates, the reader's awareness is heightened and she is better prepared to listen to the philosopher's claims about the role of luck in normative situations. Having been affected by this story, the reader now looks for the type of clarification and explanation that good philosophy can provide. For the moral philosopher the ante is now raised: what is claimed is now tested against the example. This interplay between reader and philosopher, example and theory, suggests that even the most meta-ethical of theories must at some point be cashed out and spent. The neo-Platonist Porphyry puts it another way when he says 'Empty is the argument of the philosopher by which no human disease is healed; for just as there is no benefit in medicine if it does not drive out bodily disease, so there is no benefit in philosophy if it does not drive out the disease of the soul.' [18]

Returning to Rescher's examples, the lucky villain is easily replaced with characters from history and literature whose evil intentions and guilty consciences are blunted by luck or not supported by the facts. St Augustine's stealing of the pears, simply for the sake of stealing, causes him no end of guilt, though it is doubtful that his actions did any harm. He says: 'For no sooner had I picked them than I threw them away, and tasted nothing in them but my own sin, which I relished and enjoyed. If any part of one of those pears passed my lips, it was the sin that gave it flavour.' [19] In a recent issue of *Poets and Writers Magazine*, poet Vince Clemente recalls with some remorse a time when, as co-director of a visiting writers programme, he was able to offer a well-known and struggling poet a meagre 25 dollar honorarium even though a professional football player received 3000 dollars for a similar visit to campus [20]. He says that he will never forgive himself this injustice, though the poet graciously accepted the money

and has probably long since forgotten the incident. Clemente does not have the evil intentions of Rescher's lucky villain, but the rest of the example is appropriate to a discussion about luck and conscience.

One outcome of using these types of examples is that the reader may pause to consider past actions in his or her life, actions that still generate guilt, though the actions themselves had little or no consequence. Such visceral experiences serve to heighten the reader's interest in what moral philosophers have to say, and require from them that they say something relevant and applicable. These self-confessed memories can also serve as triggers for the philosophers themselves, motivating and challenging their philosophical inclinations.

There is no shortage of well-known examples of hapless benefactors, those whose well-meaning intentions turn out disastrously. *Oedipus Rex* comes to mind. In attempting to rid Thebes of a curse brought on by the murder of King Laios, Oedipus proclaims that whoever knows the murderer and refuses to come forth shall be driven from Thebes and from every house therein. No one shall even speak to him. As for the murderer himself: 'I pray that that man's life be consumed in evil and wretchedness' [21]. The oracle, we should remember, claimed only that the murderer be purged from Thebes. Oedipus's good intentions and harsh curse turn out tragically for him and his family. Despite the fact that the story of Oedipus the King is no more believable than the story of the hapless benefactor—indeed, perhaps less believable—it is a story with deep roots in our culture and in ourselves. Through no conscious fault of his own, Oedipus is one of the most wretched of people. Such wretchedness could befall any of us even if we are not likely to kill our father and sleep with our mother.

Another example of a hapless benefactor concerns John Stuart Mill's cleaning woman. While straightening up the parlour she tossed a large pile of papers that she had taken for scrap into the fire. This scrap happened to be the first volume of Thomas Carlyle's *French Revolution*. There was no second copy, and Carlyle had burned his notes as he went along [22]. This is a writer's nightmare, as any author would testify; but it is a do-gooder's nightmare as well. More recently, some well-intentioned environmental activists in a hurry to save the earth are apparently doing more harm than good. Under pressure from various environmental groups, McDonalds has replaced its use of polystyrene packaging with coated paper. (It is interesting to note that McDonald's original decision to use polystyrene in the 1970s was prompted by similar environmental concerns.) But just as the current switch is being made, various studies—by both industry and environmental organisations—suggest that when a complete life cycle analysis is done, polystyrene is the more environmentally benign product. Despite the best available information, such morally inspired choices can have negative effects.

These last two examples of well-intentioned persons put many readers on the spot: the example is about them and not some universal, abstract, generalised, hapless benefactor. It is likely to be about the author as well. Suddenly the discussion of luck takes on greater importance because it is asked to explain some of the author's and reader's own behaviour. Because people are likely to care more about their own lives and actions than about an abstract, hapless benefactor, they are likely to care more about a theory of luck that, as author, they propose or that, as reader, they consider.

The nameless brave woman can be replaced with actual cases in the news or from personal experience. Our shared cultural narrative is filled with stories of people both brave and selfless. Even without raging waters and burning buildings there is no shortage of the more mundane—but equally serious—ways that parents can love or fail

to love their children: seeking or renouncing professional success at the expense of their children's roots and continuity, for example.

What is common to the examples recommended here is that they function as moral experiences. The characters are multidimensional and there is a story to be told, one that is either well-known or that stirs up a memory. They are about particular experiences and not nameless abstractions. They hook both the reader and author —helping them to feel a moral dilemma—and demand a response from both of them. In short, analysts and theorists of moral experience strengthen their case whenever they use actual data from common life—and I include here good literature—and not some sterilised or hastily constructed version of it. Such examples may muddy the analysis a bit, but the philosophical conclusions drawn from them are likely to have greater depth, relevance and influence. As for influence, I trust that there is enough residual wisdom left among moral philosophers for them not to be ashamed of the ability of their work to influence, in positive ways, the lives of non-philosophers: policy makers, physicians, parents, teachers and children.

With an interest in seeing the tools of philosophy applied to the ethical issues of the day—to bring theory and practice closer together—I propose that moral philosophers set as a goal the elimination of examples having to do with trolley cars, prisoners' dilemmas, evil twins, Simple Simons, burning buildings, desert islands, invisibility, the last X (tree, person, etc.), and all other examples that take the author and reader more easily to the realm of the merely possible or, worse yet, the unbelievable, than to the moral experiences of their own lives or the lives of others. The type of examples proposed here should have a number of the following features [23].

Complexity

Complex examples show people in situations where they struggle to think clearly about what to do, and who then act—either well or badly—on the conclusions they draw. Plato refers to this type of complexity in the *Euthyphro* where he claims that moral problems are not resolved the way mathematical problems are solved [24]. His point is that mathematical problems need to be solved only once to dispel disagreement. Moral problems, however, must be re-solved over and over again because they are never exactly the same; nor perhaps are we. Complex examples demonstrate clearly this aspect of moral experience.

Priority

Examples are prior in that they are not created to fit a specific argument or conclusion, but rather exist already—sometimes painfully so—and are themselves in need of explanation or analysis. Aristotle's examples are prior in this respect.

Relevance

The example chosen should be of something that is possible or likely to happen, has happened, or is likely to happen soon to members of the community to whom it is addressed. This criterion excludes the fantastic, the improbable and the fringes of moral experience, unless such examples serve to illustrate a claim about the main-stream of moral experience. David Hume remarked in an interview with Boswell that he had read *The Whole Duty of Man*, but found it of little use since he had no

inclination toward murder and theft. The only relevant homilies were those directed toward vanity, a disposition he felt in supposing himself cleverer than his schoolmates.

Accessibility

Accessible examples are about people in the news, history, literature, etc. An accessible example is one about which readers can say 'I remember that case', or 'This could happen to me or to someone I know'. Relevance and accessibility are not identical criteria since it is possible to have a relevant example that is not easily accessible. Sado-masochistic examples, though relevant on the criterion above, are not likely to be accessible to the community at large.

Resonance

Resonance is a prolonged response wherein author and reader feel empathy, anger or some other emotion when considering an example from common life. Resonant examples speak to the reader's deepest fears, aspirations and concerns. Mill's cleaning woman example has for most readers, even those with back-up discs scattered around their homes and offices, a high resonance factor. Resonant examples illustrate vividly.

These criteria do not exclude the use of simple or clear-cut examples. Nor do they limit the range of examples to which the moral philosopher has access. More importantly, these criteria do not necessarily exclude constructed examples or thought experiments, though more is now required of them [25]. As a case in point, both Simple Simon and Hemingway's half-wit are constructions, though the latter example better satisfies the criteria than the former. I maintain that the same is true for all the examples above that are posited as alternatives to Rescher's examples. Below are four examples from common experience that satisfy some of the above criteria and that can serve both as illustrations and as projects for moral inquiry:

> **It is Not Her Fault.** While attending a holiday party at her employer's home, Mary inadvertently knocks over an ornate chess piece and breaks it. Well, she thinks she breaks it: though it is broken when she discovers it knocked over, she does not actually observe it falling or breaking. What to do? Mary is normally an honest person, and is a lousy liar. In a somewhat panicked state she examines the other chess pieces and notices that some are glued. She quickly surmises that such mishaps have happened before. She also discovers that it is possible to make the broken chess piece appear normal. From this she concludes that it is at least remotely possible that the chess piece was already broken before she knocked it over. She concludes that it is not worth mentioning, and feeling rather sheepish, she carefully 'fixes' the piece and leaves the party without mentioning it.

What's important about this example is the phenomenology of moral decision-making. The reasoning is quite good: there is no clear evidence that Mary broke the chess piece. Nevertheless, the good reasoning does not necessarily lead to a morally correct decision. It seems instead to cover a moment of moral weakness.

> **The Poor Loser.** Bill hates to lose. In the proper competitive contexts this is a virtue, but it can be a character flaw in other contexts. Not long ago Bill was playing whiffle ball with two of his much younger nieces, and losing. In

an attempt to erase a large run deficit Bill crashes into his 5-year old nephew—a spectator at the time—while running hard from third to home and breaks the boy's leg. Breaking a child's leg is bad enough, but the boy is a severe haemophiliac and allergic to the clotting medicine. For weeks Bill keeps seeing the look on the boy's face at the moment of impact. The nephew *recovers with no complications.*

Bill feels remorse, but there is more at issue here than intentions and feelings. What happened here was an accident, but it is the result of a character flaw or at the very least a clear example of what can happen when one fails to act at the right time, with reference to the right object, towards the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way [26].

We Aim to Please. An élite college is concerned about the racial and ethnic diversity of its faculty. A minority faculty member, on a non-tenure line for years, takes a year's leave of absence to teach at another university. Fearing that it may lose her to this university, the college offers her promotion and tenure without her having to undertake the usual review process. She graciously accepts.

This is no longer uncommon behaviour on the part of well-intentioned university administrators. As an ethical issue it should be addressed by moral philosophers. But until such time that it is, it serves as an extremely relevant, accessible and prior example with which to illustrate theories of moral experience.

A Night on the Town. It was recently reported in the *New York Times* that, with apparently nothing better to do, a group of teenagers in Boston spent part of Halloween night beating, raping and stabbing a woman 132 times before leaving her in a field to die. When asked for a motive one of the boys said 'There was nothing to do and so I guess we had the impression (*sic*) of going out to the field and kill somebody'. Apparently the pleas of the woman—who is reported to have said 'Please, I'll do anything. Just don't hurt me'—had no effect [27].

Such activity, known as wilding, has become something of a common practice in large cities. It is certainly a type of moral phenomena in need of philosophical discussion.

Using the criteria above, these examples are complex, prior, relevant, accessible and resonant. There is plenty in them about which to analyse, explain and theorise. And they are about life as we have or can experience it. Each of them, in short, can be used to inform, enrich and address the question: 'How should one live?' The last two examples speak to the fundamental question of how to create and maintain a just society. The first two examples focus attention on the long-standing issues of the role of rationality in ethical decision making, weakness of will and the development of good character.

But there is more to it than that. These examples grab the reader. One thinks of the murdered woman's last minutes, of her parents and loved ones. One feels even for the youths whose tragic lives have led them to seek pleasure in the wrong things. As for the first three examples, they are—if I may be allowed a moment of Augustinian confession—experiences from my own life. I applied for the job at the college in question; I know the person to whom tenure and promotion were granted. I 'repaired' the chess piece at the holiday party. And I broke my nephew's leg as I barrelled home from third base. I am agitated in different ways by all four of these examples. (I can

still be genuinely haunted by my foolish base-running antics.) But these examples, along with other moments from my life and the lives of other people, motivate my philosophical instincts and nudge me forward to explore rival theoretical conceptions of ethics. What, for example, does Aristotle say about weakness of will? Can Kant help us understand well-intentioned acts that turn out badly? What is there in Rawls that can give us some insight into the phenomena of wilding? As philosopher and theorist, what am I to say about these events? Within the context of the above examples, addressing these questions takes on a certain urgency. Such examples—whether direct or vicarious, in life or in literature—likewise serve as guides to philosophical musings, and lead the moral philosopher to the realisation that, in the study of ethics, theory and practice converge. In time the use of such examples may even help the philosopher to find comfort, and then strength, in this realisation. But once realised, the use of abstract, generalised and constructed examples is soon abandoned in favour of examples from life itself.

Why do moral philosophers need trolley cars, evil twins, Simple Simons and desert islands when they have the experience of wilding, affirmative action, the complexities of moral character and weakness of will to choose from? Philosophy does have as one of its goals the broadening of possibilities, and theorists must sometimes rely on non-standard examples to make non-standard, and powerful arguments. But it is time again for moral philosophers to concentrate on actual, not improbable, worlds. Even if their selection of examples fails to have the desired effect on every reader, it is nevertheless important that the examples be satisfying to the philosophers themselves. If the search for better examples turns out not to improve their philosophy it will at least make them better persons by increasing their perceptions, awareness, humility, sympathy and even their wisdom. Such a process, however, cannot help but make them better philosophers.

The clarity of analytic moral philosophy, certainly one of its virtues, is a primary influence on the use of tidy moral examples. But ethical examples should be more than clever or cute. They should function as exemplars of the moral experiences philosophers are trying to capture with their theorising. If a review of contemporary books and journal articles is any evidence, there is still some work to be done in this important but neglected area of moral philosophy [28].

William Vitek, Faculty of Liberal Studies, Clarkson University, Potsdam, NY 13699 USA.

NOTES

[1] There still exists a temptation to further divide moral philosophy into theoretical and applied, as if one could be said to be engaged in one and not the other. I share with our Greek predecessors—specifically Aristotle—the view that moral philosophy is concerned generally with human experience and specifically with the question 'How should one live?' Such concerns naturally balance one's theoretical work with the need to apply it and test it against common life. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b21, 1095a5, 1098b9 and 1103b27 for examples of this convergence methodology.

[2] 64 (November 1990), p. 3.

[3] Ibid., p. 3.

[4] HUME makes reference to 'common life' 79 times in his writings.

[5] NICHOLAS RESCHER (1990) Luck, *Proceedings and Addresses of The American Philosophical Association*, 64, (November), pp. 5–19. Reference to Rescher's article is for illustration purposes only. For other notable examples see JOEL FEINBERG's (1970) Nowheresville; The Nature and Value of Rights, *Journal*

of Value Inquiry, 4, pp. 243-257; BERNARD WILLIAMS's shooting of Pedro or letting Pedro and 19 others be shot (*Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 98-99); JUDITH JARVIS THOMPSON's (1971) unconscious, famous violinist (A Defense of Abortion, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1 (Fall, pp. 47-66); and DEREK PARFIT's (1986) numerous examples, in: *Reasons and Persons* (New York, Oxford University Press). PETER WINCH was an early critic of example selection in analytic moral philosophy. See his The universalizability of moral judgements, in *Ethics and Action* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972). For a contemporary debate see ONORA O'NEILL's The power of example, *Philosophy*, 61 (January 1986), pp. 5-29; and D. Z. PHILLIPS The presumption of theory, in *Interventions in Ethics* (London, Macmillan, 1992).

[6] RESCHER, p. 11.

[7] Ibid., pp. 11-12.

[8] Ibid., p. 16.

[9] Ibid., p. 16.

[10] See, for example, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1141b12-14 and 1179a33-b4.

[11] 1094b12.

[12] As the analogy suggests, not all engineering projects are designed for identical conditions. Design and construction on arctic permafrost, for example, requires solutions to very specific conditions that have little or no application outside of this region. So too with moral theorising. There may be narrow and/or unusual conditions that concern the moral philosopher; the influence of torture on one's obligations, for example. But even in these instances, the theorist is concerned with human experience, however rare, and not just abstract or purely theoretical issues.

[13] *Euthyphro*, (Tredennick translation), 15e2. LANE COOPER's translation likewise suggests Euthyphro's sudden departure from the law courts.

[14] See for example Part III of *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986); and The discernment of perception: an Aristotelian conception of private and public morality, Finely aware and richly responsible: literature and the moral imagination, and perceptive equilibrium: literary theory and ethical theory (collected in MARTHA NUSSBAUM, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990).

[15] PAUL TAYLOR, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 256.

[16] MARTHA NUSSBAUM argues that literature is the best source of moral phenomena, although 'many serious dramas will be pertinent as well, and some biographies and histories'. Life itself is not a good source, she claims, because our own experience is 'too confined and too parochial'. (Form and content, philosophy and literature, in: *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 3-53). This is not the place to respond to NUSSBAUM at length. Suffice it to say that while I generally accept her reasons for choosing examples from literature rather than life itself, such reasons do not support—nor, I think, does she intend them to support—the stronger conclusion that we should never choose examples from life. There is much in life that rivals the best literature in its ability to connect the author and reader with moral experiences. The trick comes in choosing such examples with care and sensitivity, and in getting them across to the reader. But the same is true in choosing examples from literature.

[17] *The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Stories* (New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1961), pp. 22-23. Thanks to JOHN SERIO for suggesting this story.

[18] In: *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, trans. BRAD INWOOD & L. P. GERSON (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing, 1988), p. 66.

[19] *Confessions*, trans R. S. PINE-COFFIN (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1961), p. 49.

[20] *Poets and Writers Magazine* (May/June 1991), p. 53.

[21] *The Oedipus Cycle*, trans. DUDLEY FITTS & ROBERT FITZGERALD (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), Scene I, p. 13.

[22] From PHYLLIS ROSE's *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages*, (New York, Random House, 1983), pp. 99-100.

[23] For similar criteria see MARTHA NUSSBAUM's Finely aware and richly responsible: literature and the moral imagination (in: *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990). There is a growing body of literature that: (1) criticises the style of philosophical ethics that generates the type of examples being criticised here (e.g. BERNARD WILLIAMS' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*); (2) examines normative moral issues (e.g. PETER SINGER's *Animal Liberation*); (3) calls for and utilises literature in discussing moral issues (e.g. much of MARTHA

NUSSBAUM's work, and RICHARD ELDRIDGE's *On Moral Personhood*); and (4) occasionally has philosophers writing morally enriched literature (e.g. Iris Murdoch's many novels).

[24] *Euthyphro*, 7a5–8b1.

[25] I am inclined to exempt traditional thought experiments from this criterion so long as their goal—no matter how absurd their content—is to check our philosophical intuitions and to get us thinking about the moral life. NOZICK's Experience machine (in: *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, New York, Basic Books, pp. 42–45) has this feature. It is designed to show us that humans have interests other than their experiences. Thought experiments, like any tool, have a function, but they can be overused by philosophers whose disposition and training incline them to the abstract. To correct this tendency, moral philosophers would do well—at least in the short term—to follow Aristotle's advice on this matter and avoid the easier extreme by dragging themselves off in the contrary direction (ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109b1–7).

[26] ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b20–25.

[27] May 21, 1991, p. 6.

[28] Thanks to TERRELL WARD BYNUM, KRISTIN SHRADER-FRECHETTE, GREG COOPER, DAVID FATE NORTON, MARIA VITEK, and to my colleagues DAVID CRAIG, JOHN SERIO and JAN WOJCIK for help on earlier drafts.