



Enhancing student critical reading of texts through the use of blogs

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Background

- In the School of Divinity tutorials generally are about engaging with key weekly readings
- For a number of years we have been successfully using blogs to assist students with tutorial preparation
- Use WebCT blogging tool
- Students asked to blog on the readings for the tutorial prior to their arrival in the tutorial



Issues

- Generally the use of blogs increased student preparation and engagement prior to the tutorial - more casual medium that is naturally peer-engaging

BUT

- The readings are isolated from tutor and the students, reducing the effectiveness of the tool – “atomizing of student learning”.



Solution

- Pilot use of WordPress Digress.it plugin
<http://wordpress.org/extend/plugins/digressit/>
- Developed for use in Universities with the text embedded within the blog and comments added to the side



Project in action

- Piloted in one first year School of Divinity course – Christian Ethics sources
- Wordpress and plugin installed on University virtual server
- All the weekly texts for the course digitised and uploaded to the platform, ensuring all copyright cleared



Tutorials in action

- Five tutorial groups of about 10-12 students
- Each group had their own incidence of the tool
- Access via EASE through links on the course WebCT site



- **Tutorial leaders** - students in teams of two, lead the blog and the group discussion each week. The **tutorial leaders** submit 500 word **blog** by midnight on the Friday before each tutorial on the Monday on
 - identification of at least three key quotes in the assigned reading;
 - identification of particular points of controversy or disagreement between the texts;
 - questions to promote discussion
- **Rest of class** post weekly **comments** of around 300 words on by midday on the day of the tutorial.
- 20% of course grade given for properly posted comments but students need to post prior to the tutorial and must attend the tutorial.

CE: SOURCES, RAMSEY GROUP

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KANT, GROUNDWORK FOR THE METAPHYSIC OF MORALS, CHAPTER 2 (SELECTION)

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1 [page 1] We shall therefore have to investigate a priori the possibility of a categorical imperative, as we have not in this case the advantage of its reality being given in experience, so that [the elucidation of] its possibility should be requisite only for its explanation, not for its establishment. In the meantime it may be discerned beforehand that the categorical imperative alone has the purport of a practical law; all the rest may indeed be called principles of the will but not laws, since whatever is only necessary for the attainment of some arbitrary purpose may be considered as in itself contingent, and we can at any time be free from the precept if we give up the purpose; on the contrary, the unconditional command leaves the will no liberty to choose the opposite; consequently it alone carries with it that necessity which we require in a law.


2 Secondly, in the case of this categorical imperative or law of morality, the difficulty (of discerning its possibility) is a very profound one. It is an a priori synthetical practical proposition; and as there is so much difficulty in discerning the possibility of speculative propositions of this kind, it may readily be supposed that the difficulty will be no less with the practical.

3 * I connect the act with the will without presupposing any condition resulting from any inclination, but a priori, and therefore necessarily

2 general comments

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 Student 1

2/3/2012

Immanuel Kant was a German philosopher writing at the end of the 18th century. His main aim was to create a way of establishing absolute moral laws through the categorical imperative. This idea of the categorical imperative is Kant's most influential work, and this passage comes from one of his most excessive works. As a philosopher he has great influence on many modern thinkers such as Jean Piaget and John Rawls.

[reply](#)

 Student 2

2/5/2012

What Kant seems to be attempting here is to show that rational people are capable of deducing sound morality

General comments at top of each page - students introduce the text.

Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, Chapter 2 (selection) « CE: Sources, Ramsey Group

Jeremy • Edit Post Add New • Comments Appearance • Updates 4 Shortlink Search

else that appears charming to the affections, every [page 5] one may readily perceive with the least exertion of his reason, if it be not wholly spoiled for abstraction.

23 The question then is this: Is it a necessary law for all rational beings that they should always judge of their actions by maxims of which they can themselves will that they should serve as universal laws? If it is so, then it must be connected (altogether a priori) with the very conception of the will of a rational being generally. But in order to discover this connexion we must, however reluctantly, take a step into metaphysic, although into a domain of it which is distinct from speculative philosophy, namely, the metaphysic of morals. In a practical philosophy, where it is not the reasons of what happens that we have to ascertain, but the laws of what ought to happen, even although it never does, i.e., objective practical laws, there it is not necessary to inquire into the reasons why anything pleases or displeases, how the pleasure of mere sensation differs from taste, and whether the latter is distinct from a general satisfaction of reason; on what the feeling of pleasure or pain rests, and how from it desires and inclinations arise, and from these again maxims by the co-operation of reason: for all this belongs to an empirical psychology, which would constitute the second part of physics, if we regard physics as the philosophy of nature, so far as it is based on empirical laws. But here we are concerned with objective practical laws and, consequently, with the relation of the will to itself so far as it is determined by reason alone, in which case whatever has reference to anything empirical is necessarily excluded; since if reason of itself alone determines the conduct (and it is the possibility of this that we are now investigating), it must necessarily do so a priori.

24 The will is conceived as a faculty of determining oneself to action in accordance with the conception of certain laws. And such a faculty can be found only in rational beings. Now that which serves the will as the objective ground of its self-determination is the end, and, if this is assigned by reason alone, it must hold for all rational beings. On the other hand, that which merely contains the ground of possibility of the action of which the effect is the end, this is called the means. The subjective ground of the desire is the spring, the objective ground of the volition is the motive: hence the distinction between subjective ends which rest on

emotion within Kant's ethical theory. Duty must be a 'law for all human wills' and must be defined independent of inclination or feelings. At the heart of Kant's deontology is the idea that certain actions are always right or wrong. If we try to bring any kind of feeling or emotion in, there is no way we can stick to this principle because we would always judge actions according to our own feelings, not some external idea of what is right or wrong. In terms of faith, Kant argues that while faith is not a necessary condition for achieving the good, he still holds the Christian emphasis on the will as the centre of the moral life.

cancel response

I agree completely, but could we suggest that Kant is not completely sidelining the role of emotion, but perhaps attempting to re-prioritize them within moral reasoning?

Submit Comment

24 0 comments

25 1 comment

26 0 comments

27 0 comments

28 0 comments

29 0 comments

30 0 comments

31 0 comments

Comments track with paragraphs.

Comments tied to paragraphs.

Floating table of contents available with running total of comments provided.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the following elements:

- Page Header:** Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals, Chapter 2 (selection) « CE: Sources, Ramsey Group
- Navigation Bar:** Jeremy, Edit Post, Add New, Comments, Appearance, Updates (4), Shortlink
- Table of Contents (Left):**
 - David Hume, 'Of benevolence', Section II of An Enquiry Concerning The Principles of Morals (4)
 - After Virtue, Selection (pp. 1-10) (5)
 - 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (10)
 - John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, Chapter 2 (16)
 - Grisez Reading (6)
 - Luke 18:18-23 (7)
 - Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals, Chapter 2 (selection) (15)**
 - Yoder, Otherness of the Church (9)
 - Matthew 20:1-16 (11)
 - Rawls, Justice as Fairness (13)
 - Jose Miranda, Law and Civilization (11)
 - Matthew 5:21-26, 38-48 (0)
 - Augustine, City of God, Book XIX, Chapters 10-14 (0)
 - Yoder, The Original Revolution (0)
 - Exodus 20:1-17, The Ten Commandments (0)
 - Aquinas, Edited Selection on "Law and Grace" (0)
 - O'Donovan, Biblical Ethics (0)
 - Genesis 1:24-31 (0)
 - Romans 1:19-27 (0)
 - Aquinas, Edited Selection on "Law and Grace," part 2 (0)
 - Northcott, Ecology and Christian Ethics (0)
 - Romans 2:6-16 (0)
- Main Article (Center):** Affections, every [page 5] one may exertion of his reason, if it be not wholly necessary law for all rational beings that actions by maxims of which they can serve as universal laws? If it is so, then it priori) with the very conception of the . But in order to discover this connexion ke a step into metaphysic, although into a m speculative philosophy, namely, the cal philosophy, where it is not the have to ascertain, but the laws of what t never does, i.e., objective practical laws, e into the reasons why anything pleases f mere sensation differs from taste, and a general satisfaction of reason; on what sts, and how from it desires and e again maxims by the co-operation of empirical psychology, which would sics, if we regard physics as the is based on empirical laws. But here we ctical laws and, consequently, with the as it is determined by reason alone, in ce to anything empirical is necessarily f alone determines the conduct (and it is now investigating), it must necessarily

- Comment Thread (Right):**
- 2/6/2012
- I would agree with Laura's point, there is no place for emotion within Kant's ethical theory. Duty must be a 'law for all human wills' and must be defined independent of inclination or feelings. At the heart of Kant's deontology is the idea that certain actions are always right or wrong. If we try to bring any kind of feeling or emotion in, there is no way we can stick to this principle because we would always judge actions according to our own feelings, not some external idea of what is right or wrong. In terms of faith, Kant argues that while faith is not a necessary condition for achieving the good, he still holds the Christian emphasis on the will as the centre of the moral life.
- 24 0 comments
- 25 1 comment
- 26 0 comments
- 27 0 comments
- 28 0 comments
- 29 0 comments
- 30 0 comments



What happened?

- Paper questionnaire at the end of the session
- Focus group with the tutorial group leaders





Questionnaires

- Most found the resource easy or acceptable to access
- Only a few downtimes were reported – only at the start of the session
- About 50% of the students accessed the materials twice a week for any purpose but most only posted once a week
- On average they spent 2 hours/week using the tool



- 65% (cf 21%) thought they wrote more than for other tutorial groups
- 55% (cf 25%) thought their writing improved over the semester
- 59% (cf 31%) thought they prepared better



But..

- Confusion over form of writing required
 - 37% formal, 40% informal, 23% not sure!
- Calculating word count problematic – 47% (cf 42%)
- Mixed views on usage in other courses
 - 49% yes, 30% no, 11% not sure



Free text comments

- Clearly mixed message at the start of session about the aims of using the tool:-
 - assessment/homework reason given by many

BUT

- “understand the reading & share & expand views” typical response at end



Likes

- *I appreciate being able to comment on specific sections & Paragraphs*
- *Its ease of access & direct comment on text*
- *It was easy enough to use and shared perspective of everyone in the class was useful*
- *Aided my understanding as I saw others thoughts*
- *It encouraged me to read the readings in more depth & was insightful to see other peoples comments*



Dislikes

- *Couldn't reply to replies*
- *Can't reply to replies & keep conversation going*





Tutor comments

Issues

- Issue around style of writing
- Having three readings but students seeing each in isolation with little connections made
- Little over all synthesis, with sporadic postings
- Word count not easy to work out

But

- Generally liked and thought a useful tool



Going forward

- Use again for this course in 2012-13
- Better induction as to requirements – both tutors and students
- Refine tool to include word count
- Look at methods to allow comments on comments



PTAs project

- *"This project proved to be an invaluable opportunity to finally integrate skills from a former life in IT with my present pedagogical context and also provided a helpful framework to encourage assessment of the use of technology in teaching qualitatively. I'm extremely grateful to the PTAS for encouraging this kind of research into integrative and creative pedagogy and am excited to share the results with others around the University." - JK, RA*



- *“Professor Northcott, course manager and lecturer, reported a marked improvement in learning outcomes over learners on a similar course a year previously. While the launch of the wordpress platform accompanied a major redesign of the course he nonetheless believed that the enhanced means for engaging with texts had significantly improved student ability in expounding, comparing and critiquing set texts which is the core skill that is tested in the end of semester unseen exam.” , MN, CM*



Thanks to

- PTAS for funding the work
- Team members – Professor Michael Northcott and RA – Jeremy Kidwell
- First year Christian ethic sources students and tutors 2011-12