

Ethicists' courtesy at philosophy conferences

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If philosophical moral reflection tends to promote moral behavior, one might think that professional ethicists would behave morally better than do socially comparable non-ethicists. We examined three types of courteous and discourteous behavior at American Philosophical Association conferences: talking audibly while the speaker is talking (versus remaining silent), allowing the door to slam shut while entering or exiting mid-session (versus attempting to close the door quietly), and leaving behind clutter at the end of a session (versus leaving one's seat tidy). By these three measures, audiences in ethics sessions did not appear to behave any more courteously than did audiences in non-ethics sessions. However, audiences in environmental ethics sessions did appear to leave behind less trash.

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1. Introduction

Philosophers have often claimed that thinking philosophically about moral issues tends to improve, or at least can improve, one's moral behavior (e.g., Aristotle, trans. 1962, 1103b, 1140a; Plato, trans. 1961, especially the *Apology* and *Protagoras*; Kant, 1785/2002, pp. 65–66; Mill, 1859/2003, chapter 2; and recently Adams, 2006; Moody-Adams, 1997; Nussbaum, 1997, 2007; also developmental psychologists Piaget, 1932/1965; Kohlberg, 1984; Turiel, 2006). Such a view is, of course, compatible with the

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view that philosophical moral reflection is not by itself sufficient to generate moral improvement (e.g., Aristotle, trans. 1962, 1095b, 1105b; Kant, 1785/2002, p. 71). Other philosophers and psychologists have argued that philosophical moral reflection tends to be motivationally ineffectual—primarily a tool of rationalization, perhaps—or even harmful if it replaces spontaneous virtuous responses with doubts and theories (e.g., Baier, 1985; Haidt, 2001; Knobe & Leiter, 2007; Posner, 1999; Williams, 1985).

It is difficult to find empirical studies that directly address the relationship between philosophical moral reflection and real-world behavior. The effectiveness of business ethics courses has repeatedly been studied, but such studies have so far always used questionnaire responses as the outcome measure rather than direct observation of behavior (even so, the effectiveness appears to be at best modest; for a recent meta-analysis, see Waples, Murphy, Connelly, & Mumford, 2009). A similar lack of real-world behavioral measures compromises research on the effectiveness of courses on medical ethics (Antes et al., 2009). There is a small literature that examines the relationship between directly observed moral behavior and sophistication in reasoning about moral dilemmas, as measured by Kohlberg's (1984) well-known scales, but the results are mixed and tend to lack appropriate controls (Blasi, 1980; Colby & Damon, 1992; Emler, Tarry, & St. James, 2007; Kohlberg, 1984; Krebs & Denton, 2005; Stams et al., 2006).

We take it as a working but defeasible assumption that if philosophical moral reflection tends to improve moral behavior, professional ethicists—who presumably engage in it both skillfully and frequently—will behave at least a little better, on average, than do people who are otherwise cognitively and socially similar. Accordingly, we have begun to collect data on the moral behavior of ethics professors. Schwitzgebel (2009) found that ethics books—including the fairly obscure books likely to be borrowed almost exclusively by professors and advanced students—were more likely to be missing from academic libraries than were comparable books in other areas of philosophy. Schwitzgebel and Rust (2010), looking at public voting records, found that ethicists, including political philosophers, were no more likely to engage in the civic duty of voting than were non-ethicist philosophers or professors in other departments. Schwitzgebel and Rust (2009) found that the majority of philosophers, when asked anonymously to rate the moral behavior of a single arbitrarily selected ethicist and a single arbitrarily selected metaphysics and epistemology specialist from their own department, rated the ethicist no morally better behaved than the specialist in metaphysics and epistemology. In another version of that same questionnaire, a slender majority of philosophers described the moral behavior of ethicists in general as no better than that of philosophers not specializing in ethics and than non-academics of similar social background, while a substantial minority (especially among ethicists) expressed the opinion that ethicists do in fact tend to behave better. It also appears that ethicists are no more likely to respond to student emails than are other professors (Rust & Schwitzgebel, unpublished manuscript).

The present study extends this research line to another form of moral behavior: courtesy. Specifically, we examine the courtesy of philosophers attending meetings of the American Philosophical Association. We used three measures of courtesy: refraining from talking audibly during the speaker's formal presentation, preventing the door from slamming shut when entering or leaving during a presentation, and cleaning up after oneself by removing one's cups and other garbage when leaving a session. We compare audience behavior in ethics sessions versus non-ethics sessions on the assumption that the audiences in ethics sessions contain a much higher proportion of professional ethicists than do the audiences in simultaneously held, and thus competing, non-ethics sessions.

We believe that day-to-day courtesy, etiquette, and regard for others are important aspects of moral life. One Hollywood trope would have a supervillain (e.g., Hannibal Lecter) conduct his murderous affairs while maintaining perfect social grace and decorum. Arendt portrays Eichmann as polite (1963, e.g., p. 60). In light of such examples (or fantasies), it might be tempting to drive a wedge between genuine moral behavior and mere courtesy. However, we follow those philosophers who hold that etiquette or courtesy is partly constitutive of morality (Buss, 1999; Confucius, trans. 2003; Seneca, trans. 1935; Sherman, 2005a, 2005b). As Hampshire (1983) argues, culturally specific social norms are the local face of morality, often more emotionally resonant than abstract, universal norms; it matters how we conduct ourselves at a dinner party, receive gifts (however undesirable), and bury our dead. Likewise, it matters how we conduct ourselves at APA meetings.

2. Method

2.1. Meetings Observed

We observed courteous and discourteous behavior at four meetings of the American Philosophical Association: the 2008 meetings of the Pacific, Central, and Eastern Divisions, and the 2009 meeting of the Pacific Division. At the Central and Eastern Division meetings, we noted what proportion of the audience left behind cups and trash. At the Pacific meetings, we also noted rates of mid-session talking (versus remaining quiet) and door slamming (versus shutting the door quietly).

2.2. Coding Procedures

General. Before gathering any observational data, we coded all sessions as either *ethics*, *non-ethics*, or *excluded*, based on session and talk titles listed in the meeting programs. We also subdivided ethics sessions into *environmental ethics* and *not environmental ethics*. "Ethics" was construed broadly to include feminism and political philosophy but not to include philosophy of religion or philosophy of action. Sessions in either of the latter two categories were excluded from coding unless it was clear from the titles that the focus would be exclusively on ethical or non-ethical aspects of these subfields. We also excluded sessions containing a mix of

ethics and non-ethics, sessions whose classification was not apparent from the title, sessions we expected to draw a mix of ethicists and non-ethicists (e.g., sessions on teaching philosophy), and sessions that would be inconvenient to code due to a very large expected audience (e.g., plenary sessions) or due to a short transition time between mismatched sessions in the same meeting room. Sessions often included several talks on related topics sequentially in the same room, with very short audience transition times (under five minutes). An audience count was taken around the midpoint of each session but never within ten minutes of a scheduled or actual audience transition. We estimated total *audience hours* by multiplying the audience count by the length of the session. The coder generally sat near the back of the room, within easy earshot of the main door.

Talking. An audience member was coded as *talking* if she spoke aloud during the formal presentation of a speaker or commentator in a way that was audible to the coder. We excluded instances that occurred during a pause in the presentation and we also excluded brief, polite remarks (such as “thank you” for a handout or “excuse me” when passing in front of someone when entering or exiting). To improve statistical independence and the interpretation of the relationship between audience size and instances of talking, talking was coded by individual audience member rather than by event: if the same audience member talked multiple times, it was coded only as a single instance of talking.

Door slamming. We coded an *entrance or exit* when an audience member entered after the session had formally begun or left before it formally ended. When more than one person passed through a door before the door could close again, that was coded as a single entrance or exit (since only the last person through the door could control its closure). We excluded entrances or exits occurring while the door was propped open. We coded a *slam* when the entering or exiting party made no effort of any sort to slow or quiet the door as it closed, allowing the door to swing freely shut. We coded it as a *non-slam* when any effort, whether effectual or not, was made to quiet the door or prevent it from swinging freely shut. As it happened, some doors closed more loudly and disruptively when an effort was made to prevent them from slamming than when allowed to swing freely shut, but in our coding it was the attempt that mattered. Analysis revealed no difference in slam rates depending on the loudness of the doors or the effectiveness of efforts to prevent them from closing loudly, so all slams are treated equally in the results.

Cups and trash. Before each session, we took a count of the number of *cups* and piles of *trash* in the room, which we compared with a count of cups and trash piles either (a) after everyone had left or an audience transition was complete, (b) after ten minutes (if some people were slow in leaving), or (c) just before a custodial worker came through, if one entered the room quickly after a session. We coded as cups any drink container, whether disposable (paper coffee cups, plastic bottles) or reusable (hotel glasses, ceramic mugs). Overall, there were many more disposable cups than reusable ones, and the rates at which audience members used reusable cups varied substantially between meetings depending on the availability of water service. The main results hold whether disposable and reusable cups are treated together or

whether disposable cups are treated alone. We coded as trash any visible trash at least the size of a small candy wrapper. We counted several distinct pieces of trash as a single instance if they were together in a group or pile, evidently the work of a single audience member. A neatly stacked pile of handouts, presumably intended for distribution to audience members, was never coded as trash; neither was anything at the speakers' table. At the Pacific Division 2009 meeting only, we subdivided trash into *handouts* and *non-handouts*.

Full coding versus minimal coding. Some sessions were *fully coded*, meaning that all of the above data were coded, and also two other pieces of data: which talks in a session had handouts and the number of audience members with cups. However, coders had the impression that it was very difficult in large sessions accurately to detect the number of audience members with cups, and the percentage of audience members with cups was significantly negatively correlated with session size, suggesting that a substantial proportion of cups were undetected in large sessions; so these data were discarded. Other sessions were *minimally coded*, with only a cups-and-trash count before, an audience count in the middle, and a cups-and-trash count at the end. Minimal coding enabled a single coder to code several sessions. The Eastern and Central Division sessions were only minimally coded. The 2008 and 2009 Pacific Division meetings were partly fully coded and partly minimally coded.

3. Results

3.1. Talking

To our surprise, audience members rarely spoke audibly during the formal presentations. Perhaps the contrary impression we had before conducting this study was due to the salience in memory of a few particularly rude instances. Talking rates are listed in table 1. These numbers are clearly too small to support any definite conclusion other than that there is not a large discrepancy between the two groups.

It is of course likely that in many cases audience members spoke to each other in a way audible to their near neighbors but not to the coder, who was at the back of the room. Thus, in large sessions especially, these numbers may seriously underestimate the actual rate of disruptive talking. Fortunately, the talking-coded ethics and non-ethics sessions had about the same average audience size: 25.2 audience members per

Table 1. Rates of audience talking during formal presentation.

Group	Instances of talking	Coded audience hours	Instances per audience hour	95% CI
Ethics sessions	15	1476	0.010	0.006–0.017
Non-Ethics sessions	12	1324	0.009	0.005–0.016

Note: Two-Proportion z test, $p = 0.77$; 95% CI for diff -0.006 to $+0.008$.

Table 2. Allowing the door to slam when entering or exiting mid-session.

Group	Slams	Entrances and exits	Slams as % of enters and exits	Median % of slams per session
Ethics sessions	52	286	18.2%	18.2%
Non-Ethics sessions	77	315	24.4%*	15.4%†

Notes: *Two-Proportion z test, $p = 0.06$.

†Mann-Whitney adj for ties, $p = 0.95$.

session for ethics (of 23 sessions total), 27.7 for non-ethics (of 18 total; square-root transformed t-test, $p = 0.41$).

3.2. Door Slamming

Table 2 contains the main data on door slamming. When the data are analyzed one way, they suggest a statistically marginal tendency for less door slamming in the ethics sessions. When the data are analyzed another way, however, the groups show no detectable difference.

Our original plan had been simply to measure the ratio of slams to entrances and exits, analyzing statistically with a two-proportion z test (as in the penultimate column of table 2). However, post-hoc examination revealed that a disproportionate number of slams came from just a few large sessions: 32 of the non-ethics slams came from a single large, chaotic session with 97 entrances and exits; and 65 (50.3%) of the slams came from just four sessions (one ethics, three non-ethics). This is problematic because the individual slams may not be appropriately independent as required for the two-proportion test. That is, slams might be expected to constitute a larger proportion of entrances and exits in some sessions than in others, perhaps due to the size of the session, the atmosphere of the session, or features of the door. Thus, table 2 also shows the median percentage of slams analyzed by session rather than by individual slam, avoiding the independence problem. Since the resulting data are non-parametric, we use a Mann-Whitney analysis of medians. This second analysis shows no statistical difference between the ethics and non-ethics sessions.

3.3. Cups and Trash

Fortunately for our research—though unfortunately for custodians and philosophers who prefer cleanliness in their afternoon and evening sessions—the cups and trash data provided a generous abundance of data points. Tables 3 and 4 summarize the results. In contrast with the talking and slamming data, the confidence intervals are nicely narrow: these data suggest that people attending ethics sessions differ little in how conscientiously they clean up after themselves.

Two issues complicate the interpretation of these data. First, it turned out that people were more likely to leave behind trash in the morning sessions than in the afternoon and evening sessions: 13.9% versus 9.4% ($p < 0.001$). (Impressionistically,

Table 3. Cups left behind.

Group	Cups left behind	Audience count	Cups left per audience member	95% CI
Ethics sessions	197	1173	16.8%	14.7%–19.1%
Non-Ethics sessions	284	1594	17.8%	16.0%–19.8%

Note: Two-Proportion z test, $p = 0.48$; 95% CI for diff -3.9% to $+1.8\%$.

Table 4. Other trash left behind.

Group	Trash left behind	Audience count	Trash left per audience member	95% CI
Ethics sessions	136	1173	11.6%	9.8%–13.6%
Non-Ethics sessions	188	1594	11.8%	10.3%–13.5%

Note: Two-Proportion z test, $p = 0.87$; 95% CI for diff -2.6% to $+2.2\%$.

the difference seemed to be constituted mostly by fast-food breakfast wrappers.) And a greater proportion of non-ethicist audience members than ethicist audience members were coded in the morning (56.8% versus 45.0%, $p < 0.001$). One way to address this issue is to examine separately morning trash per audience member and afternoon-or-evening trash per audience member. Any difference in courtesy remains statistically undetectable: in the morning sessions, 12.7% of ethics audience members left behind trash, compared to 14.6% of non-ethics audience members ($p = 0.31$). In the afternoon and evening sessions, the percentages were 10.7% and 8.2% respectively ($p = 0.11$).

Second, ethics talks appeared to be less likely to have handouts than did non-ethics talks, to judge by the data from the fully coded sessions: 18 out of 50 ethics sessions had at least one presentation with a handout (36.0%) compared to 22 out of 37 non-ethics sessions (59.5%, $p = 0.03$). This created more opportunities for non-ethicists to leave behind trash. And indeed, in the 2009 Pacific Division where we specifically coded handouts as a subset of trash, ethics sessions had considerably fewer handouts as trash: we found 20 handouts left behind by 544 ethics audience members (3.7%) and 49 by 540 non-ethics audience members (9.1%, $p < 0.001$). Excluding handouts from the trash analysis at the 2009 Pacific meeting does not much alter the overall findings, though it does reverse the direction of the trend: ethics 66/544 (12.1%) versus non-ethics 57/540 (10.6%, $p = 0.41$). As a further check on these results, we ran a binary logistic regression predicting the likelihood of an individual audience member's leaving behind trash, using the following predictors: number of talks with handouts in the period, dummy variables for session type (ethics versus non-ethics) and time of day (morning versus afternoon or evening), and the four resulting interaction variables (handouts*type, handouts*time, type*time, handouts*time*time). Time of day was the only significantly predictive variable in the regression (coefficient = 1.13, SE = 0.36, $p = 0.002$). Session type had a small but positive logistic regression coefficient, reflecting a weak trend toward ethics audiences

Table 5. Cups and trash left behind in environmental ethics sessions.

Group	Audience count	Cups left behind	Cups left per audience member	Trash left behind	Trash left per audience member
Environmental ethics sessions	67	11	16.4%	2	3.0%
All other sessions	2700	470	17.4%*	322	11.9%†

Notes: *Two-Proportion z test, $p = 0.83$; 95% CI for diff -10.0% to $+8.0\%$.

†Fisher's exact test, $p = 0.02$.

leaving behind more trash once time of day and number of talks with handouts are factored into the model (coefficient = 0.10, SE = 0.41, $p = 0.80$).

We had also been concerned about session size as a possible confound. Fortunately, the ethics and non-ethics sessions were approximately the same size: ethics mean 20.9 versus non-ethics mean 22.8 (square-root transformed t-test, $p = 0.23$). Furthermore, cups and trash left behind per audience member did not detectably vary with session size (Pearson correlations -0.04 and 0.11 , $p = 0.66$ and 0.32 , for cups and trash respectively).

3.4. Environmental Ethics Sessions

We had wondered if the audience in environmental ethics sessions would litter less. Unfortunately, only four environmental ethics sessions could be coded and attendance at each was small. Despite the small numbers, we did find a statistically significant tendency for philosophers attending environmental ethics sessions to leave behind less trash compared to philosophers attending other sessions. See table 5.

The light attendance at these sessions suggests that attendees were mostly philosophers with a substantial interest in environmental ethics; this was also informally confirmed by the coders after some of the sessions. Neither the time of day nor distribution of handouts was unusual for ethics sessions, undercutting those potential explanations of the difference: 37% of the environmental ethics audience was in the morning (compared to 45% for ethics sessions generally) and of the three fully coded sessions one featured handouts (compared to 36% for ethics sessions generally).

4. Conclusion

Ethicists, or at least attendees in ethics sessions, appear to behave no more courteously at philosophy conferences than do non-ethicists. They appear to talk audibly and to allow doors to slam during formal presentations at roughly the same rate as do other philosophers—though for these data the statistical confidence intervals are too large to rule out the possibility of an undetected moderate difference. Ethicists also appear to leave behind cups and trash at about the same rate

as do other philosophers, and here the confidence intervals are much narrower: if ethicists are any less prone to litter, the difference is subtle at best; in fact we found a slight trend toward audience members in ethics sessions littering more, once time of day and distribution of handouts is taken into account. The evidence does, however, suggest that the audience in *environmental* ethics sessions leaves behind less trash.

We recognize the imperfections of this study: the small sample size for some of the measures, the imperfect sorting of ethicists and non-ethicists into ethics and non-ethics sessions, the lack of random assignment and so the possibility of uncontrolled confounds, and the relatively minor nature of the offenses. Such imperfections are difficult to avoid when seeking direct observational data about the moral behavior of as sophisticated and sparsely distributed a group as professional ethicists. However, the results of this study fit into a consistent pattern that we have begun to see across studies, of ethicists behaving no better than non-ethicists of similar social background. This general finding presents a *prima facie* challenge to views according to which philosophical moral reflection tends to improve moral behavior. On the other hand, the results for the environmental ethics sessions, though the numbers are small, suggest that there may be limited pockets of better behavior among ethicists with the right beliefs or professional interests (either as an effect of those beliefs and interests or in some other causal relationship), at least in contexts where those interests are made salient and the relevant behavior is publicly observable. Indeed, we the authors would find it depressing if this rather minimal claim were not true.

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