

**MORAL EDUCATION THROUGH MASS ART:
IMPLEMENTING *VANDERPUMP RULES*
IN THE MODERN ETHICS CLASSROOM**

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ABSTRACT

In a world dominated by screens, professors more than ever need to diversify their pedagogical methods to compete for the tech-dependent students' attention. In Section One, I argue the traditional method for teaching ethics does not cater to the modern student, thus to cultivate a more compassionate and ethical society, we should rethink how we conduct our ethics classes.

Traditional ethics classes rely too much on bizarre thought experiments, convoluted and abstract texts, and unstimulating lectures making them less effective at achieving their true purpose, i.e. cultivating what Martha Nussbaum (2010) calls the democratic citizen. I argue that Nussbaum's narrative imagination should be the hallmark of the ethics class. But, instead of limiting it to just highbrow literature, I argue we can extend the practice of narrative imagination to popular arts, specifically reality TV.

Since students will undoubtedly engage in mass arts such as reality TV, we ought to teach them how to engage with it critically and compassionately. In Section Two, I discuss how reality TV is an optimal medium to practice narrative imagination in the modern classroom because it grabs the attention of the tech-dependent student, is easily accessible, and depicts real life. I believe Bravo's *Vanderpump Rules* (*VPR*) is the best candidate for narrative imagination because it simulates the everyday, provides the means to develop emotional connections to the cast, and explores multiple facets of life.

At this period of time, undergraduates undergo significant transformations within the four main facets of life: family, friendships, romantic relationships, and professions. Because of this, it is imperative students understand how to address the inevitable obstacles within these domains compassionately and effectively. In Section Three, I will discuss one or two ethical dilemmas from *VPR* in each of the four domains, and couple them with a philosophical concept and specified ethical problem. I present the ethical dilemmas through conversation transcriptions and inspired-by-real-life hypothetical scenarios. By dissecting these situations from *VPR*, Students not only cultivate the compassion necessary for narrative imagination, but they can learn how to reflect and tackle similar ethical dilemmas in their own lives.

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SECTION ONE

THE MODERN ETHICS CLASSROOM

In this section, I will first explain the current educational climate and the modern student's aims for their education. Secondly, I will introduce Martha Nussbaum's aims for the education system and why it is important to cultivate democratic citizens in the classroom. I present one of her requirements for democratic citizenship—the ability to imagine oneself in another's shoes—and her argument of why cultivating compassion is necessary to make better ethical judgments. One of the ways we can cultivate compassion is through narrative imagination. Thirdly, I discuss the importance of narrative imagination and implementing art into ethics education in general. Fourthly, I discuss my and other philosophers' grievances about the traditional ethics class. I highlight four main concerns: use of bizarre thought experiments, convoluted and dense assigned texts, boring and unstimulating lectures, and too much emphasis on theory over application. I argue how implementing narrative imagination can solve these concerns. Finally, I will argue how we can use Nussbaum's narrative imagination with other forms of art and not just sophisticated literature, and that perhaps—given the modern technological climate and the decreased attention spans in our students—these other forms of modern digital art may do better job at captivating the student, and thus, cultivate the proper perspective and correlating emotions needed for narrative imagination.

The Modern Educational Climate

Education is supposed to be a place for students to acquire knowledge and develop skills so they are better prepared to navigate their world. When students get to university, they are still expected to study the typical general education courses as they did in high school like history, math, English, and science, but they also take classes related to their desired careers. These college students expect the skills acquired in their classes will enable them to flourish in their desired career and provide for their communities and families.

Today, it seems education has shifted from enriching culturally-aware, contemplative citizens to employees focused on calculated utility and economic reward. Especially with the rise of inflation, students are desperately turning to high-paying jobs to get them out of debts and achieve economic freedom, even if these jobs do not provide any existential fulfillment. Society values high-paying and pragmatic jobs such as careers in medicine, engineering, business, and law, and discourages more humanistic and typically lower-paying careers in education, art, social work, and more. To compete for these high-paying jobs, students are seeking out majors projected to provide these stable, high-income jobs. As of 2021, the top five most popular college majors are Business, Health, History and Social

Science, Engineering, Biological Sciences¹. Aside from History and Social Science at #3, the rest of these majors cater towards these profitable careers students are searching for.

Perhaps one could argue that students are generally interested in these “profitable” fields and not just studying them for maximal economic gain, but data collected from The University and College Admissions Service says otherwise. UCAS requires all college applicants to write a personal statement in their college applications including why they are interested in the major they want to study. As of 2015, they have analyzed over 300,000 students.² UCAS analyzed how often students would use the ‘passion’ words, i.e. “love”, “passion”, “passionate”, “explore”, versus ‘career’ words, i.e. “salary”, “employable”, “career”, “job”. They found that more prospective undergraduates deciding to major in medicine and economics, accounting, and law were more likely to highlight how choosing this major would grow their career, whereas those who chose majors in the humanities such as English, history, and fine arts were more likely to express their choice for their desired major came from a “passion” for the subject.

The arts are typically looked down upon because students believe they do not provide the type of utility and consistency to live what people deem a practical and profitable life. A survey done by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences surveyed 5000 people on their thoughts about specific fields of studies. Out of the ten academic fields provided in the survey, Philosophy was ranked second least favorable above Statistics.³ After the 2008 recession, there was a major decrease in humanities majors. Humanities bachelor’s degrees obtained by universities went from 16.8% in 2011 to 12.8% in 2021.⁴ Colleges are aware their students are seeking for more “practical” jobs and thus are removing funds from humanities departments and increasing funding in their business and engineering programs. Most universities require all students to take at least one humanities course, but given these courses are typically entry level courses—and students are often only required to take one—the course may not have much effect on student’s understanding of the world or themselves.⁵ Some universities—particularly in rural areas—have not only been cutting their humanities course requirements for all majors, but have

¹U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall 2011 through Fall 2021, Completions component. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 321.10.

²Ucas. (2015, June 25). Students’ personal statements show a mix of passion and career words, UCAS analysis reveals. *UCAS*.

<https://www.ucas.com/news/news/students%E2%80%99personal-statements-show-mix-passion-and-career-words-ucas-analysis-reveals>

³Humanities Indicators. (2019). *The Humanities in American Life: A Survey of the Public’s Attitudes and Engagement*. American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

⁴U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Completions component.

⁵And of course, how these courses are taught does not really encourage student understanding of themselves and the world, but we will get into that later.

been cutting humanities programs altogether. This not only hurts the humanities majors and professors at these universities, but it hurts the overall student population as there are less opportunities for them to be exposed to humanities studies.

Today's students often complain when colleges force them to take one or two humanities courses as they believe it does not help them towards a successful career, nor do they see its intrinsic value. Unfortunately, they cannot see the utility of learning about what makes them human, which is the gift of humanities courses, and perhaps the most useful skill of all. Charles N. Bertolami, a dentistry professor at NYU, observes this phenomenon among the students in the dentistry department. "This is not surprising. They have been so focused on success in a highly competitive environment to gain admission that serious introspection is a luxury that just never arises, or even worse, is interpreted as a sign of weakness" (Bertolami 2004, pg 418). If we see education as only utility and economic reward, then we may disregard other pleasures life has to offer. It is crucial we understand how to interact and understand ourselves and the world around us, and develop critical thinking skills—which humanities classes have the potential to do—in order to properly flourish.

I want to emphasize that it is not the students' fault that they see their education in this manner, and I do not believe that all students are simply profit-hungry careerists. I do believe that many actually want to find intrinsic value in their education, however, they have been conditioned all their lives to view most milestones in their lives as stepping stones for the next, always looking towards the next goal, and this is especially prevalent for education. Robert J. Sternberg argues people may not care to teach in a way that does not focus on improving test scores, i.e. one that focuses on cultivating wisdom over acquiring knowledge, or teaching one not *what* to think, but *how* to think. "Many people will not see the value of teaching something that shows no promise of raising conventional test scores ... Society has lost track of why [tests scores] ever mattered in the first place and they have engendered the same kind of mindless competition we see in people who relentlessly compare their economic achievements with those of others" (Sternberg 2007, pg 157). As educators, we must convince these utility-obsessed students about the utility found in these humanities courses in order for them to take them seriously. And because courses can be uninteresting or tedious, they are less likely to enjoy the experience in the classroom, and in turn, less likely to see its intrinsic value.

Martha Nussbaum's Narrative Imagination

Students often only see the value in their college education as a means to something else, mainly a stable career and economic flourishing. They value knowledge insofar as how it will get them the career and financial freedom they desire, but I believe that though many students believe this is college's main purpose, many still want to find intrinsic value in their classes. Unfortunately, how the courses are typically structured is not conducive to this goal. Instead of providing students with the tools for self-exploration and meaning-making, students are taught to see education as a completion

ticket to financial success, but this kind of thinking limits our human capacities. Martha Nussbaum recognizes this gap in education and encourages us to do something about it. I will illustrate Nussbaum's idea of a democratic education and how exposing our students to what she calls "narrative imagination" can foster this democratic society she aims to achieve, and simultaneously, satisfy the students' desire to find intrinsic value in their education.

Nussbaum's Democratic Education

Not For Profit (2010) illustrates Nussbaum's concerns for how the trend of education leans toward a more economic-focused approach instead of cultivating compassionate, free-thinking civilians. By keeping education's focus on generating profit, students are losing out on opportunities to empathize with those different from themselves and to dissect complex global, communal, and interpersonal issues. This is also important for the *what's-in-it-for-me* students who feel humanities classes are pointless and are not relevant to their lives. Humanities courses give us the opportunity to reflect on these serious ethical issues that impact our lives. They also allow us to develop critical thinking skills which are attractive to employers.⁶ Thus, if we want to create a more empathetic and critical thinking society—the type of society our students would want to live in themselves—Nussbaum insists we bring back a liberal-arts inspired education system. Nussbaum's ultimate aim is to create an education system that gifts students with the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human. She claims these gifts allow us to cultivate rich, soulful relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation (2010, pg 6). She does not want us to view our relationships as business transactions, but instead, meaningful connections that grant us purpose and fulfillment. And, I would argue these career-oriented, *what's-in-it-for-me* students also see the value in cultivating meaningful, fulfilling relationships.

Nussbaum's idea of the democratic education is heavily influenced by the ancient tradition. In Chapter 4 of *Not for Profit*, she advocates for the type of pedagogical style—namely the Socratic method—to develop the students' critical thinking skills required to juggle different situations and ideas. Additionally, she argues when juggling these different ideas in the classroom, we must ensure we are engaging with our emotions, as she believes merging our emotional responses with our critical thinking is the ideal concoction required for a democratic society. Which, again, students ought to learn how to engage with their emotions as this skill will not only perhaps help them in their careers, but their lives in general.

⁶Gray, K. & National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2024). Job Outlook 2024. In <https://www.nacweb.org/>. Job Outlook 2024.
<https://www.nacweb.org/talent-acquisition/candidate-selection/the-key-attributes-employers-are-looking-for-on-graduates-resumes>

What is Nussbaum's Narrative Imagination?

Nussbaum (1997, 1998, 2010) argues that a liberal education is our best bet in producing empathetic and democratic citizens. Though we may think of cultivating compassion to be a more intimate activity, she argues it is crucial we learn to practice it in schools. The practice of cultivating compassion through an active, participatory learning process can help shatter the ignorance that would otherwise limit our capacity for empathy towards others unlike us. For Nussbaum (2010), a democratic citizen must possess all three capacities to cultivate humanity: ability to examine oneself including one's values and traditions, ability to participate in and critique public discourse including reflection on how oneself fits within society, and ability to perceive and have concern for the lives of others.

I want to focus on the third capacity.⁷ Nussbaum claims we can unlock the third capacity through narrative imagination. In accordance with the Stoics, Nussbaum argues that in order for us to become this ideal world citizen, we must practice narrative imagination which she defines as “the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” (2010, pg 95-96). In this way, we can understand the motives and choices of those from different backgrounds and situations than our own. As we begin to internalize other's lives, beliefs, and motives, they will inevitably become less foreign to us and Nussbaum believes this unfamiliarity is what causes the disparity in our society. She says we can practice imagination through engaging with literature and “by identifying with [fictional characters] and allowing ourselves to be surprised (an attitude of mind that storytelling fosters and develops) as we become more responsive to our own life's adventure, more willing to see and be touched by life” (1990, pg 162). We must understand that our race, gender, socioeconomic status, and religion all shape our perspective and beliefs about the world, and Nussbaum argues that engaging with art, particularly literature, allows us to understand these beliefs within ourselves and others.

The Importance of Imagination

In Chapter 6, Nussbaum details how students can tap into their imagination through reading literature and engaging with the arts (2010). In agreement with psychoanalyst Donald Winnecott, she emphasizes the importance of play and how it offers children the opportunity to experience “otherness”. During play time, children often play pretend and imagine themselves as another being whether it be a mother, superhero, dragon, etc. She argues that by occupying other roles and engaging with nursery rhymes and stories, children learn to grasp an elementary understanding of empathy as they bring themselves into the experiences of another.

⁷I put a heavier focus on the third capacity because that is the one that includes narrative imagination, but I believe all three capacities assist equally in obtaining my ultimate goals for students in the classroom.

But, adults can still experience this imaginative play time through engaging with art. To put ourselves in someone else's shoes, we must envision their story as if we were the main character and imagine what our choices and emotions would look like in that particular situation. Narratives such as Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*, and more, allow students to exercise such an imagination. The more narrative writings we are exposed to, the easier it will be to get in the habit of narrative imagination, which should lead us to becoming more empathetic to others hardships—even if they are vastly different from our own.

Kendall Walton argues that the act of imagining is not simply “clinical, antiseptic, and intellectual” but engaging in fictional works moves us more meaningfully as we “imagine doing things, experiencing things, and feeling in certain ways” (Nussbaum 1997, pg 38). Exercising our imagination gives us the opportunity to discover who we are and what we value. The Aristotelian concept of imagination, *phantasia*, opens us to new perspectives and possibilities, and thus helps us complete this task since we can use it to balance different outcomes and scenarios. Part of fulfilling our human function is exercising our rationality; to assess situations and draw reasonable conclusions. These types of critical thinking, along with interpersonal skills, are not only attractive to employers,⁸ but are valuable in and of themselves.

Adopting Perspectives and Cultivating Compassion

Practicing imagining ourselves in another one's shoes allows us to adopt one's perspective. Elisabeth Camp (2017) argues that adopting a perspective is crucial to cultivating and explaining the correlating emotions to these narrative works. In order to truly adopt the perspective of these characters, we must cultivate the relevant emotions, and in doing this, Nussbaum claims we cultivate compassion. “Compassion is best understood as a virtue that comprises particular emotional, cognitive, and active responses which recognize a shared common humanity” (D'Olimpio 2018, pg 35). According to Laura D'Olimpio, empathy and sympathy are not rational emotions but they can assist us in forming the ideal rational emotions, i.e. compassion, to practice critical perspectivism.⁹

⁸Gray, K. & National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2024). Job Outlook 2024. In <https://www.naceweb.org/>. Job Outlook 2024.
<https://www.naceweb.org/talent-acquisition/candidate-selection/the-key-attributes-employers-are-looking-for-on-graduates-resumes>

⁹Laura D'Olimpio's critical perspective is defined as “an attitude that supports a practise of being morally engaged in the world by processing and understanding information received from mass-produced and distributed media sources in a critical and compassionate manner” (2018, pg 35). Compassion is a more useful tool for critical perspectivism because it “involves a certain amount of critical distance from the other who suffers” (2018, pg 36). She claims our emotions can create biases or lead to impartial or inconsistent results in our moral judgments and normative claims. I think D'Olimpio's critical perspectivism can be compared to Nussbaum's narrative imagination.

Cultivating compassion and igniting our imagination can be traced back to human's unique talent for rational thinking. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims we experience human flourishing when we fulfill our function as humans, i.e. activate our rationality. Adopting an Aristotelian-esque view herself, Nussbaum values traits that promote human flourishing, thus she believes cultivating compassion is enhancing human's unique capabilities. Compassion requires one to possess and abide by a set of moral principles and abilities (particularly to imagine life in another's shoes), stand back and assess the judgment of others' situations, and sense how one would respond to similar suffering.

Exposure to Tragedy

According to Nussbaum, tragedy is the feature of art that is the most powerful for cultivating compassion. This genre of art captivates its audience by displaying serious subject matter coupled with signs of human sufferings, allowing audiences to feel for the characters. The audience perceives the characters grappling with their own insecurities, illness, death, and other misfortunes, and witnesses how the characters' emotions, mindsets, relationships, and lifestyles are affected. It is important for us to be exposed to tragedy—especially if we have never experienced “real” tragedy ourselves. It is easy to make quick judgments or assumptions without previously experiencing something first hand, or at least witnessing it.¹⁰ Once people have been exposed to others' tragedies and how it affects their lifestyles and well-being, ideally, we will be less likely to make quick judgments in the future when others in our own lives are in similar positions.

As we imagine ourselves in the character's situation, we embody similar feelings to the characters we read, and we can use these emotions—coupled with our human rationality—to craft evaluative judgments and beliefs. Without adopting the perspective of the tragic character and cultivating compassion towards their misfortunes, we cannot experience proper narrative imagination, and therefore, cannot make proper evaluative judgments. Perhaps students may think emotions do not belong in the classroom, but it is precisely our emotions that make us human and allow us to feel for others. Our emotions play a significant role in how we behave ethically in society, thus we ought to be taught how to engage with them. Being too rational does not allow us to take into account the complexities of the human condition, so we need compassion.

¹⁰On the other hand, I think we can also argue that even if we *did* experience a similar tragedy, we could be susceptible to thoughtless assumption-making. For example, let's say we experienced the loss of our father, but were able to make a “quick recovery” post-loss. If we read about a character who is having a harder time “getting back to normal” after her father's passing, we may think “Well, I handled my father's death well, why couldn't she?”. This is why it is important for students to reflect on all the nuances of the situation, and not just the character's situations, but reflect on the similarities and differences to one's own experiences.

Modern education does not encourage enriching the student's mind but, instead, building up corporations with agreeable workers. And while college should be a place where students acquire the vocational skills necessary for their desired careers, it is important for students to see the "utility" of learning to live life meaningfully and ethically—arguably the most important skill of all. And, I believe one of the means to accomplish this is engaging with art. I agree with Nussbaum and others that art should be integrated into the classroom, and particularly the ethics classroom. Students can memorize various ethical theories, but the compassion required to behave ethically cannot be cultivated through intellectual inquiry alone; we need a complete understanding of the human condition. Art is not just there for our viewership, but begs us to engage with it. It is a storytelling experience; the artist becomes the storyteller as she attempts to express her humanness and being through the artistic medium of her choice. Thus, by exposing ourselves and our students to multiple varieties of art, we adopt new perspectives with each piece we engage with, thus allowing the opportunity for compassion cultivation.

Art as Moral Education

As Aristotle claimed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is imperative we act morally if we want to achieve human flourishing, and if engaging with art cultivates such flourishing, then this is something we should take seriously in educating the democratic citizen. Many aestheticians defend the use of art within education. D'Olimpio (2022) argues the importance of aesthetic education is its contribution to enriching students' flourishing. Matthew Kieran (1996) and Berys Gaut (1998) believe art is more than simply a means of entertainment, and instead, can act as a tool to "promote imaginative understanding of people, their styles of interest, and their successes and failures in pursuing their interests" (Eldridge 2003, pg 215). Wayne Booth (1989) argues that we explore our values through "reading them in a rich context" and we must pay attention to how the literary works we engage with move us and cultivate within us particular emotions and values.

Martha Nussbaum clearly advocates implementing art in moral education as narrative imagination requires it. She claims that engaging in literature specifically "best captures the subtleties of real moral dilemmas, and thus provides us with a useful proxy order to practice moral discernment" (D'Olimpio 2018, pg 41). She continues to argue:

"It is all too easy to see another person as just a body—which we might then think we can use for our ends, bad or good. It is an achievement to see a soul in that body, and that achievement is supported by poetry and the arts, which ask us to wonder about the inner world of that shape we see—and too, to wonder about ourselves and our own depths" (Nussbaum 2010, pg 102).

In agreement with Dewey, Tagore, and Ellison, Nussbaum urges us to cultivate "inner eyes", meaning developing one's empathy by introducing them to diverse issues and ways of life. She states the

role of arts in education does two things: “cultivate capacities for play and empathy in a general way, and address particular blind spots” (2010, pg 108). She also urges us to not let our students engage with literature that will perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes as these may do the opposite effect of creating democratic societies. Instead of reading literature that perpetuates these kinds of stigmatizations, we should read literature that allows students to adopt the perspective of those who suffer from these stigmatizations.

Following Nussbaum’s ideas and many other aesthetics advocates, I also believe in introducing art into the classroom—particularly the ethics class. Other humanities classes like English are familiar with engaging with art forms such as literature and poetry, but this is not as popular of a pedagogical tool in the more logical and theoretical humanities classes like philosophy. But, I believe we can transfer that same type of narrative analysis from English classes into our studies on ethics.

Art engagement is where imagination is actualized. When we create art, we express our distinct ideas and feelings, and can share them with the rest of the world. It also allows us to refine our ideas and thoughts as we have to try to reconfigure them in a way that can make sense to others. But, equally as important, is engaging with others’ art. When we are exposed to art, we are exposed to another’s being and perception of the world, giving us a taste into another’s imagination and way of thinking. Exposing ourselves to others’ art can give us a sense of who others wish to be or express, and perhaps in turn, give us inspiration for who *we* are or wish to become. This can be helpful for college students roaming aimlessly, unknowing what they want out of their future. By exposing them to new ways of thinking and experiencing, they not only learn more about themselves and perhaps who they want to become, but gain a richer understanding of their world.

Flaws of the Ethics Class

The modern student is looking at their education as a stepping stone for a profitable career. They have been taught that in order to obtain these careers, they must memorize whatever material is being presented, pass the course, and obtain the relevant degree. Education is treated as only a means, and seems to have no value in and of itself, but I am under the impression that these students do still want to find some intrinsic value within their education. Even if we believe the material we are teaching has intrinsic value, these students are not conditioned to see it as such—perhaps mostly due to the means in which we are teaching it. If our classes model the traditional classroom structure—i.e. endure boring lectures to memorize enough information to pass the exam—then it makes it more difficult for students to recognize its intrinsic value. This is especially the case for the non-philosophy major who is only taking Intro to Ethics to satisfy a Gen Ed requirement. This type of student—the majority of students in these introductory humanities courses—are typically only going to view their Intro to Ethics class as another box that needs to be checked (just like every other “milestone” in life). Perhaps we ought to embody a charismatic salesman and sell our students the idea of how philosophical study can provide

the meaning they have been searching for. It takes more than just the “product” alone to convince these students that there is meaning behind what we teach.

Not only do our ethics classes seem boring, but Derek C. Bok (1976) argues they rarely tackle problems that students will inevitably face in their own lives, nor help the students develop any kind of moral reasoning. In agreement with Bok (1976), Charles N. Bertolami (2004) urges us to get rid of these knowledge-based ethics courses that are boring and provide no real guidance in leading an ethical and fulfilling life. He writes: “Such ethics courses do not help the students capture the exciting vision of ‘who I could be’” (2004, pg 417). He continues to say these ethics classes do not “help students clarify their moral aspirations ... or define their identity and establish the level of integrity at which they will lead their professional lives” (2004, pg 417).

The typical ethics course suffers the same flaws as any other stereotypical class structure, but I am going to highlight four flaws about ethics courses in particular and the ways they not only do not cater to the demands of the modern student, but they also are not conducive to creating the democratic education Nussbaum advocates for. I argue these introductory ethics classes suffer four main issues: assign convoluted and dense philosophical texts that are likely too advanced for the average Intro to Ethics student; use bizarre, unrealistic thought experiments that students cannot relate to, and thus have a harder time seeing their relevance and taking them seriously; often taught through boring and unstimulating lectures that deter student engagement; and excessively focus on mastering theory rather than real-life application, which makes it harder for students to apply what they learned in the classroom into their own lives—which would seemingly be a significant problem for a class that it supposedly teaching us how to behave ethically in society. I argue these issues can be solved by: assigning more accessible course material, entertaining realistic and relatable ethical dilemmas, cultivating active discussion amongst students, and teaching students how to navigate the ethical dilemmas in their own lives, respectively. I propose engaging with art and implementing Nussbaum’s narrative imagination can solve these problems while also granting the student’s wishes for utility and intrinsic value.

Convoluted Texts and Theories

Philosophy arguably comprises one of—if not *the*—most difficult kind of texts to read and understand. When these fresh-from-high-school, non-philosophy majors enter their first philosophy class this is likely their first time encountering philosophical texts. These perhaps snobbish Intro to Ethics professors do not see anything wrong with expecting these philosophy rookies to endure these sophisticated, abstract texts because this is what it takes to be a “real philosopher”.¹¹ However, these

¹¹Some scholars argue that dumbing down our class material may lead to an impoverishment of education—particularly at the collegiate level—since the purpose of this education is to craft experts in one’s desired field. And, yes, sure. However, perhaps this would make more sense for an engineering major to endure a rigorous 400-level engineering class since we want our *engineers* to be experts in

ethical theorists that Intro students “must” learn have convoluted writing styles in conjunction with abstruse ethical theories. And even if there is “usefulness” within these texts, they are simply too abstract for the typical non-philosophy major. Take for instance, Immanuel Kant’s *Groundwork*. Kant, like many philosophers, has a complex writing style that not only makes it difficult for students to understand his argument, but it may deter frustrated students from thoroughly and meaningfully engaging with his work. Instead of reading the primary text, students may be more likely to search alternative ways of learning through Youtube videos or study sites like Quizlet or CliffNotes in order to gain enough understanding to “pass the exam”. Additionally, if our students become frustrated with reading philosophy, they may undoubtedly develop negative attitudes towards studying it, thus perhaps losing out on meaningful learning experiences and the opportunity to enhance their critical thinking.¹² Additionally, the self-esteem of the frustrated students may plummet as they may feel not smart enough to understand the texts. This also can lead to not only cultivating negative views on philosophy, but hurting their confidence as a learner.

If a student genuinely wants to know the ins and outs of the Categorical Imperative, then reading the primary texts seems like the most natural first step. However, we must recognize the audience in these introductory ethics courses, i.e. the *I don’t care about philosophy, this course has nothing to do with my major, and I am only taking it because I need to satisfy my humanities requirements to graduate* students. These students make up the majority of the Intro to Ethics class roster. We should never assume that just because a student is in our philosophy class that is proof they are interested in learning philosophy—or at least, what they believe is philosophy.

Implementing narrative forms of art solve the problem of the convoluted text.¹³ Narrative stories are more digestible for the modern student, and typically more engaging as humans are naturally captivated by storytelling (Hsu 2008). But, as I will later argue, just because an artwork is easy to digest, does not mean we cannot extract any real meaning from it or rigorously analyze and critique it. Many

engineering. I am wary of claiming the engineering major must also be an expert in philosophy, but perhaps, the *philosophy* major should be an “expert” in philosophy. But, I would argue that “crafting of the expert” should happen in the upper-level philosophy classes, not the introductory ethics class. Since non-philosophy majors make up the majority of these introductory ethics classes—and since philosophy contains rigorousness in itself already—then I do not believe adjusting our teaching to accommodating these students is impoverishing education. Maybe if no classes at all contained any rigor—specifically one’s major-related classes—sure. Shoutout to Dario Vaccaro for bringing up this point.

¹²Perhaps one may argue that having students read these convoluted texts actually improves their critical thinking. And perhaps, sure. But, without that initial attraction—and at least *some* kind of understanding—I am under the impression these students will not even try to engage with them. Especially, if they can get the “information” through other means, i.e. Quizlet and *CrashCourse* Philosophy videos.

¹³Perhaps not all narrative text, but even the more sophisticated literary works are arguably more digestible than many philosophical texts.

scholars have argued for how storytelling can be an effective method of teaching students to understand their social world (Mar & Oatley 2008; Gasser et al. 2022) thus narrative works can be a good substitute for the typical convoluted texts we encounter in our Intro to Ethics class.

I am wary of committing to the idea of dismissing these complicated philosophical texts altogether because though they typically ooze grandiloquence, I do believe there is some value in exposing students to primary texts. However, I think it is imperative that we keep in mind that forcing our Intro students to read such texts may deter them away from philosophy as they may not have the patience or intellectual acuity to understand it, and I believe it is cruel to “gatekeep” the gift of philosophical study from these students. We must package philosophy in a way where these students would want to open themselves up to it willingly. I believe that for these introductory ethics classes, it is best to gradually build up our students’ interest towards philosophy. This can be done by starting them off with secondary texts or more concrete and digestible scholarly articles, but of course, Nussbaum, myself, and others recommend introducing narrative forms of art. By providing less rigorous class material and replacing it with more engaging forms of narrative art, we are not only less likely to deter non-philosophy majors, but they are more likely to see the philosophical study’s intrinsic value.

Bizarre Thought Experiments

Thought experiments are a staple in the introductory ethics course. Many Intro to Ethics students have heard of Philippa Foot’s trolley problem, Peter Singer’s drowning child, Judith Jarvis Thomson’s violinist analogy, and more. However, these thought experiments more resemble silly “Would You Rather” conversation games instead of crucial ethical questions we ought to seriously consider. For example, arguably one of the most famous ethics thought experiments is the trolley problem. Though debating whether pulling the lever makes one a murderer or a hero can produce fruitful philosophical discussion, students will never be able to *truly* relate to this dilemma since—though it is still *technically* possible—it is *extremely* unlikely they will ever be put in this position.

Bertolami (2004) urges our ethics curriculum to be honest, introspective, and personalized, but the design of the typical ethics course is not conducive to the type of reflection required for a change in ethical behavior. He states: “We fundamentally see ourselves teaching *about* ethics, which is slightly different than teaching ethics—in the sense of expecting behavior to change as a result of what is taught” (2004, pg 414). If our ethics classes are cluttered with bizarre thought experiments not relatable to everyday life, students cannot activate this level of introspection as well as they could with a realistic ethical dilemma, nor do entertaining these bizarre thought experiments motivate a change in behavior.

Without being able to truly imagine yourself in this situation, or have it at least grounded in some realism, students will have a harder time translating the moral inquiry they practice debating these bizarre thought experiments into in their own lives. And this fact alone validates the *I’m-just-here-for-the-Gen-Ed-credit* student’s belief that philosophy is just prattle about nonsensical

dilemmas that will never happen. And because these thought experiments are not grounded in any familiar reality, it becomes easy for students to say *Just pull the lever* if they feel they will never be in this position while dismissing any true reflection and deliberation about the issue at hand. So, even though, *technically* there are no fantasy elements in the trolley problem thought experiment, the likelihood of students being in that position to make such a decision is just too low. And, if the modern student does not see how these experiments can relate to their lives, then they are less likely to find the value in discussing them—even if they perhaps have a seemingly good time entertaining them.

It seems silly to entertain this question of whether we should pull a lever to kill one person but save five. Sure, it leads to the deeper underlying question of whether it is okay to commit a morally wrong act if it benefits the majority¹⁴, but why can we not present this same idea through a realistic dilemma students are likely to encounter? The importance of playing with thought experiments that are actually grounded in a familiar reality is that students are more likely to translate what they learn from the realistic experiments into their own lives, thus satisfying the modern students' grievance about these Gen Ed classes they are forced to take. By recognizing how these thought experiments relate to their own lives gives students the opportunity to reflect on a time when they were in a similar predicament and the thoughts they had and the choices they made. Additionally, discussions with our classmates can aid these reflections, and hopefully allow students to recognize and judge their own ethical decision-making.

Engaging with narratives that address real-life issues and tragedies allow students to better cultivate compassion. It is easier for them to picture themselves in those situations because it is grounded in a reality similar to their own. It also feels less silly because they are reading “real” human tragedies. Though the characters are fictional, they do feel real in a sense when we engage with their stories. We feel a part of their world. These narratives allow us to gain deeper perspectives of the situations and characters, and allow us to entertain all the nuances that affect the character's thoughts and decisions, unlike these bizarre thought experiments. When we engage in and analyze these nuances, we can participate in a richer discussion about the nature of the situation, whereas these bizarre thought experiments typically consist of faceless characters faced with a two-fold decision. Most importantly, reading novels allows us to tap into others' emotions and perspectives which can grant us a better understanding of ourselves (Broom et al. 2021).

¹⁴I am aware the point of these bizarre thought experiments is to illustrate these deeper underlying questions, and that though students will likely not be in a *literal* trolley problem, perhaps they will likely be in a situation where they have to choose between letting a few people suffer if it benefits the majority—which is the deeper underlying dilemma of the trolley problem. But, my point is, I do not understand why these thought experiments must be so bizarre and otherworldly. I feel it makes more sense to play with thought experiments that better reflect a familiar reality. Thanks to Dario Vaccaro for pressing this point.

Boring Lectures

The way we conduct our classroom today is similar to what it looked like hundreds of years ago. Even as far back as the 16th century, Michel de Montaigne (1580) in *On the education of children* argued that long lectures never worked in the classroom. Along with Montaigne, John Dewey (1930) dismissed the idea of heavy memorization and passive education, and instead favored more active forms of learning. Various other famous educators such as Maria Montessori, Paulo Freire, Friedrich Froebel, and more advocated for a more active class environment that catered to the student's needs and desires. All these educators claim the lecture style is not the most optimal pedagogical method, and a heavy emphasis on memorization and test scores are not accurate measurements of a student's intellect or wisdom, yet these are still the most common pedagogical practices in the college classroom today.

These ineffective pedagogical methods were not conducive to proper learning back in the day, but given this new technological climate, this fact is even more prevalent. Students today have grown up with screens for most of their life. Their primitive years were raised with technology that has unfortunately stumped their attention spans.¹⁵ Now, students are having a harder time paying attention in the outdated classroom structure than ever,¹⁶ and if the students cannot pay attention in class, then we cannot expect proper learning. Not only does the typical introductory ethics class contain course material that is too convoluted and abstract, but this material is also often *presented* in a boring and unstimulating manner. This makes for a nasty amalgamation for the modern student.

As Nussbaum (1997, 2010) reminds us, group discussions provide a more engaging class environment than lectures. And just as a sense of community is an important component of a life well lived, it is arguably another important component of an engaging and meaningful class environment. Just like how we enjoy creating meaningful connections through fruitful conversation in our personal lives, perhaps we ought to try to simulate similar discussion in the classroom. One way we connect with others is discovering and discussing similar interests. Take for instance, movies. After we watch a movie with our friends—whether we are amateur film critics or not—we tend to like to discuss the parts we liked or disliked and why. Then, we like to ask others if *they* have seen the movie, and the conversation usually does not stop there. If we have already seen the movie, or have interest in seeing it, we will typically follow up with “Why did you like it?”. By engaging with other fan's interpretations of characters, plot, cinematography, etc., we gain a different or deeper understanding of it, and perhaps, discover new appreciations and/or criticisms. Additionally, exchanging in this type of dialogue also enhances the argumentation skills required for philosophical inquiry.

¹⁵Hayes, A. (2023, September 25). *The Human Attention Span [INFOGRAPHIC]* | Wyzowl. Wyzowl. <https://www.wyzowl.com/human-attention-span/>

¹⁶Edelman Intelligence. (2016). Gen Z in the Classroom: Creating the Future. In *Adobe Educate*. Adobe.

Implementing art in the classroom allows us to simulate these lighthearted debates we have with our friends. I argue we ought to replace mind-numbing lectures with enlightening group discussion about a shared artwork. This artwork must possess the capability to encourage student engagement and supply us with various dilemmas and stories to play with. In simulating these types of connections and stimulating discussion, we are closer to getting our students to cultivate the compassion Nussbaum advocates for. These types of connection-making, philosophical inquiry, and critical thinking skills are the catalysts for Nussbaum's democratic society.

If Intro students are introduced to philosophy in an uninteresting manner, they will likely treat it as any other banal subject they are forced to "learn" and less likely to recognize its potential to create meaning in their lives. It is more challenging to gain the attention of the modern non-philosophy undergraduate, and if we want to expose them to the gift of philosophical study, we must be aware of and adjust to their educational needs. By incorporating discussions and debates about narrative artworks that engage with important philosophical questions, we can capture their attention, and perhaps make learning philosophy fun.

One may argue having "fun" is not a necessary condition for proper learning, thus there is no need to create a "fun" or "easy" class environment—perhaps especially in a college setting. And I believe, yes, those who are genuinely interested in learning the material—or who are desperate for an "A"—can learn (or "learn"¹⁷) and understand the material without needing to "have fun". However, students undoubtedly learn better through an active class environment (Deslauriers et al. 2019), thus it seems it makes sense to try to simulate a *What-did-you-think-about-the-film* discussion in the classroom to get students talking to each other; the "having fun" is simply a bonus (but, perhaps a bonus that is still worthy of serious consideration).

Theory over Application

Bertolami claims that these ethical principles and theories typically taught in these classes are "too abstract, dry, and off-putting to have any practical affect" (2004, pg 417) and teaching them on their own serves no practical effect in a student's life as "the difference between living ethical and satisfying ethics is the difference between playing a sport and reading the rule book" (2004, pg 417). Bok shares similar sentiments as he believes lecturing students on these ethical theories do not develop a student's moral reasoning and therefore "do little to help the student cope with the practical moral dilemmas he may encounter in his own life" (1976, pg 27).

¹⁷Students whose only goal is to get an A may likely only memorize enough material to pass the test, but if they just memorize the "right answers" just to forget them after the semester, or in general, lack the desire to truly understand the material, I am wary to call this learning proper.

Sternberg (2007) argues focusing too much on teaching theory may disrupt the student's acquisition of wisdom. Though cultivating intelligence is important, he reminds us that intelligence alone will not shape ethical citizens. In fact, if the cultivation of intelligence is not accompanied by ethical teachings, then one could use their intellect inhumanely. Therefore, the focus should not be on cultivating intelligence in our students, i.e. how well they memorize the ethical principles of these old philosophers, but instead, encourage the development of wise critical-thinking skills that they can use outside the classroom.

After observing the habits of his dentistry students, Bertolami explains his grievances with how our ethics classes are currently run: "While the ethics courses do succeed in telling students what our expectations of them are, that's about all they do. Knowing our expectations is all these' needed to pass the test. What the courses fail to address is the one question everyone really wants the answer to: Why? Why be good? Why be ethical?..." (2004, pg 416). Our ethics students must do more than memorize theories; he argues they must engage in their own particular experience and determine who they are and what they really want in life.¹⁸ Instead, students approach the ethics class like any other class; memorize the answers, pass the test, get the degree. But, it takes more than "knowing the answer", as D'Olimpio (2018), and other neo-Aristotelian philosophers say, "it is not enough to know the right thing to do; we also need to understand the right way to do it" (2018, pg 40).

As D'Olimpio (2018, 2022) argues, as well as many others (Nussbaum 1995, 1997, 2010, 2011; Murdoch 1998; Sternberg 2007), abstract theory alone is seldom going to motivate moral action. She continues to say that learning these moral theories and rules may be important, but it is really "the definition, application, and manifestation of these rules that are important to society" (2018, pg 39). According to D'Olimpio, Nussbaum, and other philosophers, there must be something deeper within our studies that cultivates action in our students, and this requires an engagement with the students' emotions. And, of course, how we can do this is engaging with narrative works.

Students will never understand "the right way to do it" if their ethics classes focus too heavily on theory over practical application. Discussing practical application opens the doors for self-reflection, and this can be achieved through engaging with narratives. Presenting a true-to-life dilemma from a narrative work is an excellent means of encouraging introspection and class engagement. After analyzing the narrative, we can ask students self-reflective questions such as *What would you do in this dilemma? How did you come to that conclusion? Have you or someone you know faced a similar situation?*

¹⁸I am aware there are ethics classes that are not solely about theory. There are applied ethics courses that address global ethical issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, immigration, etc. that are relevant to students' lives. This is much more preferable than studying straight theory, however, I feel there could still be a disconnect for cultivating empathy. Perhaps by implementing narratives about how people are affected by these global ethical issues, we can have a stronger influence on these students' approaches to these problems and convince them to take them more seriously.

What did you/they do? If you believe your choice was morally correct, why do you think that? What do you think you could have done differently? If we are entertaining ethical dilemmas that are realistic, students should be able to recall a similar situation in their own life, or if they have not encountered one themselves, they have heard of someone they know who has or they may likely be in this dilemma in the future. And, after entertaining this realistic dilemma and having classmates discuss it, students should have more clarity on how to approach these situations.

More Than Literature

I believe we ought to implement Nussbaum's narrative imagination in the ethics classroom as it solves my concerns for the stereotypical ethics class. Role-playing is an excellent method to cultivate the compassion required for ethical decision-making. However, I believe we can expand the kinds of art we use to practice narrative imagination to more than just the high-brow literary works Nussbaum and others recommend. In fact, I believe there are other modes of art that could be *better* for producing narrative imagination, particular within the modern student. Nussbaum mentions various literary works such as *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Hard Times*, and though we have been teaching these works in the classroom for some time, and they have interesting stories and perspectives to expose our students to, their perhaps antiquated diction and obsolete medium may not attract the modern student.

Technology consumption has skyrocketed as more and more people use their technological devices for work, entertainment, travel, etc. Students today do not know a world without it. Because they are so overstimulated by their devices, they have more difficulty focusing in the traditional classroom setting than previous generations.¹⁹

There have also been studies showing a decrease in reading.²⁰ As society has progressed to be more technological, students are less captivated by literary works and more by digital mediums like films, television, music, and social media. Even those attracted to reading do not gravitate towards high brow literature necessarily, and instead may prefer more accessible forms of written work like children's novels, young adult novels, blogs, and poetry.

This decrease in reading interest is especially important when it comes to reading dense and sophisticated texts. Whether it be fiction or nonfiction, students do not feel an initial gravitation to a story if they cannot understand, relate to, or find interest in. Thus, if a student is not even attracted to the artistic medium, and on top of that, does not understand or relate to its content, this presents an

¹⁹Hayes, A. (2023, September 25). *The Human Attention Span [INFOGRAPHIC]* | Wyzowl. Wyzowl. <https://www.wyzowl.com/human-attention-span/>

²⁰NEA. (2023). *Arts Participation Patterns in 2022: Highlights of the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* [Dataset]. National Endowment for the Arts.

issue for what we want to accomplish in the classroom. Perhaps, we should not abolish reading altogether as reading and engaging with others' ideas has significant pedagogical value, but we should adjust our assigned readings to the modern student demographic accordingly. And, we can do this by supplementing our readings with modern technological mediums.

Though Nussbaum argues classic literature is the best medium for narrative imagination as she believes it is the best source for teaching how one should live (1998, pg 358), I believe narrative imagination can only be possible if one feels an enchantment towards a piece of art, and if majority of students are not captivated by this antiquated medium, then perhaps we should implement a different medium of art that better captures their attention. In the next section, I will explain a defense of mass art, and how a modern form of mass art such as reality TV can not only be conducive to experiencing Nussbaum's narrative imagination but also caters to the modern student.

SECTION TWO

PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES OF REALITY TV

I will begin this section by first discussing various philosophers' thoughts on mass art—some positive, some negative. Secondly, I explain why I agree with Laura D'Olimpio's (2018) and other philosophers who view mass art as a possible tool for critical examination about ourselves and our society. Thirdly, I argue how reality TV can be used for generating narrative imagination in the classroom, and perhaps, address the flaws of the stereotypical ethics class. Reality TV can be an effective medium for narrative imagination in the ethics class for four reasons: it sustains the attention of the screen-addicted student, maintains an easily digestible format, depicts and addresses real-life situations, and enables entertaining evaluations beyond the TV screen. Fourthly, I will argue the best type of reality TV show for cultivating narrative imagination must meet three criteria: resemble the everyday, provide the means to develop emotional attachments to the cast members, and explore multiple facets of human life. Finally, I will conclude Bravo's *Vanderpump Rules* fits those three criteria.

In Defense of Mass Art

Many aestheticians and scholars alike share an unfavorable view of mass art believing only negative implications can come from it. Some believe the main issue with mass art is its aesthetic appeal because it is not created for exploring an artist's unique thoughts and worldviews, but instead, for easy mass consumption (Collingwood 1938; Greenberg 1939; MacDonald 1953). Collingwood (1938) claims mass art—or what he calls “amusement art”—is too strategic in its art making process as it tries to appeal to the most number of people. When artwork prioritizes this easy consumption, it tends to appear cheap, predictable, and mindless. Because it is designed to appeal to as many people as possible, it tends to lack risk, depth, and individual artistic expression, and without these components, it seems mass art devoids itself of any real value (Collingwood 1938; Greenberg 1939; MacDonald 1953).

T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1999) express more of a social concern. They believe mass art contributes to what they call the “culture industry”. Similar to the previous authors, they believe genuine art aspires to be free from society, and since mass art is based on spreading as much of itself as possible, it is doing the opposite of what art is meant to do. The culture industry shows no resistance at all to society, in fact, it is cultivated to fit society's desires, but the effects of it can be dangerous as indulging in these mass arts serve as a distraction from taking notice of the real problems going on in the world. They argue how the culture industry imposes false beliefs onto its audiences, and in turn, audiences transfer these false beliefs into their real lives (1999). The culture industry deprives audiences of honest reflection and instead promotes inauthenticity by brainwashing them to think that these false representations in mass art are accurate representations of reality. An example of this would be a

character in an unfortunate situation who gets saved by the hero. This is a common trope in mass art and it teaches the audience that if you are in distress you will get saved, but that is not always the case.

In continuation of their argument, Adorno and Horkheimer (1999) claim mass art takes away our exercise of imagination. So now, we are not only robbed of our aesthetic reflection but our autonomy as political agents. To make matters worse, the culture industry is the primary or only source of art for most people, therefore most people will not be able to exercise or develop moral or political autonomy through the means of “high art”. They argue that if the audience is constantly consuming mass art, then they cannot take advantage of the benefits high art engagement has to offer such as opportunities for personal reflection or exposure to new ideas and thoughts, and additionally, not partake in worldly issues (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1999).

Plato was the first to openly scrutinize mass art. Though there was no real “fine arts” back in ancient Greece, Alexander Nehamas (1997) argues Plato’s contemplation towards poetry can easily be compared to the contemporary philosopher’s negative dispositions towards today’s mass media art. In Book X of the *Republic*, Plato argued that we are too susceptible to the possibly harmful imagery and stories within art, and thus it will inevitably shape our behaviors for the worse. Specifically, Plato argued that poetry has this effect as it is a “medium inherently suited to the representation, or imitation, of vulgar subjects and shameful behavior” (Nehamas 1997, pg 372). Nehamas further explains in *Plato and the Mass Media*: “Poetry is essentially suited to the representation of inferior characters and vulgar subjects. These are easy to imitate and what the crowd, which is already perverted to begin with, wants to see and enjoys” (1997, pg 373).

Despite the negative backlash towards mass art, there have been scholars who have praised mass art and were optimistic about what it could arise (McLuhan 1994; Shusterman 1994; Carroll 1997, 2001; Benjamin 2008; D’Olimpio 2018, 2022; Strohl 2022). Namely, they look into the nature of mass art and recognize its power to cultivate large audiences. They analyze mass art through a historic lens, understanding that mass art is simply the transition from one era to the next, thus we may not judge it too harshly (Benjamin 2008; McLuhan 1994). The development of new technologies has altered our culture. With this change, Walter Benjamin (2008) argues, modern mass art exposes us to new mediums and ideas of the current epoch. He believes that mass art is a frozen relic encapsulating the particular era of which it was produced.

Matthew McLuhan (1994) is fascinated by mass art because with these modern technological advances, we are now more than ever able to access different sensory experiences. Before there was telecommunications, our only exposure to art was through paintings or literature. Today, we have plenty of different media that tackle multiple senses like radio, television, film, and social media. By extending our sense experience and modes of thought, we are able to amplify the human experience. Thus, according to McLuhan, these new modes of mass art should be preferred over early artistic mediums.

Matthew Stohl (2022) argues against the idea that mass art lacks any real value. He argues in defense of unironically loving “bad” art, particularly movies. He argues that even if a film is aesthetically condemnable, its value is determined by the individual and the capacity it enables one to engage with it. If a form of mass art provides a means for worthwhile activities for engagement, then we can deem it valuable to some extent.

Others argue though mass art is easy to consume, and perhaps easy to craft, that does not mean it is not worthy of serious study and criticism (Shusterman 1994; D’Olimpio 2018, 2022). It holds importance in society as it is what compels and elicits emotional responses from the mass audience. Abraham Kaplan (1972) claims the emotions elicited from mass art are superficial, but Carroll (1997), and many other scholars (Dewey 1934; Hall 2006, 2009; Friedman 2014; Stohl 2022), argue that these emotions are not only legitimate but would also deem them as not necessarily as shallow as Kaplan claims.

D’Olimpio (2018) highlights the importance of the masses’ engagement with mass art. She claims people would rather read literary works over moral philosophy, but “films and television shows will be even more popular, and the ease of access as a result of current technology points to their significance in society” (D’Olimpio 2018, pg 38). Students will engage in these works regardless. Thus, in agreement with D’Olimpio, I believe we must be able to teach our students to engage with these “technologically medicative narratives” (2018, pg 50) critically and compassionately. She does share similar fears as other mass art critics (Nehamas 1997; Adorno & Horkheimer 1999), but she does believe it is possible mass art still offers us opportunities to learn about, engage with, and develop compassion towards the stories of others. And, perhaps, if we teach our students how to engage with these works critically and compassionately, these social concerns become null.

Though there are many alluring stories in these classic novels Nussbaum recommends, the literary medium in itself has become obsolete in this modern generation of students—at least, for many of them.²¹ Reading is not as attractive as it used to be in this technological era as students crave more stimulating forms of entertainment such as movies, television shows, and social media reels. This means it will be harder for students to connect to a literary work—despite perhaps having a captivating story—simply because the medium itself is either not as accessible or attractive.

If our goal is to create the most democratic and empathetic society, then we must present art that is accessible and relatable to the majority. I am not sure that I want to go as far as to claim we should do away with all reading in the classroom, but I do believe it is crucial to be aware of the modern student’s attitudes towards reading. By providing supplementary readings that are easily digestible, we can find a happy medium. If the literature or philosophy we are assigning is too dense or sophisticated,

²¹The Nation’s Report Card. (2022). *Appendix Tables for 2022 Reading Report Card*. National Assessment of Educational Process (NAEP).

<https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=4>

it may drive students away.²² By only teaching high-brow literature, we are alienating a good chunk of students who cannot connect with these works. These students who are not avid readers nor possess the intellectual capacity to engage with these high forms of art need to feel connected with something. It would be impossible to fulfill Nussbaum's task of narrative imagination if students cannot relate to the work in some fashion—or at the least—find it interesting or stimulating enough to truly want to engage in it. And if we want to cultivate this compassion in as many people as possible, would it not be wise to avoid dense and sophisticated texts to not alienate those students who lack the patience or intellectual capacity to entertain them? In fact, perhaps it is our duty as educators to expose our students to multiple forms of art, particularly ones more accessible and suitable for the modern, tech-dependent student.

Why Reality TV

Though we can perhaps use a variety of electronic mediums to cultivate this narrative imagination, it seems one of the most prominent to gravitate young people is television shows. In 2017, 63% of young adults watched the news weekly, 47% watched sports weekly, and 44% watched reality TV weekly. These numbers jumped in 2022 to 80%, 75%, and 77%, respectively, with reality TV being the largest jump.²³ Thus, we can tell from the data that television media is a modern art form that attracts undergraduates, and if they are already interested in this type of media, perhaps we should capitalize on their attention.

Reality TV in particular has had exponential growth in viewership²⁴ and studies have shown that it has the capabilities of conjuring up emotional responses in its audience similar to how we do for fictional characters (Reiss & Wilke 2004; Friedman 2014; Lewis 2015; Quian et. al. 2018). When May Friedman herself watches reality TV, she says it “gives me an entry, albeit one that is heavily mediated, into a world that I could not otherwise see” and “gives me access to raw emotion and takes me beyond my own neighborhood and experiences” (2014). Many scholars have advocated for exploring reality TV in the classroom to unlock different perspectives and lifestyles (Rahoi-Gilchrest 2011; Friedman 2014; Quian et al. 2018). A study conducted by Quian et al. (2018) revealed that students reported a greater

²²I am particularly thinking of the non-philosophy major undergraduate who is only in our class to satisfy a general education credit to graduate—which makes up most of our Intro to Philosophy students. I am sure there are a handful of students who would appreciate dense and sophisticated texts, but, this is not as common.

²³U.S. Census 18-24. (2022). Media Trends Among Young U.S. Adults, Then & Now. In *CivicScience*. Civic Science.

[https://civicscience.com/gen-z-in-focus-movies-and-tv-shows-are-more-important-to-young-adults-today/#:~:text=TV%20\(44%25\).-,Now%20\(2022\),all%2C%20at%2077%25%20today](https://civicscience.com/gen-z-in-focus-movies-and-tv-shows-are-more-important-to-young-adults-today/#:~:text=TV%20(44%25).-,Now%20(2022),all%2C%20at%2077%25%20today).

²⁴Stoll, J. (2022). *Average daily time spent watching traditional TV and digital video in the United States from 2021 to 2025* [Dataset]. Statista.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/420791/daily-video-content-consumption-usa-device/>

level of understanding of the dry, technical class material after watching a reality TV episode displaying similar concepts. Along with Quian et al., there have been many other scholars who have argued the pedagogical potentials of reality TV (Hall 2007; Rahoi-Gilchrest 2011; Friedman 2014). I will argue that reality TV can be an effective means to achieve narrative imagination in four ways: sustains the attention of the tech-addicted student by incorporating their technological world, supplies an easily accessible form of philosophical inquiry to inexperienced philosophy students, depicts real-life situations²⁵ that students can relate and emotionally respond to, and enables the bounds of the narrative to go beyond the TV screen.

Sustains Attention in the Technological Era

It is our responsibility as educators to keep ourselves informed about how to engage students in the classroom and adapt our teaching methods accordingly. Though perhaps more elitist academics refuse to entertain mass art in the classroom, if we want today's students to be engaged with the class material, mass art can be a helpful resource to capture their attention. And, if we are true educators, we should care about student engagement and fostering a rich, stimulating learning environment.

This is especially important when teaching ethics. In order to have an orderly and ethical society, the population must know how to behave ethically. The average non-philosophy major student is not going to be captivated by the words of Kant or Aristotle—or even perhaps—*allow* themselves to be captivated. Philosophical texts are dense, abstruse, and boring to most students. The average student may have difficulty applying these antiquated philosophical concepts in their own life or seeing their relevance in today's world because they are too abstract and unrelatable. And, if the way we are teaching these dense philosophical concepts is boring and uninspiring, then how do we expect to maintain the student's attention?

However, we must be cautious as we ought to not *mindlessly* integrate technology studies in our classroom. Unfortunately, not only has technology negatively impacted young people's attention spans²⁶, but studies have shown the more frequent the use of our technology, the less empathetic and perspective-taking we have become (Konrath et al., 2011). The rise of social media and other electronic vehicles of faceless communication has deteriorated our empathy muscles as they cannot be fully exercised through the means of a screen. We need to see people's facial reactions to our words and actions in order to interpret their emotions properly and accurately (Choi et al. 2014). Social skills in

²⁵Of course, we can debate how “real” reality TV is, and I believe that differs across the genre. But, for the most part, it is at least presented as if it is *supposed* to be real. So, even if there are some exaggerations, the events and cast members are grounded in reality. And, similarly to fictional stories, students can still find a sense of relatability more or less within the not-so-real reality TV programs.

²⁶Hayes, A. (2023, September 25). *The Human Attention Span [INFOGRAPHIC]* | Wyzowl. Wyzowl. <https://www.wyzowl.com/human-attention-span/>

general are plummeting as younger people are having a harder time reading others' emotions (Uhls et al., 2014). But, urging people to decrease their screen time is a fool's errand which is why D'Olimpio (2018) argues perhaps we should embrace the media in which they are consuming and teach them how to engage with it critically and compassionately.

In order to properly capture the attention of the tech-obsessed student, we must not only ditch our long lectures and diversify our pedagogical methods, but perhaps it is important to incorporate their technological world into the classroom. In these student's screens is an entire world that is "just as real as the ordinary world" (D'Olimpio 2018, pg 4), and one that is unable to be understood unless we live in it ourselves. The discourse surrounding this technological sphere symbolizes a type of shared experience which allows people to foster connections with one another. Thus, by introducing discourse about this technological world in our pedagogy, not only will it get the attention of these tech-crazed students, but it could make a more enriching and communal classroom experience.

Reality TV is a great technological medium to introduce to the classroom because we know that it is very prominent in many students' free time.²⁷ Even if reality TV is not a part of someone's leisure time, scholars have suspected people are drawn to the medium for various reasons such as its novelty (Hall 2007), unpredictability (Hall 2006, 2007; Baruh 2010; Lewis 2015), opportunity for social interaction (Reiss & Wiltz 2004; Hall 2007; Friedman 2014), opportunity for cognitive practice (Green et al. 2004; Sherry 2004; Hall 2009), comedic value (Hall 2007); and its ability to satisfy human desires such as feeling superior over others (Reiss & Wiltz 2004; Hall 2006, 2007; Lewis 2015), aspirational identification (Scannel 2002; Hall 2007, 2009; Friedman 2014; Lewis 2015), schadenfreude (Reiss & Wiltz 2004; Nabi et al. 2006; Hall 2007), or simply because they are interest in watching real people on screen (Nabi et al. 2006; Hall 2009; Baruh 2009; Friedman 2014). And because students do not expect to watch and discuss reality TV in the classroom, it becomes even more exciting as they get to indulge in conversation about their leisurely activities in an environment they otherwise would not.

The enthusiasm elicited from reality TV discussion is similar to the one we experience when indulging in gossip. In ancient civilizations, education was taught orally. We learned the difference between moral and immoral behaviors through storytelling and dialogues—similar to gossip—and students and teachers cultivated close connections with one another. Education was used as a tool to improve civic life, and teachers encouraged students to participate in the public affairs that were discussed in the classroom (Brown & Luzmore 2021). Today, at these large-scale universities—and even smaller scale colleges—we do not have as strong ties to our community. We feel less connected with each other, but a discussion of art can reignite a shared sense of community. Though many scholars may find

²⁷U.S. Census 18-24. (2022). Media Trends Among Young U.S. Adults, Then & Now. In *CivicScience*. Civic Science.

[https://civicscience.com/gen-z-in-focus-movies-and-tv-shows-are-more-important-to-young-adults-today/#:~:text=TV%20\(44%25\).-,Now%20\(2022\),all%2C%20at%2077%25%20today.](https://civicscience.com/gen-z-in-focus-movies-and-tv-shows-are-more-important-to-young-adults-today/#:~:text=TV%20(44%25).-,Now%20(2022),all%2C%20at%2077%25%20today.)

it abhorrent, humans undeniably love to gossip and other scholars have noted positive implications about its practice. Historian Phyllis Rose (1983) claims that gossip “may be the beginning of moral inquiry, the low end of the platonic ladder which leads to self-understanding”. She continues to say that perhaps why we are so desperate to know details about the lives of others—or in our case, engage and discuss the lives of people in reality TV—is because ultimately, we want to know how to live ourselves. Mary Leach (1995) also adopts a more positive outlook on the practice of gossip. She claims engaging with our emotions is more powerful for our philosophical inquiry and moral judgment than formal reasoning. Thus, she believes what she calls “serious gossip”²⁸ is an excellent way of connecting with others and our emotions and can be a resource for many educational activities such as “play, moral investigation, self-reflection, wonder, self-expression, and discovery” (1995, pg 127).

Just how we can gossip about the people in our lives, we can gossip about people on reality TV. And, for a class of strangers, finding a common topic to gossip about can simulate the enticing tattle sessions we have with friends. Introducing reality TV and emulating these “gossip-esque” colloquies in the classroom has the ability to create stimulating conversation, allows students to create connections with other students over a shared interest, and perhaps, most importantly—especially for Leach (1995) and Rose (1983)—enables us to look into and discuss the lives of another in order to gain a finer perspective of our own.

Easily Accessible

Reading philosophy requires rigorous attention and patience in order to properly understand it. After a long day of classes and other life obligations, your typical non-philosophy major undergrad in their mandatory introductory ethics class most likely does not have the patience or reading comprehension to entertain such dense philosophical texts like Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals*. If a student cannot grasp these philosophical texts, then it seems proper learning and fulfillment cannot transpire. Not only will they not understand the work, and thus not reap the benefits of reading philosophy, but it is possible they may cultivate an insecurity about their intelligence or a negative perspective towards philosophy in general. The last thing we want is to deter new students—or potential budding philosophers—away from philosophy simply because they lack the reading comprehension necessary to engage with it.

However, watching reality TV obviously does not have this problem. Rita L. Rahoi-Gilchrest (2011) argues reality TV could be a means of learning in the classroom as it is a “very manageable artifact” (2011, pg 89) thus, professors can offer a “wider range of programs/artifacts to choose from if

²⁸Mary Leach avoid to outright define gossip as she believes gossip can mean many things to many people, but she states the characteristics of “serious gossip” are “conversations which take place in small groupings, usually at ease, in relation of trust” (1995, pg 127) that also can be a resource for the educational practices I’ve highlighted above.

the instructor is *selective* in using examples in everyday class discussion” (2011, pg 89) It is easy after a long day to sit on the couch and indulge in reality TV—as that seems to be how a lot of people spend their time anyway.²⁹ If our class readings and material are approachable and easy to comprehend, students are less likely to grow frustrated with their philosophical studies. Additionally, today’s students have been having trouble reading or are reading slower in general (Spichtig et al., 2016) and there has been a significant decrease in student literacy in the US overall.³⁰ These students deserve to still have access to some kind of narrative art form that allows them to indulge in meaningful and philosophical discussion without needing to strain themselves trying to understand convoluted philosophical texts. By engaging with a medium that does not require a high reading comprehension or heavy attention to detail to understand it, we are opening the doors for more people to engage with the gifts of philosophical inquiry.

Of course, we do not want to encourage mindless television watching. That would be going against the goal we are trying to achieve. But, the medium in which we can gain some philosophical understanding and discussion need not be difficult to comprehend in order for it to be meaningful. I do not believe it is necessary that students must engage with rigorous material to conduct themselves morally or explore deep philosophical inquiry. Additionally, I do not believe it makes us better educators to provide them with rigorous material. Some may argue that we should encourage students to engage with these rigorous texts as there ought to be rigor in the philosophy class. I would agree with this only if we were talking about graduate classes or upper level undergraduate classes—or at least, classes with majority philosophy majors. Non-philosophy majors could be exposed to some rigor, but ultimately, I contend these freshman non-philosophy majors need only to dip their toes into the philosophy pool. They should be gently eased into the cold, unfamiliar waters in order to get acquainted with its piercing postulations and perhaps often intimidating vernaculars, rather than mercilessly shoved, plummeting all at once. They do not have enough familiarity with philosophy yet to dive head first.

Reading Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* does not make one a better person. It is the way in which someone can engage in the *Metaphysics of Morals* that creates the potential to improve how they conduct their lives ethically. This I feel can be the same with reality TV. Of course, watching reality TV without any real critical engagement will not make one a better person. But, in using this medium correctly, perhaps our students will cultivate compassion better than they would suffering through the writings of the *Metaphysics of Morals*. And of course, reality TV alone may not satisfy the students’

²⁹Stoll, J. (2022). *Average daily time spent watching traditional TV and digital video in the United States from 2021 to 2025* [Dataset]. Statista.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/420791/daily-video-content-consumption-usa-device/>

³⁰Kassidy, B. K., MD. (2022). *Preventing a Lost Generation: Facing a Critical Moment in Student’s Literacy*. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

search for meaning (and if we are going off of just pure consumption, the *Metaphysics of Morals* is probably a better candidate for creating meaning in one's life, that is, if one has the erudition and patience for it). But, if we use reality TV effectively in the ethics classroom, along with class discussion and self-reflection, it surprisingly makes it a lovely medium for those who want to indulge in philosophical questioning who otherwise do not have the comprehension or patience to do so.

Depicts Real Life

Though a fantasy story can teach us valuable lessons on ethics, I believe that its fantastical element draws the audience too far away from reality. In real-life scenarios, we tend to take things more seriously because we recognize the stakes and understand the potential consequences. We have to remember that students are asking *How does this matter to me?* while enduring these college lectures. By entertaining real-life situations rather than fantasy or outlandish ones, it will be easier for students to recognize the relevance of their introductory ethics class in regards to their own life. We are not simply entertaining bizarre thought experiments that will never happen—and that often feature binary decisions—we are discussing real-life events that happened to real-life people and that could potentially happen—or has already happened—to our students.

Literary works can resemble real life quite well which is why many of the aforementioned philosophers (Booth 1988; Nussbaum 1997, 2010, 2011; D'Olimpio 2018, 2022) recommend studying literary works for ethical studies because students can relate to these fictional stories. Readers tend to connect to these fictional characters as if they were real and feel a sense of closeness towards them. But, what if they *were* real? Reality TV strengthens these connections and creates empathy towards *actual* people. Though Neil Postman has a seemingly negative attitude towards technological mediums, he acknowledges we cultivate strong emotional connections when witnessing tragedy on screen as these tragedies are “more or less constants in human experience” (2010). He continues to say witnessing such sufferings “really touch us at the deepest levels”, and since reality TV “characters” are real, their tragedies are real too. As Postman notes: “I think stories like this, where people will say, ‘Why her? Why in this way? What will happen to the children now?’—these are the things that most human beings really think about at the deepest levels”(2010).

Though reality TV has the reputation of being manipulated by producers to create fake drama or misleading storylines, even if all of reality television was 100% staged, it is still real people, and even its un-authenticity can be another form of self-exploration. May Friedman argues these conversations over the inauthenticity of reality TV can be used as tools for self-reflection and “may evolve into a more nuanced reckoning with the notion of authenticity itself” (2014). And despite mass art skeptics like Adorno and Horkheimer (1999) who claim mass art give us a false sense of hope, reality TV lovers commented how they feel reality TV, unlike fictional stories, “function as an antidote to the

unrealistically optimistic images of life portrayed by Hollywood”³¹ (Hall 2020, pg 26) and in turn, “can help one feel more content with one’s experience” (Hall 2020, pg 26). Sure, there are several reality TV shows that feature unworldly events and perhaps unrealistic conflict, but as Quain et al. states: “These shows bring realistic human interaction to life. There are crises, challenges, triumphs, and spectacular failure. Most importantly, the shows tell stories, real-life, human stories” (2018).

Quain et al. continues: “Every good teacher knows that people love stories. These shows are story-rich. They are believable because the personalities and people are real and students can relate to them” (2018). Recognizing the similarities in their lives with the ones they see on TV can be a powerful tool for not only cultivating compassion for others, but learning how to navigate one’s own life and developing a “better understanding of human nature and behavior” (Hall 2009). There are a variety of kinds of reality TV, and some of them do a better job at depicting real life situations than others (I will explain this in the next subsection). And, yes, though we can argue that reality TV tends to be scripted or manipulated by producers, it still grounds itself in realism.

Goes Beyond the Screen

Just like how we can develop love towards characters in a book, we can do the same with the people we see on reality TV. In the past, we used to only dream of meeting our TV idols, but with the rise of social media, the parasocial relationships we have with these celebrities have the potential to become more interactive. “It is a unique feature of the contemporary world that we have access to more information and images, opinions, and various perspectives than ever previously thanks to our global technology and connectivity” (D’Olimpio 2018, pg 8). Unlike other narrative art forms like literature and film, reality TV allows us to go beyond the screen for further investigation. At the end of a book, the story ends, and sure, perhaps the characters live on forever in our hearts, but—aside from fanfiction and perhaps a movie adaptation—that is all we can know about the character and their story. With reality TV, since they are real people, we can engage with their “stories” and “characters” further than just what is depicted on the TV screen, and we can do so through various mediums outside the show itself such as social media platforms, Youtube, Reddit, podcasts, fan forums, news outlets, and even in-person interactions with the cast themselves.

By interacting with various media, students become investigators as they attempt to piece together all the evidence and inquire with their fellow sleuths to identify what is happening, who is involved, and what are their motives. This can also enhance students’ critical thinking skills as they will learn to question the legitimacy of the things they see online or elsewhere (D’Olimpio 2018). These

³¹Perhaps this point is not strong when thinking about reality TV shows that depict exuberant and glamorous “Hollywood” lifestyles like *The Real Housewives* franchise or *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, but even in these shows, we do perhaps see their not-so-glamorous sides. And these cast members still go through common life conflicts within their families, friendships, and relationships just as viewers do, thus viewers still have the potential to relate to them in some capacity.

various media outlets offer students access to more perspectives and interpretations, but D'Olimpio urges us to tread lightly, as with so many voices on these multimedia platforms, we must avoid being wrongly swayed by misinformation or insular interpretations. She advises us to practice critical perspectivism³² with our students and teach them to act as moral agents when engaging with this technological world in which they will be inevitably infused. "Even as the mediums alter in ways we could not hope to foresee or imagine, people will be able to ask not just 'what', 'how', and 'where', but also 'why'" (D'Olimpio 2018, pg 7). We want the compassion we cultivate in the classroom to translate to this technological world, thus, using reality TV as our narrative medium can essentially kill two birds with one stone, i.e. cultivate compassion in our real world and our online world.

And of course, as Rahoi-Gilchrest (2018) points out "the best-engaged students are those who are given a diverse range of ways to explore communication" (2018, pg 90) which circles us back to our first advantage of engaging with reality TV—and perhaps the other supplementary technological media—in the classroom, i.e. it sustains the attention of the tech-obsessed student.

Criteria for Narrative Imagination Through the TV Screen

As John Dewey (1934) stated, popular art or low brow art does not get as much attention in the academic sphere as it is seen as cheap or senseless despite its popularity with the general public. "Popular arts must have flourished, but they obtained no literary attention. They were not worthy of mention in theoretical discussion. Probably they were not even thought of as arts" (1934, pg 191). He attempts to break this narrative that popular arts are not worthy of serious study by not paying attention to the art itself, but the aesthetic experience it brings to its audience. This aesthetic experience brings feelings of joy and meaningfulness which I believe is required to experience Nussbaum's narrative imagination. But, there are some reality TV shows that are more suited to nurture narrative imagination than others.

There are various types of reality TV shows such as dating (*Love is Blind*, *The Bachelor*), competition (*Big Brother*, *Survivor*), career (*Cops*, *Miami Ink*), transformation (*Queer Eye*, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*), social experiment (*Wife Swap*, *What Would You Do?*), game show (*Family Feud*, *Wheel of Fortune*), docusoap (*Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *The Real Housewives* franchise), and more. And though we could perhaps work with any of these types of reality TV shows to some extent, I will highlight three TV show criteria I believe are most favorable for experiencing narrative imagination: resembles the everyday, cultivates emotional responses and attachments, and explores multiple facets of life.

³²D'Olimpio defines critical perspectivism as: "an attitude that supports a practise of being morally engaged in the world by processing and understanding information received from mass-produced and distributed media sources in a critical and compassionate manner" (2018, pg 35)

Resembles the Everyday

By viewing a show that resembles everyday life, students can more easily understand the character's positions as they are more likely to have been in that situation or be in that position in the future. So, shows like *The Bachelor* or *Big Brother* would not be optimal choices. Yes, I believe we can definitely pull out some compelling and relatable moral lessons from these shows—and they do allow students to connect to the cast members over a whole season—but the set up of the show itself is too manipulated and “game-esque”. These shows can best be compared to bizarre thought experiments typically found in philosophy classes. If we take *The Bachelor* for example, it is very unlikely that outside of a reality TV show a student would be competing against twenty women for a bachelor's hand in marriage—and a bachelor they have only known for a few weeks at that.

Another thing to note is not only should the reality TV show resemble the everyday, but specifically the everyday of everyday *people*. Shows like *The Real Housewives* franchise and *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* depict people's day-to-day lives, but the cast members featured on these shows are unbelievably wealthy and live outrageously luxurious lifestyles, and therefore, are not as relatable to the average viewer. But, even shows that are supposed to be about “people like us” such as *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *The Crocodile Hunter* are not really people like us. Perhaps these cast members do not live exuberant lifestyles, but we still would not consider them representations of the general population. Alice Hall's (2007) survey notes how avid reality TV viewers did not see these types of shows as truly depicting “reality”; one participant said this to say about *The Crocodile Hunter* star, Steve Irwin wrangling a crocodile with his bare hands: “It's not really reality. He's the only guy that could really do that” (2007, pg 100). Hall emphasizes these participants recognize these reality TV shows as real in the sense that they are accurate portrayals of events, but not real in the sense of representing common reality. Thus, we need a show that captures the day-to-day life of a typical human in society. In this way, students are not only more likely to find relatability to the ethical dilemmas they witness on TV, but potentially have encountered them before or will encounter in the future.

Cultivates Emotional Responses and Attachments

You only have typically one and a half to two hours to get to know characters in a movie and maybe a few more hours in a novel, whereas television shows offer us multiple seasons across multiple episodes to get to know the characters and plots. Since we have longer screen time with the characters, we are likely to form deeper connections with them. Thus, the second criteria of a good reality TV for the ethics class is one where we get to know the characters across multiple episodes and seasons, or at least have the opportunity to witness these cast members in their most intimate and “human” moments. In this way, we are more likely to cultivate stronger emotional attachments to cast members. So, game shows and most transformation shows, like *Wheel of Fortune*, *House Hunters*, and *Bar*

*Rescue*³³, where you only meet the cast members for one episode do not allow the viewer to develop strong ties to them—or at least, as strong of ties compared to cast members who we have seen many episodes of or have witnessed undergoing typical human struggles. The stronger the emotional bond we can form with the cast members we watch, the more rich narrative imagination we can experience.

A lot of these shows fail to reach the level of vulnerability required for audiences to connect with the cast and their story. Witnessing someone else's vulnerabilities and tragedies helps us sculpt a more human-esque view of them. This has an even larger impact when we are witnessing such tragedies happen to cast members who we have grown fond of across many episodes or seasons. Sure, there may be a moment in a game show where a contestant tears up about how this \$30,000 will pay her medical bills, but there is still not enough time to develop a real connection with these contestants. Watching people who we have developed a strong connection with—albeit a parasocial connection—go through such tragedies is similar to reading the character's tragedies in the classic novels Nussbaum discusses, but perhaps, we could feel an even stronger connection to witnessing a real-life event happen to a real person rather than reading about a fictional tragedy happen to a fictional character as Neil Postman (2010) claims.

Unfortunately, we are most likely not going to watch a whole season of a reality TV show in one class, so this may hinder our ability to form as deep of a connection with the cast. However, I believe watching even just a couple intense, emotional scenes could perhaps do the job, thus we may not need to get too invested in the show's entirety to cultivate enough compassion for narrative imagination. Additionally, the medium itself is entertaining enough and can encourage students to explore the rest of the series in their free time if they so please.

Explores Multiple Facets of Life

There are several shows that simulate everyday life and feature cast members who we can grow attached to across a myriad of episodes and witness them undergo their most human moments, but they still do not meet the third criteria since they only feature one facet of life. Take a show like *90 Day Fiancé*³⁴. This show features long-distance couples on opposite ends of the world who have recently applied to the K-1 visa. The show follows their lives as the couples endure the trials and tribulations of living with their new fiancé. Though *90 Day Fiancé* focuses on real-life events, and is not manipulated in a “game-esque” style, it mostly focuses on the couples themselves and how the world orients itself to them as a couple. There are a decent amount of familial and friendship conflicts in *90 Day Fiancé*, but those conflicts center around how the family and friends think about the partner and/or the engagement. By limiting itself to only one aspect of life, i.e. romantic relationships, this show would not

³³Brant, I found a way to include *Bar Rescue* in my thesis, you're welcome.

³⁴Shoutout to Alex Feldt for introducing me to *90 Day Fiancé*.

be the best all-encompassing representation of the multifacetedness of human life, thus we should choose a show that explores friendships, family, and professional life as well.

Thus, the best kind of reality television show to study in the ethics classroom is one that does not feature a game-esque style or an environment similar to a glorified thought experiment, allows the students to connect with the cast members for an extended period across many episodes/seasons in order to cultivate proper empathy or depicts human tragedy of some sort, and features conflicts and situations across various aspects of one's life. I believe a reality TV show that best demonstrates these three criteria, and thus is one of the best candidates for Nussbaum's narrative imagination, is Bravo's *Vanderpump Rules*.

SECTION THREE

ADDRESSING ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN VANDERPUMP RULES

In this section, I will first introduce Bravo's *Vanderpump Rules* (*VPR*) and its social significance. Second, I will highlight four rules of thumb educators should set in the classroom in order to prime their students with the correct attitudes and judgments to analyze and reflect on the clips from *VPR*. Third, I will discuss one or two ethical dilemmas from *VPR* in each of the four life domains i.e. family, friendship, romantic relationships, and profession, coupled with a philosophical concept and specified ethical problem, i.e. Confucian filial piety + obligations to parents; Aristotle's friendships of virtue + confidentiality and loyalty; feminist contractarianism + infidelity and intimate domestic abuse; and care ethics + balancing personal interest and well-being with professional responsibilities, respectively. I will explain why addressing these particular dilemmas is important for undergraduate students at this stage in their lives, i.e. they are most likely to encounter these issues, and additionally, do so at a level of depth and newness like never before. The exploration into the nuances of these dilemmas not only encourage compassion cultivation but also the development of critical thinking skills. I will present these ethical dilemmas through conversation transcriptions and inspired-by-real-life hypothetical scenarios. Additionally, I will briefly list alternative ethical dilemmas from *VPR* for each domain as well as potential correlating philosophical texts to complement each unit.

What is *Vanderpump Rules*?

The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills spinoff, *Vanderpump Rules* (*VPR*), first aired on Bravo in 2013. The show stars socialite and restaurateur, Lisa Vanderpump and the staff at her West Hollywood restaurant and lounge, SUR. Viewers witness the lives of the struggling bartenders, hostesses, and "SURvers" as they juggle their professional obligations with their personal lives all while trying to make it big in the entertainment industry as models, actors, and singers. Viewers watch the *VPR* gang's various parties, vacations, marriages, and career successes along with the more-than-occasional binge-drinking, cheating, break-ups, divorces, friendship betrayals, fist fights, and screaming matches, and just a few occasions of them actually working. Their intermingled and tumultuous relationships with each other—combined with some heavy doses of alcohol—leads to some drama and hijinks which draw viewers to their TVs every Wednesday night.

As the show became more successful, the cast members were able to graduate from their jobs at SUR to pursue their own business ventures as restaurant owners, podcast hosts, entrepreneurs, and also grow their families and become parents. The once financially-struggling cast living in cheap, rugged apartments in West Hollywood were now living in luxurious houses and condos in the Valley with

pools and assistants³⁵. Though the modest living was lost in the later seasons, the viewers got to witness a new version of the cast as their success from the show has taken off.

What started off as just another *Real Housewives* spin off has become the most watched cable TV show in 2023 within the 18 - 49 age demographic after the premiere of the Season 10 reunion³⁶. Though *VPR* has had steadily inclined viewership throughout its run, the infamous #Scandoval incident in March 2023 was what really boosted their recent viewership stats. Tom Sandoval, an original cast mate and boyfriend of Ariana Madix of nine years, had been having an affair with another castmate's ex-fiance and Ariana's best friend, Rachel Leviss³⁷. The affair lasted for seven months until during Sandoval's concert on March 1st, 2023, Ariana discovered a risqué Facetime screen recording of the two. Within a couple of days, the story was out to the public, only three weeks before filming the Season 10 reunion special.³⁸

A record-breaking 4.6 million viewers tuned into watch the recently exposed affair unfold on the uncensored part one of the *VPR* Season 10 reunion³⁹ making it Bravo's most-watched episode of all time.⁴⁰ The reunion special was blowing up as #TeamAriana was trending across all social media

³⁵This feature somewhat goes against my first TV show criteria in the previous section, so if we want to emphasize that first criteria, the early seasons of *VPR* are more reflective of the average viewer's everyday life. Still—as I said previously—even if reality TV does not fit all the criteria, it does not mean we cannot cultivate compassion. I do believe though grounding the show in some kind of relatability could be more optimal.

³⁶Rice, L. (2023, June 16). 'Vanderpump Rules' becomes ratings juggernaut; most watched cable series in 18-49 demo. *Deadline*.
<https://deadline.com/2023/06/vanderpump-rules-ratings-most-watched-cable-series-in-18-49-demo-2023-1235419009/>

³⁷During her time on *VPR*, Rachel Leviss went by "Raquel", but after she left the show, she chose to be called by her birth name "Rachel". I will refer to her as "Rachel" throughout this thesis.

³⁸Carpentier, M., Vilensky, S., & Ergas, T. (2023, November 9). Tom Sandoval and Ariana Madix's relationship timeline. *Bravo TV Official Site*.
<https://www.bravotv.com/the-daily-dish/tom-sandoval-ariana-madix-relationship-history-vanderpump-rules#:~:text=Ariana%20explained%20to%20her%20friends,recording%20of%20the%20on%20FaceTime.>

³⁹Hailu, S. (2023a, June 16). *Thanks to #Scandoval, 'Vanderpump Rules' season 10 hits 11.4 million viewers*. Variety.com.
<https://variety.com/2023/tv/news/vanderpump-ratings-scandoval-season-10-viewers-1235646782/>

⁴⁰Campione, K. (2024, February 9). 'Vanderpump Rules' Season 10 Reunion Part 1 Becomes Bravo's Most-Watched Episode Of All Time As Network Touts Top-Rated 2023. *Deadline*.

platforms, and many audiences who previously did not know what *VPR* was, shortly became invested in the show's drama further skyrocketing the show's popularity. Viewers waited patiently for the Season 11 premiere in January 2024 which began filming three months after #Scandoval.

Besides its current social relevance, *VPR* allows us to get up close and personal into the lives of the SUR staff, forming judgments about and developing an affinity towards the cast. Even if we develop a fondness towards the cast, it is hard to excuse their various wrongdoings depicted on the show. But, these wrongdoings do give students a myriad of ethical dilemmas to explore in their ethics courses. And though by Season 8, most of the original cast does not even work at SUR anymore as *VPR* depicts how they have moved on to other endeavors and flourished from their once modest lifestyles, their core issues are more or less still grounded in the common human experience. Students can get a better sense of who these cast members are as they watch them navigate ethical dilemmas across all facets of life. Though some of the *VPR* cast have some truly horrendous behaviors and attitudes, students can also recognize that they have the same desires and fears as they do, allowing them to see the more human side of these kooky characters.

I believe in order to create a democratic society like Nussbaum advocates for, we must start at the interpersonal level, thus we should entertain ethical dilemmas with our students that involve the people closest to them like their romantic partners, family members, friends, and colleagues. Thus, I believe entertaining ethical dilemmas featured in *VPR* that tackles each of these domains allows students to grow compassion for others in the realms of life that are most relevant and meaningful.

Priming the Correct Attitudes

When we only see a brief clip of an altercation, it may be easy for us to pick sides and point fingers, and perhaps often disregard empathy and make quick assumptions without knowing the entire story. This is especially true if the egregious behavior we are witnessing is the only exposure we have had of these people. Reality TV has the power to observe and analyze these cast's origin stories, their interactions with others, their raw emotions and desires, and in turn, allow us to develop a sense of who they are and how they have created this life for themselves. Additionally, it perhaps encourages our voyeuristic tendencies as we indulge in the typically unseen parts of another's life. When we have access to the behind-the-scenes of someone's life—particularly their hardships—we are likely to find a little bit of ourselves within their situation which makes it easier to empathize with them. Of course, if we already decide we do not like a cast member, it may be difficult for us to empathize with their hardships as we have already formed negative characterizations of them (Camp 2017). But in the same way, after

<https://deadline.com/2024/02/vanderpump-rules-season-10-bravo-viewership-records-2023-1235819844/>

forming an idea of who a person is through watching the show and developing an affinity towards them, it perhaps is easier for us to understand and empathize with them when they act immorally.

When introducing *VPR*, or any kind of narrative art in the ethics classroom, we must prime our students with the right kind of attitudes in order to cultivate compassion and exercise critical judgment. Here are some general rules to remind ourselves and our students when critically examining these ethical dilemmas:

1. Identify the relevant factors that could influence one's behavior.

Before immediately forming a judgment about someone, we should teach our students to acknowledge and ponder the relevant factors that could be influencing their behavior. There are typically many relevant factors, but the catalyst for most of the immoral behaviors on *VPR* is alcohol consumption. We know that the consumption of alcohol can alter one's behaviors, and a lot of times, in a more damaging manner than they otherwise would (Steele & Southwick 1995). Again, we do not want to simply excuse immoral behavior simply because one was wasted, however, it may be easier for us to understand what transpired such behavior when we understand other factors such as mixing with drugs and alcohol (which is frequent not only in *VPR*, but in our everyday lives⁴¹). It can also be a great lesson for students to learn about what happens when we consume too much alcohol and be aware of the person we and others become when we drink because college may be many students' first time being exposed to heavy alcohol consumption, or at least perhaps their first time drinking themselves.

Of course, there are a number of other factors that can influence such immoral behavior such as family trauma, stress, bad news, addictions, psychological conditions, etc. By being aware of these factors, students are better suited to be more compassionate towards people who may act out in such ways. We can reflect on times when our bad mood or poor mental state influenced our outlandish behaviors; perhaps we normally would not have acted in such a manner under normal circumstances. But, if we do not engage in that kind of self-reflection, then it will be harder for us to empathize with others in similar conditions. But, that also leads us to our next general rule.

2. Do not simply excuse immoral behavior, but practice understanding it.

VPR presents a lot of misbehavior by the cast mates and we would not want the students to confuse cultivating compassion with simply excusing such inappropriate behavior. The last thing we

⁴¹National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). (2022). *Alcohol and young adults ages 18 to 25*. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA).
<https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohols-effects-health/alcohol-topics/alcohol-facts-and-statistics/alcohol-and-young-adults-ages-18-25>

want our students to take away from this course is the belief that we should enable mistreatment from the people in their lives because they were drunk or had a rough day, especially if the behavior, action, or words in question are abusive or traumatizing.

We should not teach students to *excuse* immoral behavior, but we should teach them to *understand* the behavior, which I believe is an important attitude to adopt not only when watching a show like *VPR*, but when dealing with people in our own lives. Students must learn these behaviors are wrong and should not be tolerated, and if someone in their life is conducting themselves in this manner, it needs to be addressed. But, of course, it should be addressed in a compassionate manner that does acknowledge the relevant factors that influenced the behavior, and in this way, perhaps we can find the “human” within these monstrous characters.

3. Recognize that immoral actions rarely solve the underlying core issue.

Of course, committing immoral acts negatively harms the people involved, but students must understand that it does more than that. Committing these immoral acts, particularly infidelity or using cruel language, put the spotlight on the immoral act instead of addressing the underlying problem of perhaps why it was committed in the first place. For example, when people cheat on their partners, many times it is because there is something missing in their current relationship.⁴² But, instead of addressing these concerns with their partners, they instead resort to the coward’s way out. Because they did not address this problem directly and instead committed this act of infidelity, the original underlying problem in the relationship tends to go unaddressed because the partner replaced it with a more significant problem. Similarly, if we use cruel language when expressing our needs and concerns with someone, the problem then becomes about the use of cruel language as the original problem looks trivial in comparison to the egregious words and tone.

In order for our needs and concerns to be properly addressed—or at least have the potential to, it is imperative for students to recognize that we must communicate in a way that is compassionate and clear, and to warn them not to resort to cowardly acts of betrayal or harsh language as our problems will then be more likely to be overlooked.

4. Catch the immoral behaviors in themselves and others.

The most important general principle we must consider is taking the scenarios we witnessed from *VPR* and recognizing similar behaviors in ourselves and the others in our lives. If we have grown up with cruel or abusive behavior from others, then we may easily perceive that behavior as normal, and

⁴²*Cheaters on cheating*. (2024, July 3). Superdrug Online Doctor.

<https://onlinedoctor.superdrug.com/cheaters-on-cheating.html>

maybe not just normal, but how we are *supposed* to behave. Thus, it is crucial to know when a behavior is wrong, how this behavior affects those around them, and why it should not be tolerated.

Sometimes, it is tough to catch immoral behavior because people can be sneaky or manipulative. These people can disguise their mistreatment towards others as charm or charisma. These charmers then cast a spell on us to believe they are not doing anything wrong, or even, make us believe that *we* did something wrong. This type of manipulation stops us from noticing the potentially harmful relationships in our lives. Or, even if we have noticed abusive behavior, many people still do not recognize the relationship itself as harmful or abusive, or at the least, one that is not worth preserving.⁴³

We ourselves could also be prone to manipulative or abusive behavior without even realizing it. Or, perhaps we know our words and behaviors have hurt someone, but not understand to the extent in which it has hurt them. This is why it is so important to demonstrate how these harmful behaviors negatively impact others. We must not only reprimand such behaviors but teach our students that this behavior is not okay and should not be tolerated. Ideally, we would want students to get in the practice of thinking about how their behaviors or words can affect others, and also, reflect on how other people's words and behaviors affect them. And if other's behaviors are unhealthy or abusive, students must learn to not tolerate behaviors, but of course, fostering the courage to confront the person or leave the relationship is easier said than done.

By reminding our students of these four principles as they analyze *VPR*, they are better equipped for proper critical analysis, compassion cultivation, and self-reflection. I will implement these principles throughout our discussion of *VPR*. I will explore the four main domains of life—family, friendships, romantic relationships, and profession—along with a correlating philosophical concept and ethical dilemma from *VPR*.

Family

Out of the four, family is the least represented domain on *VPR*. Only occasionally do we see the cast's parents and siblings, but these few interactions still give us plenty of opportunities to analyze the cast's family dynamics and are worth entertaining in the classroom. Family is arguably the most foundational facet of life, thus it is crucial we study it. This is the best domain to discuss first since how we were raised greatly impacts how we approach the situations we come across in the other domains of life. In this unit, I want to focus on our obligations to our parents, and pair it with a discussion on Confucian filial piety. I have transcribed two conversations from *VPR* to demonstrate how to start a

⁴³Harvey-Jenner, C. (n.d.). A shocking number of young women are in abusive relationships - but many don't know the signs. *Cosmopolitan*.

<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/reports/a20072270/domestic-abuse-relationships-cosmopolitan-uk-womens-aid-research/>

discussion with our students about what kind of obligations we should or should not have to our parents, specifically ones who probably do not deserve it.

At the start of college, students' relationships with their family will develop in interesting ways. For many students, this is the first time they are living independently without needing to abide by the rules of their parents. Without being under parental watch perhaps opens the door for students to explore a new side of themselves and try new things, which may lead to revelations about their relationship with their parents. Students may realize the less favorable qualities of their parents that they did not notice during childhood as perhaps their new found freedom has made them realize how their parents held them back in some way or negatively impacted another aspect of themselves. They may realize how their parents shaped their own judgment and beliefs about life, and now they must decide whether to keep those judgments and beliefs or create new ones.

Many students will also become parents themselves, if they are not already. Students may perceive their own parents' bad parenting as normal—or more significantly, how it is supposed to be done—and perhaps will parent the same way⁴⁴ unknowingly seeing the issue with it. Some of the ways our parents raised us are not normal or healthy, but if that is the only parenting we experienced, and we never took the time to reflect on or talk through it with others, then we will most likely produce similar wrong behaviors without understanding their negative consequences. This is why it is important to self-reflect on one's upbringing and to digest and analyze the effects it had on us. Additionally, it is important to indulge in these reflections with others in order to gain new perspectives we would otherwise not consider.

Even if we had a great family life, discussing the tragic parts of other family lives gives us the opportunity to better understand and cultivate compassion for those who were not so lucky. If students grew up with loving and supportive parents, they may have a harder time understanding people who grew up with not-so loving and supportive parents. Our upbringing significantly shapes who we are and what we believe. Thus, it is important to teach students to be conscious of others' potential family issues—or life issues in general—and in this way, they are better suited to cultivating compassion for others.

Confucian Filial Piety

The philosophical concept I would pair with this unit is Confucian filial piety. Confucianism emphasizes the desire for cultivating relationships and a mutual respect for one another in order to maintain a sense of harmony. Yet our deepest—and thus more satisfying, relationships—are more susceptible to conflict, and the destruction of these deep relationships can have a negative impact on our well-being and relational identity. Filial piety, or xiao, is the attitude of loving and respecting one's

⁴⁴Minkin, R., & Horowitz, J. (2022). Parenting in America today. In *Pew Research Center*. Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/01/24/parenting-in-america-today/>

parents and elders under the guidance of Confucianism. Confucius believed that our parents must come first because family is the foundation of the development of moral concern for others outside of it. He states in *The Analects*: “In serving your parents you may gently remonstrate with them. However, once it becomes apparent that they have not taken your criticism to heart you should be respectful and not oppose them, and follow their lead diligently without resentment” (4.18, Ivanhoe).⁴⁵

I feel—at least in my experience—Chinese philosophy does not get discussed much in ethics classes, perhaps particularly the introductory class. But, I think the ideas of Confucius address very interpersonal issues that are not only easy to digest for introductory students, but easy to relate to and converse. And I believe Confucius’ filial piety is an excellent philosophical concept to integrate into our discussion about our obligations to our parents, particularly those who perhaps do not deserve it.

If our parents dedicated their lives to take care of us, when we become adults ourselves we may feel obligated to support them financially, share our secrets, spend time with them, care for them in their old age, etc. But, even if they were good parents, do we still even have these obligations? Even if students have great parents, there is still an interesting discussion about the extent of our obligations to our parents as adults. And if our parents mistreated us—but perhaps did *at least* provide us with the necessary means to survive—do we still have to fulfill these obligations simply because they are our parents? Here are some potential ethical questions we could propose to our students about filial piety and our obligations for our parents:

- ❖ After leaving home, do we have any obligations to our parents?
- ❖ Is it okay for us to break ties with our lousy parents even when they need us?
- ❖ Are we obligated to financially support our parents who did not prepare well for their retirement?
- ❖ Are our parents entitled to relationships with our children?
- ❖ Should we put our lives on hold to take care of our elderly parents?
- ❖ How should we confront our parents with the problems we have with them?

For this unit, I will be discussing two scenes from *VPR* that involve James’ mom, Jacqueline and Stassi’s mom, Dayna. Jacqueline is asking James for financial support and Dayna is asking Stassi for love and affection, but perhaps these mothers do deserve what they are asking from their adult children. After discussing Confucian filial piety and analyzing the scenes with Stassi’s mom, Dayna, and James’ mom, Jacqueline, students can ponder these self-reflective question:

- ❖ In what ways do you think your parents influenced who you are today?
- ❖ In what ways did your upbringing teach you what good or bad parenting is?

⁴⁵Most translations of the *Analects* articulate this similar message, however Legge (1971) and Huang (2013) adopt a more ambiguous interpretation stating that he perhaps can stick to our beliefs contrary to our parents as long as we do so respectfully.

- ❖ Has there been a time where you feel you could not express your feelings and wants to your parents? Why do you think that was?
- ❖ How much do you believe we can blame someone's upbringing for their immoral behaviors?
- ❖ In what ways are your parents similar or different from Stassi's and James' moms?
- ❖ How would you feel if you were in Stassi or James's position? What would you do?
- ❖ How would you feel about practicing Confucius' filial piety with your parents?
- ❖ How do you think Confucius would respond to these two situations?

Stassi's Mom

Though *VPR*'s cardinal character Stassi sports the stereotypical mean girl archetype, she woos audiences with her bluntness and charming sense of humor. Still, despite her charisma, audiences still criticize the questionable actions she commits and seething insults she spews. We watch how Stassi can be overly dramatic and attention-craving at times, particularly on her infamous birthday trips. We can tell she adopts a more domineering energy in the group. The Stassi line that arguably best encapsulates this domineering, mean girl-esque energy comes from the very first episode in her confessional where she says: "When new people come in, if I don't like them, I try to make them quit. Seriously. I have made girls quit just by being mean to them."

We do feel sorry for Stassi after seeing how hurt she was when her co-star and best friend of three years, Kristen, had sex twice with her ex-boyfriend, Jax in Season 2. And though, yes, we can still feel sympathy for her after this incident, but our sympathy does not shape our understanding of who Stassi is—or who she became—better than analyzing her interactions with her mother. If these small clips of her interaction with her mother Dayna are exemplary representations of Stassi's upbringing, then perhaps we can make sense of her attention-seeking behavior.

In Season 7, Episode 6, Stassi, Katie, and Kristen go on a dinner date with their moms to celebrate Kristen's relaunch of her t-shirt brand.⁴⁶ Before entering the restaurant, Stassi's mom Dayna says to Stassi's best friend Kristen, "I hope my daughter grows up to be *half* the woman you are". At the dinner, all is well as the girls and moms cheers to Kristen's successful launch until Kristen asks Dayna about the conversation she had with Beau, Stassi's boyfriend, at the launch party earlier.⁴⁷ Dayna briefly discusses their conversation and then starts explaining how she hopes Stassi does not bring her "emotional baggage" into this new relationship. Kristen remarks "It's unfortunate Stassi has a ton of

⁴⁶Bravo. (2019, January 16). *Stassi & her mom make the night awkward | Vanderpump rules | Bravo* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NonFJMTQPG4>

⁴⁷Earlier at Kristen's launch party, Dayna said to Stassi when talking to her and Beau "I don't want you to, you know, be yourself and mess it up", referring to Stassi and Beau's relationship. She followed up that comment with "He's up here, and you're down here."

baggage.” Stassi—clearly uncomfortable hearing her mother and best friend bad mouthing her at dinner—attempts to express her frustrations and defend herself⁴⁸:

STASSI: >I feel like you don’t < listen to me tru:ly-like when I say things. Like, you’re not[N:Q

DAYNA: [I feel like you always ()=

STASSI: I’m getting annoyed, I’m getting ann↑oyed

DAYNA: (I feel like you don’t) listen to m:e=

STASSI:=I’m getting really annoyed. (.) Just like last night when Beau go:es “S:o she has some of these iss↑ues because of her ex-boyfriends, and you go “N:::o ((shakes head)) she’s alw::ays been like this.”

You just contradict yourself 24/7! ((Dayna gets teary-eyed))

KRISTEN’S MOM: She lo::ves you

STASSI: But <I lo:ve her too!>

KATIE’S MOM: You guys will understand when you be↑come mo:thers

KRISTEN: Just don’t talk to her like you talk to u::s. Don’t do th↑at

When Stassi attempts to express to her how her mother’s words make her feel, Dayna blames her behavior on menopause instead of actually listening or apologizing. It appears Dayna—and perhaps the others at the table—believe these “insults” are simply motherly concerns. Even if that is the case, Dayna does not try to see it from Stassi’s perspective or attempt to reflect on how her words affect Stassi. Instead, Dayna starts tearing up when Stassi expresses her feelings. And even after all that, Kristen and Dayna *still* continue to poke fun at Stassi:

KRISTEN: ((scrunches hands and face)) She’s stu:ck in her b*tchy place and I ha:te it, and it’s making me mad

DAYNA: ↑Can we photograph th:at face th:at=

KRISTEN:=That no (sh*t)

DAYNA:=But it’s this like, look ((scrunches face to mock Stassi))

STASSI: ((inaudible stammering)) >I-I-I-<put my hands up ((puts hands in defense)) ri:ght n:ow and I’:m just gonna sit=

KRISTEN:=>I just don’t get babied so I can’t baby people< ((Stassi’s mom lovingly leans in close to Kristen)) No one f*cking babies me ((Krisen shakes head, Kristen’s mom shrugs))

STASSI: ↑KRI:STEN, what do I ↓d::o then when you ↑come to me with things?=
KRISTEN: =>°I just don’t come to you that often°<

STASSI: Listen to what you just sa:id! ((points to Katie then points to herself))=

KRISTEN: =But you’re [gonna ca:lm down tomorrow and >you’re gonna feel diff↑erently<] just like on your birthday

⁴⁸The Jefferson Transcription System was used to transcribe all the conversations in this thesis.

STASSI: [You:'re making it worse]
 KATIE: Stop it Kristen, Kristen n:o don't=
 STASSI: =>You brought this ↑u:p<
 KRISTEN: =>You're just in a really bad mood, and I won't ↑ta:lk about anything [with you right
 ↑now] until you ca:lm do:wn<
 STASSI: [Well you just made it ↑worse!]
 KRISTEN: ((buries face in hands, rub hands down face)) This is s:o inten::se right now
 STASSI: Oh, oh so it's okay to, like, come at me, but once it gets directed at [↑you?] ((swapping arm
 gesture towards Kristen))
 DAYNA: ((scrunches eyes, rubs face)) [Jes::us]
 STASSI: Then it's too intense and you [wanna go aw↑ay?]
 KRISTEN: [N:o, I take sh*t all the [tim::e]
 STASSI: [Cm↓o::n (.) ↑Kristen.
 DAYNA: ↑CAN EVERYBODY STOP BEING SELFISH AND THI↑NKG ABOUT
THEM:SELVES, AND JUST THI:NK ABOUT THE FACT TH:AT WE ARE ALL
 TOGET↑HE:R? ((smiling, interchanges between pointing at herself and each individual person at the
 table))
 KATIE: I kn↑ow, I'm just trying to (understand)=
 DAYNA: =NO I'M NOT TRYING TO BE A BU↑LLY, [BUT I'M JUST-NO-
 STASSI: [I'm sorry Mom-I just have to feel my feelings [and I can't just-
 DAYNA: [OKAY, WELL CAN YOU FEEL THEM ↑LATER!=
 STASSI: =No, I'm not like that (1.5) because this is-
 ((Dayna gets up from the table and walks away, Stassi sighs))

And before Stassi can finish expressing her feelings about the situation—thus allowing her to feel heard and the opportunity to defend herself after her best friend and mother made unnecessary and insulting comments about her—her mother gets up and leaves the table before she can vent her feelings like everyone else got to do. After Dayna leaves the room, this is what unfolds:

KRISTEN: Se:e (.) It's not okay
 KRISTEN'S MOM: All right, you know what, I'll be back
 KRISTEN: Okay.
 ((Kristen and Katie's mom go check on Dayna))
 STASSI: ((sighs into hand)) This happens every f*cking time <I don't even wanna eat> I- I- I just-I':m
 s:o just-
 [cut to Dayna and the moms on another side of the restaurant. The moms hold Dayna as she sobs
 loudly]

KRISTEN'S MOM: ((hugging sobbing Dayna)) Shh (1.5) It's oh-I know. I'm hurting cause you're hurting

[cuts back to Stassi, Katie, and Kristen]

KATIE: You can't just ignore it. You have to be [responsive.

STASSI: [I do::n't! >We fight every-I-I< fight with her all the time ((hands up))

[cut to Dayna and the moms]

DAYNA: ((sobbing)) I feel like an ↑outsider in her li::fe= ((wiping tears away))

KATIE'S MOM: =I know it's hard

[cut to Stassi, Katie, and Kristen]

KATIE: You have to find a way that your mom feels special and she has a place in your life

[cut to Dayna and the moms]

DAYNA: ((sobbing))((hugging herself)) <I just need her to ho::ld me and te::ll me that she lo:ves me!>

KRISTEN'S MOM: (.) It's okay ((moms group hug))

[cut to Stassi, Katie, and Kristen]

STASSI: Of course, I love my mom so much=

KATIE: =>I know, I know, I know<

[cut to Dayna and the moms]

DAYNA: <But I ↑LO::VE her!> ((sobbing, looking up at the ceiling, hands up))

KRISTEN'S MOM: Of course you ↑d::o

[cut to Stassi, Katie, and Kristen, Kristen is wiping Stassi's tears from her face]

STASSI: ((sniffles)) I wanna go home

The episode cuts to Stassi's confessional as a reflective Stassi explains: "Sometimes I get this victim mentality, and have these, like, freak-outs the same way my mom does. And I'm scared one day, that's gonna be me."

The most significant takeaway from this scene is watching Stassi's reaction to her own mother and best friends insulting and poking fun at her, and their reactions when Stassi attempts to express how she feels about two of the closest people in her life insulting and embarrassing her at dinner. Kristen and Dayna both conveniently become "too overwhelmed" to participate in the conversation anymore. Dayna goes as far as walking off to sob in another section of the restaurant. And of course, the other mothers follow, thus pulling all the attention on Dayna while Stassi appears to be the villain that made her mother cry. Dayna's sobbing request for her daughter to hold her is baffling given the fact that minutes before she was just poking fun at her. We even see Katie tell Stassi to do something to make her mom feel special, which if one was raised by a seemingly attention-seeking narcissist, that may be frustrating to hear.

This scene reveals Stassi as not simply a stereotypical mean girl, but a human being with wants and needs that she is desperate to communicate. This small interaction with her mother—along with

another appalling one earlier in the episode with Stassi's boyfriend⁴⁹—gives students an idea of what it is like dealing with a narcissistic parent and how it affects the child. We can feel Stassi's frustration through the screen. And, even if a student was not raised by a narcissistic parent themselves, by watching these scenes from *VPR* and engaging in conversation about them, perhaps it can lead students to understand how childhood shapes who people become as adults.

If we can empathize with Stassi—someone who has committed numerous acts of cruelty and exemplifies typical mean girl behavior—then perhaps when we encounter similar behavior of others in our lives, we may be more likely to not *excuse* their behavior, but *understand* it. This will perhaps remind us that we may not know the whole side of the story, that we should not be quick to judge or make assumptions about others.⁵⁰ Of course, we do not know everyone's situation, but we do know that narcissism is on the rise (Twenge et al. 2008). It feels it is almost inevitable that students will come across people with narcissistic tendencies at least once in their life, and thus perhaps they should learn to recognize, navigate, and confront it.

James' Mom

A cast member arguably more controversial than Stassi is James. James comes from a wealthy family. His father, Andros Georgiou, is a music producer who toured with George Michael, who also happens to be James' godfather. His family's relationship with Lisa got him a job at SUR and he made a natural transition into the cast, first appearing as Kristen's "revenge boyfriend" in Season 3. The British nepo baby won over audiences with his wit and sense of humor, but even the biggest James' fans cannot defend the immoral acts he has committed on screen. His most appalling behaviors include getting drunk at work, fat shaming his female co-stars, cheating on his romantic partners multiple times and lying about it, starting fist fights, sending emotional abusive texts, and verbally abusing his girlfriends.

Knowing all this information about James, it can be difficult for us to cultivate compassion towards him when he faces tragedy on *VPR* or back his side during conflict even where he could be in the right. Just as Camp (2017) says, our characterization⁵¹ of a "spoiled, fame-hungry alcoholic" shapes

⁴⁹In the same episode, Dayna belittles Stassi to Stassi's boyfriend Beau. She says to Stassi "you're actually down here and he's up here" and questions why Beau even likes Stassi.

⁵⁰Perhaps we don't think that being raised by Stassi's mother is the sole reason why she became this "mean girl". However—at least I believe—Stassi does deserve to express her frustrations with the people who are close to her regardless. We owe it to each other as human beings to listen to each other's wants and needs. And, if those close to Stassi have a problem with her mean girl behavior, then they should also get to express their feelings to her, but do so in a caring, compassionate manner.

⁵¹Camp defines characterization as "a stereotype or schema, and that a perspective assimilates one's thinking about a particular subject to a more general stereotype" (2017, pg 7).

our characterization of James, a perhaps not-so-seemingly “spoiled, fame-hungry alcoholic”⁵². And though these aspectual thoughts⁵³ can help us understand relevant characteristics and predict future behaviors, Camp warns that our characterizations can also lead us to ignore or reject any facts that do not align with our perceived characterization. So, when we see James being apologetic or friendly, it is harder for us to interpret it as sincere, and perhaps we are bound to believe he is only being apologetic or friendly for selfish ulterior motives.

Watching James’ interactions with his mother, Jacqueline, gives us insight into how his upbringing—along with dealing with his parents’ recent divorce, something a lot of students can relate to⁵⁴—has shaped his behavior. We see how much James’ parents’ divorce negatively impacted his mental health in Season 7. Earlier that year, James’ father left Jacqueline and since then, she has been talking poorly about him to James and asking James for money. It has been rumored that the money James is sending her is going to unnecessary things like Botox⁵⁵ instead using it to take care of his younger brothers. In Season 7 Episode 10, James, his mom Jacqueline, and his girlfriend Rachel⁵⁶ have a conversation in his apartment.⁵⁷ Jacqueline asks James how his therapy session went which leads to James trying to set boundaries with Jacqueline. He has two requests: do not talk poorly about his father to him and inform him on how his money is spent. Here is a transcription of their conversation after Jacqueline asks about his therapy session:

⁵²This can also be said about Stassi. Perhaps, Stassi matches our description of “stereotypical mean girl”, so it may be difficult to cultivate compassion or see any kind gestures as anything more than superficial because of this characterization we have of her. Though, I believe the aforementioned scene with Dayna may be enough to destroy that mean girl characterization of her—at least for a moment.

⁵³Camp defines aspectual thoughts as having “a non-metaphorical term for thought in which one mental representation structures another” (2017, pg 7). Our characterizations are the foundation of our aspectual thoughts.

⁵⁴Bieber, C., JD. (2024, May 30). *Revealing divorce statistics in 2024*. Forbes Advisor.

<https://www.forbes.com/advisor/legal/divorce/divorce-statistics/>

⁵⁵De Wilde, K. (2016, March 29). Kristen Doute Reminds Everyone That James Kennedy’s Mom Stole Her Credit Card To Get Botox. *The Inquisitr*.

<https://www.inquisitr.com/2938549/kristen-doute-reminds-everyone-that-james-kennedys-mom-stole-her-credit-card-to-get-botox>

⁵⁶During her time on *VPR*, James’ girlfriend went by “Raquel”, but after she left she started going by her birth name again, “Rachel”. Since I make references to post her being on the show, to remain consistent, I am referring to her as Rachel.

⁵⁷Bravo. (2019b, February 13). *James Kennedy wants to see his Mother’s Receipts. . .Literally* |

Vanderpump rules | Bravo [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEkf910gQyM>

JAMES: Lots of talking abo:ut (.) <family stuff>, and I just think setting some <↑bound↓aries> (.5)
would be a <good thi::ng> (3) Like, you can't talk to me about dad=
JACQUELINE: =>Okay<= ((quickly nods))
JAMES: No, but you say "okay" but then, like, we=
JACQUELINE: =I wo:n't ((shakes head))
JAMES: When he pisses you off, or something happened, o:r he didn't send you enough money=
JACQUELINE: ((hand gestures up))=↓Pau:se right the:re
JAMES: What?
JACQUELINE: ((hand shake)) He doesn't send me money=
JAMES: =>He doesn't send you money<[I know that
JACQUELINE:[No, let's clarify that]=
JAMES: =He doesn't
JACQUELINE: [E:VER]
JAMES: =[Ever]
JACQUELINE: =E:VER ((hand gestures up, wiping motion, and circles)) Cause that will make my
blood boil (.) He's the ↓one that left me with my three children with F*CK::ING ((slaps hands))
NOTH::ING. ↑He got his own ↑apart:ment, did his ↑thi:ng, went F*CK::ING SCUBA DI↑VING
JAMES: What are you=
JACQUELINE: =<Yes>, I'm bitter ((quick nods))
JAMES: But like you alw:ays do that, you put me in the middle. Do you not see that? and [it's not fa:ir
JACQUELINE: [You're ↑telling me let's create a boundary right?=
JAMES: =That's the fir[st bou:ndary
JACQUELINE:[So let's create it.] Perfect. Done. Second.=
JAMES: =Don't talk to me about Dad. Second th:ing is that, if I am financially helping (.) an:yo:ne, I
want to see ((hand chopping motion)) what I'm doing (1) ↑No mum ↑don't shake your head (.) I'm
sending you two hundred dollars every three days
JACQUELINE: ↑Two hundred dollars every ↑three days? NO.=
JAMES: =>Do you wanna see my Paypal?<
JACQUELINE: (.) Ok↑ay fine, and what do I do with that money? ((points to self)) I've got Dylan. I've
got Harry (.5) Was I a sh*tty mo↑:ther? You went to a £50,000 school A YEAR—right? Gre::at
vacations, Ralph Lauren, Burberry. This is BULLSH*:T. Yo:u took your first steps at f*cking Tiffany's.
I'm not telling you to kiss my a**, I'm saying, 'say thank you, Mum. You did something for me. You're
not a <total b*tch> ((hands move in circular motion))
JAMES: I'm not saying ↑that you're a b*tch=
RACHEL: =Your mom cares about you=
JACQUELINE: That's how you're making me feel ((sips water)) (1) °I feel like a child°
JAMES: No, I feel like the child. And, I ↑am the child=
JACQUELINE: =No, >you are, you are<=

JAMES: =And yo:u need to remember that. When you were first breaking up with dad ((hands chopping motion)) I was in f*cking he:l, and I'm like=
 JACQUELINE: [O::h and I was:n't?=
 JAMES: =No, oh, >but[I'm not saying
 JACQUELINE: [We all were in hell, James,[it was↑n't just the ↓Jam↑es's he↑:ll
 JAMES: [I'm just saying my feelings ((points and smirks))
 JACQUELINE: Don't do that James
 JAMES: ((laughs)) CAUSE YOUR TONE >your ↑to(h)ne, your to↑(h)<=
 JACQUELINE: YES my tone
 JAMES: Alright mum (.) I'm asking fo:r those boundaries
 JACQUELINE: >What? What?<
 JAMES: Don't involve me with dad anymore, and just show me what I'm helping with=
 JACQUELINE: =Perfect. Perfect=
 JAMES: =Because I see it going nowhere, and I see our relationship going downhill again, and I don't want that.
 JACQUELINE: Fine.

This particular situation allows us to ask students about the financial obligations we have to our parents. Now that James is making money as a successful DJ—in addition to being a cast member on *VPR*—he is in a better financial position to support his family, but should he have to? And even though his parents are separated, we may question how this seemingly rich father would still not financially support his children—at least in some capacity. Perhaps, one could assume that Jacqueline is doing just fine financially, but after having a rich and generous husband, she is used to this luxurious lifestyle and desires to maintain it. So, it may appear that she does not “need” the money, she just wants to live in luxury.⁵⁸ Students could argue this assumption alone deems her unworthy of James' money, but more importantly, it is the way she refuses to address her son's needs that perhaps deems her not worthy of not only her son's money but a relationship with him.

Similar to Stassi's situation, James is trying to express a need. That is, he wants to set boundaries with his mother. Though we see James trying to establish boundaries that many would find fair—and the way he is requesting these boundaries is respectful and calm—Jacqueline interprets James

⁵⁸There is another important scene with Jacqueline that demonstrates her “money-hungriness”. In Season 7, Episode 5, Jacqueline approaches Lisa, James' former boss, and attempts to convince her to rehire James after firing him for insulting other female SUR employees. And when that did not work, she got Lisa to hire Jacqueline's other son. Normally, we could interpret this as a kind motherly gesture, but because we have this “characterization” of her—as Camp (2017) would say—as a selfish, money-hungry person, we perhaps are more likely to interpret this as her asking Lisa to rehire James not for James' sake, but so she could get a steady flow of money from her son.

setting boundaries as a criticism of her instead of hearing why he wants to set his boundaries and how her behavior is impacting him. Instead of addressing and sympathizing her son's grievances, she deflects the issue by saying what a great mom she was to James growing up and the bountiful opportunities he had because of her. Perhaps this scene also has the ability to squash assumptions we have about growing up rich, i.e. just because you grew up with money, does not necessarily mean you had a great childhood. Even with all the money in the world, at the end of the day, we are all still humans who experience tragedies and obstacles in life that can disrupt our well-being.

The conversation transcription betrays Jacqueline frequently interrupting James and dismissing his feelings. She believes his feelings are trivial compared to hers since she is the one who was left as a heartbroken single mom where James is making it big in Hollywood. She also notes how James went to expensive private schools and lived a luxurious life growing up, thus she has always been a great mom so there is no reason for him to be upset. She interprets James setting boundaries as calling her a bad mom, but James clearly just desperately wants to salvage the relationships, but it is hard because she does not listen to his needs.

From watching and analyzing these two scenes, I want students to gain an understanding of how much parent's behaviors can shape who we become, and to cultivate compassion for those with lousy parents. Most importantly, I believe students need to understand the importance of listening to people's needs—even if it may hurt to hear. If we do not listen to our loved one's needs and desires, it can damage our relationship with them. Though Stassi and James exhibit abhorrent behavior throughout the show, they are still human beings with wants and needs that go unaddressed and unappreciated by their own parents. Stassi and James are both desperately trying to express how they feel, but both parents take them expressing their feelings as criticisms instead of listening to how their actions are impacting their children.⁵⁹ It is difficult to imagine how one cannot grow up to adopt these attention-seeking behaviors given how it seems perhaps they did not get much attention as children nor were their emotional needs addressed.

Also, we can gain an interesting perspective on filial piety after watching these scenes. Dayna and Jacqueline believe they are entitled to affection and financial support, respectively. Though Confucius may argue that being parents alone is enough to grant them these wishes, students should perhaps rethink the idea that just because someone raised you, does not mean they are entitled to your time, affection, secrets, and money—especially if they are lousy.

⁵⁹This can also be an interesting point of discussion. How can we tell someone our grievances with them if they always take it as a form of criticism? Or, if we ourselves take a loved one's grievances about us as forms of criticism, perhaps we should reflect on why we do this, and how we can overcome our sensitivities to better acknowledge, listen to, and address our loved one's feelings and needs?

As I stated earlier, family dynamics are not featured too often on *VPR*, but here are some other potential family-related problems we could explore from the show:

- ❖ *Sibling Living with You and Your Partner* - Ariana and Jeremy, Season 4
- ❖ *Hearing Gossip About Siblings* - Ariana and Jeremy, Season 6
- ❖ *Partner-Parent Conflict* - Brittany and Sherri, Season 6
- ❖ *Parents Getting Involved in Your Workplace* - James and Jacqueline, Season 7
- ❖ *Alcoholic Parents* - James and Jacqueline, Season 7
- ❖ *Dealing with Loss of a Parent* - Jax, Season 7-8; Lala, Season 7
- ❖ *Introducing Partner to Parents* - Stassi and Dayna, Season 7

And, here are some other supplementary readings about obligations to parents and filial piety that we can assign in the classroom:

- ❖ *What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?* Jane English ~7pgs
- ❖ *Recent Approaches to Confucian Filial Morality*, Hagop Sarkissian ~9pgs
- ❖ *Socrates on the Definition of Piety: Euthyphro 10A–11B* (1971), S. Marc Cohen, ~19pgs
- ❖ *The Problem of Conflict Between Filial Piety and Justice: A Comparative Study of the Views of Confucius and Socrates on the Relation of Father and Son* (2018), Byung Seok Son, ~5 pgs

Friendships

We confide in friends our stories and secrets and trust them not expose them to others. But, on *VPR*, this is not often the case. The friendships on *VPR* are particularly questionable. Viewers frequently watch their friendships collapse and are shocked by their rekindling despite the most egregious of friendship betrayals. For example, as mentioned in the family unit, Kristen cheated on her boyfriend of almost six years, Sandoval, with her best friend Stassi's ex boyfriend and Sandoval's best friend, Jax. Not only did both Jax and Kristen commit the ultimate betrayal, but they lied for the entire season about the incident until the season finale. Fans were shocked when Sandoval and Stassi not only forgave Kristen and Jax but they became friends with them again.⁶⁰⁶¹

⁶⁰Perhaps some may argue that they became friends again for the sake of the show—and perhaps being on the show together, and having no choice to be around each other, often led to rekindling friendships. But, we could argue that even if we stopped being friends with someone, there could still be many circumstances when we are forced to be around them, so this can still be a somewhat natural way of rekindling a friendship.

⁶¹After leaving the show after the Season 3 reunion, it has been speculated that Stassi only made up with Kristen in order to get back onto *VPR*. Either way, there are many times in rekindling friendships where we may only become friends with someone again out of convenience or for other selfish benefits.

Similar to family, our friendships have the potential to shape who we are and what we believe. Except, unlike family, we can choose who our friends are. In this unit, I want to focus on friendship loyalty and confidentiality, and couple this discussion with Aristotle's take on friendships. I present two dilemmas. The first is presented as a not-so-fictional dilemma about friendship confidentiality based on the real-life events from *VPR* and the second is another conversation transcription from *VPR*.

At this time in student lives, students are at an interesting transition when it comes to friendship. Most students are coming into college looking for friends, especially if none of their high school friends are attending the same university. Going to college gives students the opportunity to meet numerous new people across different walks of life. These new college friendships can influence our beliefs and attitudes, and reshape who we are, as it appears that the cultivation of interworldview friendships among undergraduates may be the reason why nearly one third of first-year students change their religious or spiritual self-perceptions (Rockenbach et al. 2019).

First-year undergraduates will also have to test if they can or should maintain the friendships they created in high school, since perhaps the only reason they were friends with them was out of mere convenience. If these were the people in our classes or who lived in our neighborhood, it may make sense to befriend them, and there may not have been many other options. If we were only friends with these classmates out of mere convenience, then we should reflect on if these friendships are worth maintaining when the bounds of homeroom no longer apply. Students may feel they want to hold onto these friendships for nostalgic purposes or familiarity, but perhaps they should accept there is nothing wrong with outgrowing old relationships that no longer serve them.

Aristotle on Friendship

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes three classifications of friendships: pleasure, utility, and virtue. The pleasure, utility, and virtue distinctions represent the reasons we love our friends, i.e. grant us amusement, provide service or convenience, and push us towards human flourishing, respectively. Aristotle argues that friendships of pleasure and utility are more trivial and superficial because the main motivator of their existence is the benefits we can get from them. Once we no longer receive those benefits, the friendship ceases to exist. On the other hand, friendships of virtue are created not solely for a means to some benefit, but because we cherish who our friend is as a person. Friendship of virtue allows each other to become better people together and they can survive when pleasure and utility are not present. It is these types of friendships that cultivate and shape who we are, and thus, are the most important to Aristotle.

Aristotle's virtue theory is commonly featured in the typical introductory ethics class, and his view on ethics shapes his views on friendship. To help students define for themselves what it means to be loyal in a friendship, I believe it is crucial to identify and break down the different stages and

classifications of friendship. According to Aristotle, we should choose friends who exhibit virtuous character. He claimed that a friendship intertwined with injustice is no friendship at all. For example, if our friend is asking us to hide the dead body of the person he has murdered, he is putting us in an unvirtuous position, and thus, not being a true friend. And perhaps, though our friendships of pleasure and utility satisfy some needs of ourselves, we should prioritize sustaining our friendships of virtue.

As students take friendships more seriously at this stage in their life, it is important for them to consider what friendship means to them. Here are some ethical questions concerning Aristotle's idea of friendship and friendship loyalty that can be entertained in the classroom:

- ❖ What does it mean to be loyal in a friendship?
- ❖ Does the length of friendship affect our loyalty to our friends?
- ❖ How do we determine if a faulty friendship is worth saving after a breach of confidentiality?
- ❖ In what circumstance, if any, is it morally permissible to spill our friends' secrets?
- ❖ Should we always forgive friends after they broke our trust?
- ❖ Can we be friends with bad people?
- ❖ Is it disloyal for our best friend to be best friends with someone who has hurt us?
- ❖ Is it wrong for us to dictate who our friends can be friends with?
- ❖ At what point should we end a friendship?

There are a myriad of friendship betrayals, secret spilling, and questionable loyalties featured in *VPR*. For this unit, I will be discussing two friendships: Schwartz + Sandoval and Ariana + Scheana. Our first friendship dilemma concerns confidentiality and being caught between two friends where friendship betrayal seems inevitable. The second dilemma asks if a friendship betrayal is being committed, and in what ways can we foster our friendships of virtue. After discussing these dilemmas and Aristotle's views on friendship, students will be prepared to ponder these self-reflective questions:

- ❖ What does friendship mean to you?
- ❖ What qualities do you look for in a friend?
- ❖ Has a friend ever betrayed you or someone you know? How did you/they handle it?
- ❖ Have you or someone you know ever betrayed a friend? How did you/they handle it?
- ❖ Do you think Schwartz is morally blameworthy for keeping Sandoval's secret?
- ❖ If you were Ariana, would you be okay with Scheana staying friends with Kristen? Why or why not?
- ❖ What do your friendships of pleasure, utility, and virtue look like?
- ❖ What do you think Aristotle would have to say about Schwartz's friendship with Sandoval and Ariana's friendship with Scheana?

Schwartz and Sandoval met 15 years ago through a Craigslist ad⁶² and they have been best friends ever since, and arguably the closest, most unbreakable friendship on *VPR*. Just like everyone else on the show, Schwartz and Sandoval participated in their own immoral behaviors, and more or less stood by each other's side. But, there have been many times when one did call out the other for his misconduct such as in Season 8, Episode 3 when Sandoval unnecessarily rage-texted Stassi, blaming her for not talking to him first about hosting her book party at his restaurant,⁶³ and threatening to kick her and her guests out. Schwartz called him out for speaking poorly to their friends and urged him to apologize. But, there have been plenty of times when one has boldly defended the other like in Season 5 when everyone was prepping for Schwartz and Katie's wedding. Several of their friends were bashing Schwartz for how he has treated Katie, but Sandoval boldly noted how, yes, Schwartz needs to change and reflect on his behavior, but Katie and the others should also acknowledge the trouble Katie has caused Schwartz too.

Through the years, Schwartz and Sandoval corrected each other's wrongful behaviors, but also, stood up for each other. On top of this, we know their friendship is not simply one of pleasure or utility since even after suffering the unpleasurable times, and with Schwartz moving out of Sandoval's apartment, they still remained friends, so perhaps we can deem their friendship a friendship of virtue. Or, can we?

The dilemma I will discuss was not aired on *VPR*, but its contents were discussed at length later on the show and on various podcasts and news outlets.⁶⁴ In this dilemma, Sandoval confesses a secret to Schwartz, but Schwartz feels guilty about keeping this particular secret. This not-so-fictional dilemma was created from my imagination of how I believed this conversation could have transpired based on my own assessment of the relationship dynamics from *VPR*. I made sure to preserve the

⁶²Wardell, J. (2024, April 19). *Tom Schwartz Met Tom Sandoval on Craigslist*. RealityTea.

<https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/tom-schwartz-met-tom-sandoval-124251840.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CI%20met%20him%20online%2C%20we,eventually%20Jax%20Taylor%20as%20well.>

⁶³Sandoval owns 5% of the restaurant, TomTom, and Lisa—the majority owner of TomTom, and Schwartz—another 5% owner—already approved of Stassi's book party.

⁶⁴D.M., & D.M. (2024b, January 31). *When did Schwartz find out about Tom and Raquel's affair?*

Distractify.

<https://www.distractify.com/p/when-did-schwartz-find-out-about-tom-and-raquel#:~:text=Tom%20Schwartz%20knew%20about%20Tom%20and%20Raquel%20the%20entire%20time.&text=%E2%80%9CI%20learned%20in%20late%20August,that%20knew%20about%20the%20affair.>

integrity of the emotions and include any prevalent background information. Even though we cannot access the actual conversation that happened between Schwartz and Sandoval, this can still be a valuable and stimulating activity for students as they get to imagine how the interaction played out. Here is the dilemma I created inspired these real-life events:

Schwartz's Dilemma

Your business partner and best friend of 10 years⁶⁵ Sandoval frequently confides in you about his relationship problems with his girlfriend of 9 years, Ariana. You have become good friends with Ariana after all these years dating your best friend—so close that she was even a groomsman at your wedding—and she has become a significant piece of your friend group. Sandoval has complained about his and Ariana's sexual incompatibility and her general annoyance with his presence. But, you have also noticed how Sandoval tends to insert himself into whatever opportunities Ariana receives and starts unnecessary altercations with her. Recently, Sandoval has confessed to you that he has been having an affair with Rachel, another girl in their friend group and Ariana's best friend.⁶⁶ You urge him to tell Ariana and he claims he is going to, but is waiting for the right time. He begs you not to tell anyone and you without thinking promise you won't.

Unlike the rest of the dilemmas discussed in this thesis, I actually got to entertain this one with my PHIL244 students.⁶⁷ When I introduced this dilemma to my students, I first asked them if they thought Schwartz should go against Sandoval's wishes and tell Ariana the truth, or should he keep his promise to his best friend of +10 years. The responses were mixed, but most of them were leaning towards telling Ariana. Those who said they should tell Ariana pointed out that Ariana is still Schwartz's close friend, even if he does have stronger ties to Sandoval, and as her friend, he should tell her. Others believed his individual relationships with

⁶⁵They have been friends for *at least* 10 years, but I am unsure how long they knew each other before the show.

⁶⁶During an interview on *Watch What Happens Live*, Schwartz claims he found out in August 2022 about Sandoval and Rachel hooking up once, but he was not aware that an affair was pursued until January 2023 when Sandoval confessed he was in love with Rachel. When asked why he did not tell Ariana, Schwartz says Sandoval was assuring him he was going to do the right thing (I have kept the integrity of this fact within my "fictional" dilemma) but "continued to procrastinate".

Watch What Happens Live with Andy Cohen. (2023b, April 6). *When did Tom Schwartz really find out about the affair?* | *WWHL* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnFoVf9UY34>

⁶⁷I think it is also important to note out of my 100 students who entertained this dilemma in my class, I believe only 3 or so were familiar with this situation. And those who did not know about this situation or *Vanderpump Rules* in general were still able to follow along pretty well.

both Sandoval and Ariana did not matter—if he knows someone is being cheated on, he should tell them regardless.

Those who said Schwartz should *not* tell Ariana mostly defended their position by stating that Schwartz has a stronger friendship with Sandoval and he asked him not to tell her, so even though it hides the truth from his friend Ariana, we cannot break our trust with our *best* friend Sandoval. Some also noted that if they were in Ariana’s position, they would not want to hear about the affair from Schwartz, and since Schwartz was not involved in the creation of the affair, it should not be his responsibility to tell.

Some students opted for a moderate approach by giving Sandoval a set amount of time, such as a week or month, to confess. If he does not confess by the set time, then Schwartz should tell Ariana himself. This at least allows Sandoval the opportunity to “do the right thing”, especially since he claimed he was planning on doing it anyway.

Several students stated they have been in similar situations themselves when they knew about someone cheating on someone and were not sure if they should break the news or keep it to themselves. Even if students have not been in this particular situation, they at least have been in situations where they perhaps knew some secret and were asked not to share it. And, we have learned that some secrets may be easy to keep, but others—such as Sandoval’s—may be harder since students may believe they are doing something wrong by keeping a friends’ secrets when the secret is hurting others—especially hurting other friends of theirs. Additionally, this dilemma elicited an amusing discussion not only about the nature of friendship confidentiality, but relationship infidelity and its variations from one-night stands to decade-long affairs.

In reality—and much to my student’s disappointment once revealed to them—Ariana did not find out about the affair from either Sandoval or Schwartz.⁶⁸ Fans were enraged with Schwartz for not telling Ariana after all their years of friendship, but perhaps we are able to cultivate compassion for Schwartz, given this difficult situation of being between his two best friends. An essential characteristic we look for in a friend is the ability to trust and confide in them. However, it is not virtuous to put our friends in a position to keep such a heinous act a secret, especially if it hurts our other friends. And, unfortunately, whether Schwartz tells Ariana or not, he will unavoidably betray someone.

⁶⁸Ariana found out about the affair during one of Sandoval’s concerts when someone handed her Sandoval’s phone after he dropped it, Ariana discovered risqué FaceTime screen recording of Sandoval and Rachel.

Carpentier, M., Vilensky, S., & Ergas, T. (2023b, November 9). Tom Sandoval and Ariana Madix’s relationship timeline. *Bravo TV Official Site*.
<https://www.bravotv.com/the-daily-dish/tom-sandoval-ariana-madix-relationship-history-van-derpump-rules#:~:text=Ariana%20explained%20to%20her%20friends,recording%20of%20the%20on%20FaceTime>.

Aristotle would say however that there is no real friendship between Schwartz and Sandoval because of the unvirtuous situation Sandoval placed him in. If we are taking up Aristotle's position, we could argue that since Schwartz and Sandoval's friendship is not "real", then it would be perfectly okay to tell Ariana about the affair. However, we understand that it is more complicated than that. Sandoval was Schwartz's roommate for many years, the best man at his wedding, and now his business partner. It is hard to throw all that away.

This also raises an interesting question on whether we can be friends with unvirtuous people. Sure, good people do bad things from time to time, and besides the dilemma Sandoval has put Schwartz in, perhaps Sandoval's years of loyalty and support deems him a good friend. But even if someone who is a good friend to us has frequently mistreated and betrayed others, is it wise for us to stay friends with them? What does that say about us?

It may be easier to just say Sandoval committed this heinous act against Ariana, so Schwartz should not stay friends with him. But it is difficult for Schwartz to toss all those years of friendship away, especially since—perhaps aside from placing him in this precarious situation—Sandoval has been a great friend to Schwartz. Yet, we should also be aware of how our friends shape who we are, and if we are constantly surrounding ourselves with people who commit such immoral acts, it may be a good idea to at least take a step back and reevaluate these friendships.

Ariana and Scheana

Continuing our discussion on friendship allegiances and friendships with bad people, we should consider whether it is okay to remain friends with someone who has repeatedly hurt another person close to us. Scheana and Ariana met while both were working at one of Lisa Vanderpump's other restaurants, Villa Blanca. After Scheana moved to SUR to star on *VPR*, she and Ariana still remained best friends, and Ariana was even a bridesmaid at Scheana's wedding in 2014. Audiences got to watch their friendship grow when Ariana became a full-time *VPR* cast member in Season 3.

In Season 2, Kristen and Sandoval were dating, but Kristen was suspicious of Sandoval and Ariana's close friendship and accused him of cheating on her with Ariana. This also led to various instances of Kristen acting cruel and unfair ways towards Ariana.⁶⁹ Also during this time, Kristen had been profusely denying the rumor about sleeping with Jax, but when the rumor was confirmed, it put an end to Sandoval and Kristen's almost six-year relationship. When Sandoval and Ariana finally get together in Season 3, Kristen devises a revenge plan to ruin their relationship by exposing a rumor that Sandoval cheated on Ariana with a girl in

⁶⁹Though both Ariana and Sandoval profusely denied the rumors, they finally admitted at the Season 2 Reunion that they did share a kiss in a pool in Las Vegas while Sandoval and Kristen were dating.

Miami. Kristen goes as far as bringing “Miami Girl”⁷⁰ to confront Sandoval while he was working a shift at SUR. And, on top of all these orchestrations, she consistently bad-mouthed Ariana, complained about her mere presence at events, and spewed unnecessary and cruel comments to her. Kristen’s attempts to later make amends with Ariana come off as self-serving and phony, as the apology was conveniently timed right before Sandoval and Jax’s birthday trip to Miami in Season 3, to which she had not been invited. Fans speculate—and it *would* appear to be the case—that she wanted to expose this potential cheating in order to get back together with Sandoval as she says in a Season 3 confessional that if Ariana was not in the picture, Sandoval and her could still be together.

Ariana’s best friend, Scheana, is still friends with Kristen despite all the vile things Kristen has done and said to Ariana. In Season 4, Episode 1, Ariana expresses that she does not like the idea of her best friend Scheana also being best friends with the girl who has been consistently hostile towards her and tried to destroy her relationship, and that she does not enjoy being in the same vicinity as Kristen—understandably so. While working at SUR, Sandoval, Ariana, and Scheana have a conversation about Scheana’s 30th birthday, and we watch this interesting exchange between Sandoval, Ariana, and Scheana:

SANDOVAL: S:o ↑apparently I’m schedul:ed four times this week be:cause Jax decided to get his nose fixed

SCHEANA: You’re co↑ming to my part:y?

SANDOVAL: Yes. (.) Yes. I’m coming. Yes.

SCHEANA: Okay. Yo:u ↓d:o know James is DJing right?

SANDOVAL: There’s ↑s::o many oth:er DJs, I-, [dude, I’m not saying James

SCHEANA: [No, no, I know, I know, but=

SANDOVAL: =James is a great DJ, but=

SCHEANA: =James, Shay, and I are sti::ll (.) cool, [>we’re still friends<]⁷¹

SANDOVAL: [I understand that=]

SCHEANA: =>And him and Kristen are not gonna f*cking stay together forever< ↓we all know that.

SANDOVAL: >↑IS SHE COMING< to your birthday party?!

SCHEANA: She’s not f*cking in↑vited

[cut to Sandoval’s confessional]

SANDOVAL: With Kristen, you actually have to ba:n her (.) from the premises. <Otherwise> (.) she will show up

⁷⁰This is the nickname the cast and fans gave to the girl Sandoval allegedly cheating on Ariana with.

⁷¹Besides Kristen, Scheana being friends with James is another example of Scheana being friends with people who have hurt her friends.

[cut to Sandoval, Ariana, and Scheana]

ARIANA: It sucks because <↑I> want to be able to have fun. And I don't want this, f*cking, li:ke (.) ((Ariana lifts arms up, hands cupped downward, Scheana sighs and puts head down in hands)) wicked wi↑tch f*cking hanging over sh*t

SCHEANA: I just wish certain people gave me >personally< a reason to not like th↑em >because when no one's given me a direct reason it makes it so much easier for me to be ni↑:ce, but<=

ARIANA: =I'M a direct reason! ((hands gesture to self then gesture to Sandoval)) HE'S a direct reason!

[cut to Ariana's confessional]

ARIANA: Unfortuna:tely, at some point, Scheana's going to have t:o (.) ackn:owledge the fact that Kristen has been a horrr::ible person, <to me> ((gestures to self)) who is sup↑posed to be her best friend

[cut to Sandoval, Ariana, and Scheana]

SCHEANA: ↑C:an't we a:ll just get a↓long(h)?

ARIANA: ((disgusted)) E::w ((Scheana laughs))

SANDOVAL: Get outta here

And of course, as expected, Kristen shows up to Scheana's birthday party despite not being invited. And even though Scheana acted repulsed when Sandoval asked earlier if she was coming, we watch Scheana have a very friendly exchange with party crasher and Ariana's bully, Kristen. After their friendly exchange, the episode cuts to Schenana's confessional where she says, "I still have a f*cking soft spot for Kristen. There's something about her I just can't hate." The episode cuts to Ariana and Sandoval talking at Scheana's party⁷²:

SANDOVAL: °Why the f*ck is Kristen ↑he::re?°

ARIANA: <°I don't kn:ow°>

SANDOVAL: °Not even in a costu:me°

ARIANA: Something's tell me I may or may not have a fake friend

SANDOVAL: °°Scheana?°° ((Ariana nods))

ARIANA: When she says things like '↑We:ll, she's never done anything to m↑::e' I'm like (.) 'When did I not beco:me important?'

⁷² *Ariana questions her friendship with Scheana* | *Bravo TV Official site*. (2015, October 26). Bravo TV Official Site.
<https://www.bravotv.com/vanderpump-rules/season-4/episode-1/videos/ariana-questions-her-friendship-with-scheana>

[cut to flashback of Scheana saying “I just wish certain people gave me personally a reason not to like them because when no one’s given me a direct reason it makes it so much easier for me to be nice.”]

ARIANA: After what transpired a year ago and the concerted effort that was made ...

[cut to Ariana’s confessional]

ARIANA: Kristen wanted me to get hit by planes, trains. <She wanted to die.>

[cut to flashback of Kristen saying: “I do wish [Ariana] would get hit by a Mack truck or something.”]

ARIANA: And it absolutely should NOT be okay with my BEST friend, Scheana

[cut to Sandoval and Ariana]

ARIANA: I have a really amazing life and I don’t have room in my life for f*cking bullsh*t (.). And if I stand alone in that, I stand alone.

Similar to Schwartz’s dilemma, in this scene, Scheana is also bound between two friends, but her friendship with Kristen is more than questionable. But, unlike Schwartz, it appears Scheana does not see or think it is a big deal that a stronger friendship necessarily means stronger loyalties. We can tell that Scheana measures friendship loyalty differently as she says in Season 4, Episode 3, “I’ve been friends with Kristen a lot longer.” We can infer that Scheana is trying to justify her disloyalty to Ariana by emphasizing how long she has known Kristen, but just because we have known someone longer, perhaps this should not mean our loyalties are stronger. This leads students to question how we should assess friendship loyalty and if we should be okay with someone closest to us being friends with someone who has hurt us.

Though Kristen and Scheana have known each other longer, they are not friends of virtue. We may assume this because it seems their friendship started because of needing to work and film together, but both of them have expressed gripes about each other’s behaviors—not just to each other, but to other people as well—so it seems they do not necessarily value the other’s “virtuousness”. They seem to be friends because they have fun together and it is also convenient since they work together and associate themselves with the same group of people. Whereas, Scheana’s relationship with Ariana arguably resembles a friendship of virtue. Both have expressed how much they appreciate each other, and though they have exchanged criticisms, they do not reprimand each other’s moral character typically. Moreover, Ariana and Scheana were best friends before Ariana was casted on *VPR*, so we can tell that their friendship is not solely out of convenience—or at least not started from it.

We could perhaps identify Scheana and Kristen’s friendship as a friendship of utility. After Kristen was shunned by her best friends for cheating on Sandoval and sleeping with her best friends’ ex-boyfriend in Season 2, she perhaps was desperate for any kind of friend, and luckily for her, Scheana welcomed her with open arms. Similarly, Scheana also was not on good terms with the SUR girls, so it makes sense that Kristen and Scheana would “scratch each other’s back” in a sense and become friends. We could argue sure, maybe they did actually enjoy each other’s presence, but it seems Kristen and Scheana would be happy to have any kind of friend after both being ostracized from the rest of the cast.

Though Scheana may have been “friends” with Kristen longer, given how Kristen treated Scheana—particularly in Season 1—it seems odds Scheana would call Kristen a friend during that time. Kristen, along with Stassi and Katie, ostracized Scheana when she started working at SUR. Perhaps, there could also be some misunderstanding of what friendship really means.⁷³

This has the potential to ignite an interesting class discussion about what should be the measure of loyalty—span of friendship or depth of friendship⁷⁴—and how these two work together. By identifying the different levels of friendships and applying them to Scheana and Ariana, students can reflect on the types of friendships in their own lives. Perhaps they are in or were in a situation similar where their friends were friends with people they did not like, but perhaps they never really reflected on how it makes them feel and why.

Additionally, we can ask students if they think Ariana and Scheana’s friendship is *really* a friendship of virtue. Ariana does not seem to appreciate Scheana’s conflict-avoidance tendencies and her desperate need to be friends with everyone, especially people who she probably should not be friends with.⁷⁵ Perhaps, Scheana should not be the one to decide her loyalties, but Ariana should be the one to shed light on this issue because Scheana may not realize the extent of this problem. Friendships of virtue mean keeping our friends accountable and pointing out one’s attributes that prohibit their ability to flourish in their relationships and in life. If Ariana tells Scheana that if she does not address her conflict-avoidance tendencies and this craving to be liked by everyone then their friendship will be over, she will be doing not only herself a favor, but also Scheana.

Perhaps Scheana does not recognize how her conflict avoidant tendencies truly affect the people closest to her, and sometimes it takes someone else to point these things out to us. Scheana’s conflict-avoidant tendencies are not only impacting Ariana, but they will inevitably impact the rest of her relationships too. By Ariana setting a boundary with Scheana that if she does not change, their friendship is over, Ariana may have to sacrifice a friendship, but at least she will not maintain a friendship that negatively affects her in such a way. And, Scheana—if she takes the advice of her best friend—will have better relationships with the people around her, and cultivate a proper friendship of virtue. Or, if Ariana cuts her off, perhaps it will give her an opportunity to reflect on how she perceives friendships.

⁷³This offers another interesting question for students: Can we become friends with someone who has mistreated us in the past? Even if they apologized for their mistreatment towards us, would we want to be friends with someone who was capable of that behavior?

⁷⁴Or, perhaps something else.

⁷⁵Similar to Stassi and James, perhaps her upbringing has something to do with why she has these conflict-avoidant tendencies and this need to be friends with everyone. Though I do not show too much compassion towards Scheana specifically here, I do take this into consideration. And, as someone myself who also has conflict-avoidance tendencies and the need to be liked by everyone, I very much understand Scheana in this regard.

As Aristotle says, friendships are crucial to human flourishing. Our friends have the power to shape our sense of self, thus we should take them seriously, especially going into adulthood. Students may be at a time where they have to reflect if it is worth it to maintain old friendships from high school, or if perhaps realize they were only friends with their high school friends out of mere convenience.

I believe it is also important to emphasize that there is nothing wrong with a friendship of pleasure. They do serve their purpose, and it perhaps is bittersweet to naturally drift apart from these friendships while remembering all the good times we had. Or, maintaining them, but understanding that they may not entirely fulfill us in the way that a friendship of virtue will. Not maintaining these pleasure friendships does not mean that anyone did anything wrong; we just now recognize that as we grow older, our priorities and values change, and it is okay that being in different places in life—whether physically, mentally, or emotionally—is not enough to keep the friendship alive like it once was. Aristotle reminds us that it is natural for our friends to come and grow as that is what makes us human. Here are some other instances regarding friendship loyalty and other predicaments concerning friendship on *VPR*:

- ❖ *Cutting Off Friends* - Stassi and Katie, Season 3; Stassi and Kristen, Season 8
- ❖ *Forgiving Friends After Betrayal* - Jax and Sandoval, Season 3; Stassi and Kristen, Season 4
- ❖ *Rekindling Friendships* - Stassi and Katie, Season 4; Stassi and Kristen, Season 4; Lala and James, Season 7; Lala and Scheana, Season 9
- ❖ *Making Amends* - Katie and Lala, Season 6
- ❖ *Becoming Friends with Someone Who's Hurt You* - Lala and Katie, Season 6
- ❖ *Friendship Confidentiality* - Jax and Sandoval, Season 3
- ❖ *Hiding Secrets From Friends* - Lala and James, Season 5
- ❖ *Caught Between Two Friends* - Schwartz, Sandoval, and Jax, Season 8; Scheana, Ariana, and Sandoval, Season 11
- ❖ *Questioning Friendship Loyalty* - Sandoval and Jax, Season 3; Katie and Scheana, Season 5; Ariana and Scheana, Season 11
- ❖ *Confronting Friends About Their Toxic Partners* - Katie and Stassi, Season 5; Scheana and Katie, Season 6; Kristen and Stassi, Season 7; Lala and Scheana Season 9; Brittany and *VPR* women, Season 6
- ❖ *Confronting Friends About Being a Toxic Partner* - Jax, Lala, Stassi, Season 6
- ❖ *Best Friends and Business Partners* - Sandoval and Schwartz, Season 7-10, Ariana and Katie, Season 9-11
- ❖ *Mixing Friendship with Business* - Sandoval and Stassi, Season 8
- ❖ *Friends with Benefits* - Lala and James, Season 4; Scheana and Adam, Season 7
- ❖ *Hooking Up with Friend's Ex* - Stassi and Kristen, Season 2; Katie and Rachel, Season 10
- ❖ *Being the "Other Woman" in Your Best Friend's Partner's Affair* - Ariana and Rachel, Season 10

Here are some scholarly readings about Aristotle on friendship and other friendship-related discussions that can complement this unit:

- ❖ *Why Bad People Can't be Good Friends* (2013), Alexis Elder, 15 pgs
- ❖ *Aristotle On The Friendships Of Utility And Pleasure* (1983), Kenneth D. Alpern, 12 pgs
- ❖ *Friendship and Moral Danger* (2000), Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett, 19 pgs
- ❖ *Friendship for the Flawed: A Cynical and Pessimistic Theory of Friendship* (2020), Glenn Trujilo, 10 pgs
- ❖ *What's Bad About Friendship with Bad People?* (2021), Cathy Mason, 11 pgs

Romantic Relationships

We witness the various romantic relationships featured on *VPR* bicker, cheat on each other, break up, get back together, date mutual friends, send rage-texts, scream at and hit each other, and more. Though we see some over-the-top bizarre cheating scandals or explosive public altercations, students can often find the relatability within these altercations after breaking them down and analyzing them. There are many dilemmas within romantic relationships that one can experience and that are represented in *VPR*, but in this unit, I want to focus on the ethics of infidelity, intimate domestic abuse, and manipulation. I chose feminist contractarianism as my philosophical concept to pair with this discussion. I focus on a singular relationship in *VPR* and use a strand of conversation transcriptions that span over the course of many episodes to analyze the different types and signs of manipulation and intimate domestic abuse.

Students may have had boyfriends or girlfriends prior to college, but as they grow older and define their values and desires, they take these romantic relationships more seriously (Shulman & Connolly 2013), thus it is crucial students understand how to navigate these more serious relationships at this stage in life (Vennum & Fincham 2011). And if their goal is marriage—or even just long-term partnership—their relationship will undoubtedly become an important—if not *the* most important—facet of their life. Unfortunately, despite their importance, students typically are not taught how to navigate these relationships. In the same vein, these young adults may not know how to spot the signs of a bad romantic partner (Miller 1995), perhaps because they do not understand that these forms of abuse are not normal (Nancarrow et al. 2012; Webster et al. 2014; Towler et al. 2017), they are too consumed by their infatuation and the “good parts” of the relationship (Lang 2011), or they have been manipulated to perceive otherwise (Jackson et al. 2006). Or, perhaps, they *do* recognize the signs, but because of their exposure to these maltreatments in previous relationships, they have a reduced sensitivity to the seriousness of abuse (Arnocky & Vaillancourt 2014; Murphy & Smith 2010a). And, similarly to our conversation on friendship, even though it may seem obvious to just break up with partners who are

not good for us, students should consider the nuances of these situations and why that is easier said than done.

Cheating is prevalent in our society.⁷⁶ Students most likely either have had personal experience with cheating themselves, or at least, knew someone who cheated or got cheated on. We know cheating is wrong, but we must understand *why* it is wrong. It takes more than knowing something is wrong to not conduct that behavior; by understanding who is getting hurt and how it affects them, people perhaps will be less likely to commit such immoral acts. Watching *VPR* allows us to watch how one's immoral behavior affects their loved ones. Indulging with these cast mates and their tragedies produces resembling emotions within us that allow us to not just cognitively understand another's emotions, but cultivate compassion for their situations. In the instance of infidelity, before our students ask why cheating is wrong, it is important to understand the nature of cheating including the different types, why it occurs, and how to navigate it.

Feminist Contractarianism

Contractarianism, rooted in the Hobbesian idea of social contracts, states that since humans are programmed to act on their own self-interest, and if they act on these self-interests, it will inevitably cause chaos. To avoid this, we form social contracts with others. According to Hobbes, abiding by these social contracts is how to behave ethically in society.

To better complement our discussion about intimate domestic abuse and infidelity, I want to focus on Jean Hampton's feminist contractarianism. Hampton takes inspiration from the seemingly contradictory contractarian ideas of Hobbes and Kant to propose a "contract test" in order to evaluate the decency of our most intimate relationships. Infused in her feminist contractarianism is the Kantian idea that all humans have intrinsic, non-instrumental value, thus the contract test is used to test if each party is morally respecting the other as such and satisfying each party's legitimate interests. Each party should be an equal participant in the construction and modification of the contract. Hampton admits the limitations of feminist contractarianism is that it does not tell us how to directly respond to other human beings or how we should cultivate strong relationships, however, it does tell us what is required for proper loving relationships and what we need to protect, i.e. moral respect to others and ourselves.

Though Hobbes's contractarianism is often discussed in the ethics class, it is arguably more of a political theory than an ethical theory. Hampton brings a certain personal element into the conversation that makes a seemingly clinical ethical theory more passionate and humanitarian. Here are some potential ethical questions about infidelity, intimate domestic abuse students, and feminist contractarianism can explore:

⁷⁶General Social Survey (GSS). (2017). *Who cheats more? The Demographics of Infidelity in America*.

Institute for Family Studies.

<https://ifstudies.org/blog/who-cheats-more-the-demographics-of-cheating-in-america>

- ❖ What are characteristics that we should not tolerate in our romantic partners?
- ❖ What does a healthy v.s. unhealthy relationship look like?
- ❖ What makes cheating wrong?
- ❖ What does it mean to cheat on your partner?
- ❖ Should cheating always immediately end in a break up?
- ❖ Is the cheater always 100% responsible for the cheating?
- ❖ Does it matter who else was involved in the cheating?
- ❖ Should we always tell our partner if we cheated on them?
- ❖ What is worse: the cheating itself or lying about it?
- ❖ Is Hampton's contract test a good method in assessing relationships?
- ❖ How does infidelity fail Hampton's contract test?

For this unit, I will be discussing a singular relationship from *VPR*: Jax and Brittany. In Season 6, it is revealed that Jax cheated on Brittany with their co-worker and friend, Faith. As the couple tries to overcome Jax's infidelity, we witness Jax's abusive and manipulative behaviors towards Brittany. After entertaining these ethical questions in the classroom and analyzing Jax and Brittany's relationship, students will be ready to engage in these self-reflective questions:

- ❖ Why do you believe cheating is wrong?
- ❖ Why do you believe people cheat?
- ❖ Have you or someone you know has been cheated on? What did you/they do to handle it?
- ❖ Have you or someone you know cheated on someone else? What did you/they do to handle it?
- ❖ What do you believe are signs of manipulation or abuse?
- ❖ Why do you believe Brittany stayed with Jax?
- ❖ What do you think Hampton would say about Jax and Brittany's relationship?
- ❖ How can you perform Hampton's contract test on your intimate relationships? Do your partners, friends, and family pass the test?

Jax and Brittany

There are *several* instances of cheating in *VPR* that we could discuss, but the one I will be discussing is Jax cheating on his girlfriend of two years Brittany with their co-worker Faith in Season 6. From Season 1, SUR bartender Jax has been notorious for being a serial cheater and pathological liar. He has cheated on his former girlfriend, Stassi multiple times and slept with his best friend's girlfriend and Stassi's best friend, Kristen. Along with his various cheating escapades, he has been known to spread rumors, lie about his wrongdoings, break confidentiality with his closest friends, verbally harass partners, steal, start fist fights, and even get arrested multiple times. But, sweet country-bumpkin Brittany won his heart when they first met in Las Vegas in 2015 and began dating shortly after. After moving from Kentucky to Los Angeles to be with Jax, Brittany became a part of the *VPR* cast in Season

4. Jax's relationship with Brittany already started off on the wrong foot in Season 4 when in an attempt to pursue new SUR hostess, Lala, he lied about the seriousness of his and Brittany's relationship.

In Season 6, Episode 1, during Scheana's masquerade birthday party at SUR, Faith tells James that Jax DM'd her about wanting to see her while Brittany was in Kentucky. Faith, who was previously good friends with Jax, told him to come over since she was doing live-in care for a 95-year old woman, so she thought "nothing is gonna happen". Faith continues to tell James how Jax was telling her how long he had been wanting her and how beautiful she was, and finally Faith insinuates they ended up sleeping together. The next clip jumps to Sandoval, one of Jax's best friends, telling Jax this rumor and Jax exclaims that he has never hooked up with Faith nor anyone else.

The episode cuts back to James and Faith talking as Faith goes into detail about the hookup, perhaps *too* much detail leading audiences to believe she did not just make this up. Later at the party, Brittany confronts Jax, but he swears he did not cheat on her with Faith and claims people are "setting him up", but Brittany is suspicious given Jax's previous cheating scandals with his ex-girlfriends and his pathological lying habits. In the back alley of SUR, *VPR* girls console crying Brittany sitting on the ground when Jax comes over:

SCHEANA: ((to Jax)) What is going on?

JAX: Someone said that I hooked up with Faith.

SCHEANA: And you did↑:n't?

(1) ((Jax gives incredulous look, cocks his head out of disbelief))

BRITTANY: I am <dis↑gusted>. Per usual, by you.

JAX: >You're going off of her<-what sh↑e said over=

BRITTANY: =If I find out this is tr:ue, then I am ↓mo::ving the f*ck out, I'm taking the do↑gs with me, and you can rot in f*:cking hell

JAX: I did not <DO ANYTHING> (whatever man) f*ck you, f*ck you ((referring to Scheana and the girls)), if you (.) wanna cancel a godd*mn relationship cause of this=

LISA: =Do:n't talk to her like that-Jax=

JAX: Wh↑at do you wa↑nt me to ↑do??

LISA: Not=

JAX: I'm getting attack↑ed for something I didn't do! ((turns to Brittany)) I'm with you every. Waking. Day of my life

((Lisa, Ken, and the girls leave))

BRITTANY: B↑:ye, I'm sorry guys

Meanwhile, Faith tells Lisa that Jax told her his relationship with Brittany was over and he was planning on leaving her.⁷⁷ She says she can prove she is telling the truth.⁷⁸ Jax and Brittany finish their conversation:

JAX: You wanna get me irate?=

BRITTANY: =I'm going= ((stands up))

JAX: =Over something that didn't happen? ((Brittany leaves)) °F*ck°

The scene cuts to Lisa's confessional where she says: "I never believe anything that starts with 'I heard', because for the most part, it's not true. But when it comes to Jax Taylor... invariably, it is."

What we see from this debacle so far is the extent to which Jax is willing to cover up his wrongdoings, even to his closest friends. He tells Brittany how there is no possible way he could have cheated on her because he is always with her, but of course, this cannot always be the case. He appears to be a decent liar; if someone is accusing us of committing such an egregious act we did not do, naturally, we would be outraged and profusely deny it as passionately as Jax. This constant gaslighting and insistent denying causes Brittany to second guess whether the rumor is true, but given Faith's excruciating detail about their night together, and Jax's track record of lying and cheating, it is fair to conclude Jax did in fact cheat on Brittany.

In Episode 2, Brittany (temporarily) breaks up with Jax and up until this point, Jax still denies his hook up with Faith. In their apartment, Brittany is packing a suitcase to go to Las Vegas with an old friend to get away from Jax. Brittany tells Jax to go away when he walks in the room, and calling him a liar, but Jax finally decides to confess:

⁷⁷In a later interview, Faith said after their night together, she began to develop feelings for Jax and started to see themselves as more than just a fling, especially since Jax said he is breaking off things with Brittany. She admitted that she was hurt and surprised to see Jax and Brittany together holding hands at the party. This presents another potential discussion about how Jax potentially manipulated Faith to sleep with him.

Koerner, A. (2019, January 29). "*VanDERpump Rules*" Faith reveals her hookup with Jax was more than just one night of intimacy. Bustle.

<https://www.bustle.com/p/vanderpump-rules-faith-reveals-her-hookup-with-jax-was-more-than-just-one-night-of-intimacy-8026240#:~:text=%22We%20did%20not%20sleep%20together,%22We%20stay%20in%20contact.>

⁷⁸Faith's "proof" was later revealed to the *VPR* cast in Season 6, Episode 5. After Faith and Jax had sex, Faith recorded a voice memo of their conversation. Jax was saying he never wants to get married,—despite him and Brittany discussing getting married in the future— and that he is not sexually attracted to Brittany anymore and does not like being with her. He also mentioned how he does not like Brittany talking to her friends about their relationship because he believes they influence her decisions to not abide by Jax's requests. His request was wanting a threesome.

BRITTANY: =So tell me the truth. ((hand on hip)) (3.5) You did have sex with her?

(1.5)

JAX: Yes, it's true. <Yes.>

BRITTANY: ((looks down, looks back up)) (3) Rot in he↑ll. (3) ↑At least you can finally f*cking admit it.

[cut to Jax's confessional]

JAX: This isn't my first time being caught cheating (.) You know in the past, I've gone thro:ugh months and months of >deny, deny, deny< an:d that didn't work out for me

[cut to Jax and Brittany]

BRITTANY: ↑Why the f*ck would you do that?=
JAX: =↑It was when we were going through bad times=

BRITTANY: ((shakes head)) =I don't ca↑re=

JAX: =>It was about what was going on in our relationship<=

BRITTANY: =OH IT'S NOT ABOUT THAT!=

JAX: =Yeah it was=

BRITTANY: =JAX IF YOU LO:VE SOMEONE, YOU DO:N'T DO [THAT NO MATTER WHAT

THE F*CK IS HAPPENING

JAX: [I kn:ow that, I understand]

BRITTANY: ((chokes up)) ↑I didn't do that to ↑you. (3) ((shakes head)) I would ne:ver do that to you.

(4)

JAX: You're right.

In this transcription, we see Jax tell Brittany the reason he cheated was because they were going through a rough patch in their relationship. But, instead of confronting Brittany about their relationship problems, he chose the cowardly way out. He even admits later on the Season 6 reunion that he just cheats to get out of relationships, so in a way, perhaps we wanted her to find out. Either way, it would have been better for him to be honest and break up with her then simply betray their relationship by cheating. Plus, if he wanted her to break up with him so bad⁷⁹, it appears he does not mind hurting and betraying her, so we can question why he did not just do that instead.⁸⁰

⁷⁹Aside from cheating on her, there is some evidence from Season 6 that leads to us believing Jax wanted Brittany to break up with him. Such evidence includes: 1. Raving on and on about how much he loves his female Reiki master, saying he has the best day of his week when he sees her, 2. Claiming he got a job offer in Florida and assuming Brittany would be okay with moving to Florida (perhaps with the hopes she would not be), 3. Saying to Brittany "You're not perfect either" any time she brought up how hurt she was by his actions. And, in general, just being mean and dismissive towards Brittany.

⁸⁰Jax does end up breaking up with her in Episode 19, but once she leaves, he immediately texts her he regrets it.

In Episode 3, Brittany and Stassi, one of Brittany's good friends, have a spa day. Brittany confesses to sleeping with Jax despite breaking up with him after Jax confirmed he slept with Faith. Stassi, being an ex-girlfriend of Jax herself, reassures her that she is not judging her and understands why she did that. Stassi says in her confessional: "I can picture exactly what Jax is doing to Brittany to get her to come back to him. He's saying everything that she's wanted to hear. I don't want Brittany to have to go through that the way that I did and so many others before her did". Later, Jax and Brittany are in their apartment and seem to be getting along as if nothing happened. Brittany says the girls planned a girl's night just for her and we see this important conversation exchange:

BRITTANY: She said that they were gonna throw a-a party in my honor ((smiling)) Heh with like all my favorite things (h) ((Jax puts face in hands)) and they're probably ↑all going to be talking sh*t about yo:u

JAX: But it's between us. Not-not everyone=

BRITTANY: =But everyone knows, so it's not just between us=

JAX: =I understand that, but I'm not dating all them, I could care less about them (.) could ca:re le:ss=

BRITTANY: ((looks to the right and down)) °Don't talk like that.°

JAX: I'm just saying. I'm not-it's between you and I (.) for it to work out

[cut to Jax's confessional]

JAX: Friends don't do sh*t like this. Friends don't get up in her ear and just do-do-do-do ((make mock talking motions with hands)) Like, you people ne:ed to leave us alone, and get a f*ck:ing life.

[cut to Jax and Brittany]

JAX: Like if you wanted it over, we could just end it right now. But we don't want that

(1)

BRITTANY: ((looking down)) Because I love you so much, but=

JAX: =And I love you too=

BRITTANY: =It's just ha↑:rd

JAX: It's been killing me inside, it really has, I'm just glad it's (.) o↑ut.

[cut to Jax's confessional]

JAX: They say I manipulate ↑Brittany. I never manipulated >anything–any at all< ((shakes head))

[cut to Jax and Brittany]

JAX: You're a big girl, you make your own decisions⁸¹=

BRITTANY: =I a:m going to make my own decisions, and I am really confused

⁸¹This is actually a really interesting line. Though Jax is telling Brittany she should not be "airing out their dirty laundry" as he later says, here he is letting Brittany know that she can make her own decisions. So, Brittany may *believe* she is actually making her own decision without realizing the type of manipulation Jax puts onto her simply because of this line. She can make her own decisions, but she also is so desperate to maintain this relationship with Jax, so she may just do whatever it takes to make him happy which may mean not doing what she *actually* wants.

[cut to Jax's confessional]

JAX: ((shakes head)) How am I manipulating anything? What am I gaining out of this? (3) Okay, a girlfriend ((shrugs)) but I mean, girlfriends are a dime a dozen

[cut to Jax and Brittany]

BRITTANY: ((looks to Jax then looks to the right)) Do you swear I'm not going to find anything new out? ((looks back to Jax))

JAX: ((shakes head)) No, you're [not going to find anything

BRITTANY: [Anything?

JAX: ((shakes head)) No,

BRITTANY: Because if I decide I'm going to try to believe you (.) I don't want to start hearing ↑new things [that I didn't know about.

JAX: [No, I understand, yeah

BRITTANY: That would just ruin everything.

The key takeaway from this interaction is Jax's insistence for Brittany not to discuss their relationship with her friends. He claims it is because it is none of their business, but perhaps we can presume—especially given what he told Faith after they hooked up—that he does not want her friends' input on their relationship because he knows they will try to convince her to leave him (as perhaps they should). By insisting Brittany to not talk about their relationship with her best friends and confidants, he gets to be in control, and thus limiting the influence her friends could have on her decision to leave him.

Abusive and manipulative partners will try their best to isolate their partners from their friends and family. This type of dominance-possessive behavior can be categorized under psychological abuse (Follingstad and Dehery 2000) or, more specifically, social abuse (Park & Jeon 2022) and has the potential to lead to more destructive abusive behaviors (Felson & Messner 2000; Strauchler et al. 2004). We also see Jax lying once again to Brittany, telling her she will not find out anything new—which of course—she does.

Meanwhile, the *VPR* ladies came prepared for the ultimate “F*ck Jax”-themed slumber party for girl's night. The girls hit a piñata with Jax's face taped on the front, enjoyed a buffet of Brittany's favorite foods, and even cast a “spell” on Jax to curse him for his evil ways. But, the light-hearted fun comes to an abrupt stop when Ariana tells Brittany that she has heard from many sources that it was not just the one time Jax and Faith hooked up. This pushes Brittany to call up Jax while he is having a boys' night at a bar:

BRITTANY: I'm just gonna call him and put him on speaker phone (.) for ↑all of you guys to hear

SCHEANA: Do it!

((phone is ringing, Kristen's hand over her mouth))

STASSI: °I'm so scared°

[cut to *VPR* men at the restaurant, Jax looks down at his phone, scene proceeds to interchange between Brittany and Jax's respective locations]

JAX: Ah sh*t, sorry ((answers the phone))

BRITTANY: Jax?

JAX: ↑Yeah?

BRITTANY: How many times did it happen with Faith?

JAX: ((shakes head)) Once honey. (.) That's it.

BRITTANY: N:o, tell me the truth.

JAX: I swear on my life

BRITTANY: I have proof.

JAX: ((stands up from table)) Honey (I'm going to step outside for one second) sorry

SCHEANA: °Say "She's here"°=

BRITTANY: =She's here

JAX: What? (.) >Brittany, Brittany, Brittany< it's no:t=

BRITTANY: =Jax?=
JAX: =() She's lying, she's lying, ↑Why is she ↑the:re? (.5) >↑Why is she ↑there? <-↑Why are you setting me up? -↑Why are you ↑doing this? We-we were talking=

BRITTANY: =YES, but I didn't kno::w you actu:ally f*cked her more than on:ce

JAX: >I didn't-I didn't do-it< was only one ↑ti:me

(.)

BRITTANY: Jax, she's obviously not f*cking here, I would've f*cking stab:bed her a** ((girls laugh)) she's obviously not here.

JAX: O:h my go:d, ↑don't do that to m:e!

KRISTEN: °"Don't d:o that to ↑me"?!°

BRITTANY: Because I want you to tell me the truth for on:ce!

JAX: >Why are you believing anything<-I swear to Go:d to you=

BRITTANY: =All I asked was for the f*cking truth and you didn't give me the truth!

JAX: >What does it matter< that I did it two or three times?

((girls eyes' widen)) (2)

BRITTANY: YOU'RE F*CKING DISGUSTING, I F*CKING HATE ↑YO::U

JAX: I would tell you if I did it >two, three, four, five times< What-what's the difference between one time and ten times, it doesn't make a difference

BRITTANY: [THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING YOU PIECE OF SH*T

JAX: [No ()

BRITTANY: [Changes ev:ery:thing.

JAX: [()

BRITTANY: I can't wait, I can't WA:IT!=

JAX: =I didn't do anything=

BRITTANY: =YOU ARE F*CKING ↓DO::NE, you piece of sh*t!=

JAX: ((screaming)) I PROMISE YOU I DIDN'T DO IT!! >SHUT UP!!< I SAID I DIDN'T DO IT!! ((angrily paces))

(2) ((Brittany's mouth opens wide, girl shocked, Kristen and Stassi point with hands over their mouths))

JAX: ((angrily paces)) WILL YOU STOP??

BRITTANY: ((Brittany cocks head, mouth still open)) [That attitude you just gave me

JAX: [WILL YOU ST:OP!=

BRITTANY: =Proves to me you're not f*cking changing a d*mn thing. We're done. ((hangs up the phone))

JAX: ((softer tone)) >Brittany, Brittany< hon:ey. ((angry)) err God.

The most terrifying part of this transcription is the verbal abuse Jax directs at Brittany. And though perhaps his fury makes sense given that it *really was* only the one time,⁸² that does not mean his screaming towards his partner is appropriate or justified. It is also important to note that if this is how Jax behaves on camera for millions to see, we could only imagine the types of egregious behavior he commits behind closed doors. But even despite the false accusation, students should understand that we should never yell at our partners like this or tolerate partners who yell like this.

We also see in this transcription that Jax believes it does not matter if the cheating happened one time or multiple times, however, Brittany disagrees. This makes him more suspicious that he did actually sleep with Faith multiple times⁸³, but Faith said in a later interview that it was just the one time.⁸⁴ Still, this offers an interesting discussion about if it really does matter if our partner cheated once or multiple times.

Even after Jax cheated on Brittany with her friend and co-worker, and discovering the cruel things Jax said to Faith after they hooked up, Brittany stays with Jax. We would think that since Brittany gave Jax another chance he would be on his "best behavior", accept his wrongdoings, and do whatever it would take to earn back her trust. However, during this season, whenever his infidelity—or immoral

⁸²Koerner, A. (2018b, January 29). "*VanDERpump Rules*" Faith reveals her hookup with Jax was more than just one night of intimacy. Bustle.

<https://www.bustle.com/p/vanderpump-rules-faith-reveals-her-hookup-with-jax-was-more-than-just-one-night-of-intimacy-8026240#:~:text=%22We%20did%20not%20sleep%20together,%22We%20stay%20in%20contact.>

⁸³Perhaps, he just cheated on Brittany multiple times with someone else.

⁸⁴Koerner, A. (2018b, January 29). "*VanDERpump Rules*" Faith reveals her hookup with Jax was more than just one night of intimacy. Bustle.

<https://www.bustle.com/p/vanderpump-rules-faith-reveals-her-hookup-with-jax-was-more-than-just-one-night-of-intimacy-8026240#:~:text=%22We%20did%20not%20sleep%20together,%22We%20stayed%20in%20contact.>

behavior in general—is brought to his attention by Brittany or another cast member, he vehemently spits his infamous line “you’re not perfect either”, or a variation of the sort. We see an example of this in Season 6, Episode 14, along with another instance of Jax stating he does not like Brittany discussing their relationship problems with others. Brittany is on the phone with her dad in her and Jax’s apartment. She tells her dad that Jax cheated on her, and her dad understandably has a negative reaction. After their conversation, Jax walks into the room to talk to Brittany:

JAX: I heard some– (.) like (.) fr:agments of your conversation, it so↑:unded like you were talking to your dad, I’m not su:re

BRITTANY: Oh you he↑ard (h)?

JAX: So what did he say?

BRITTANY: He wasn’t sur↑prised (1) that he kinda got that from your character that you don’t have very much self-control. I just hope May-ma doesn’t find out because that’ll really break her heart

[cut to Jax’s confessional]

JAX: I’m not upset about what Brittany’s fat:her said. I means, I’m more upset the fact that she:’s kinda like, airing out our dirty laundry

[cut to Jax and Brittany]

BRITTANY: ((choking up)) I mean, having to have these, like, conversations with my family and stuff (.) really, really hard

JAX: ((head down))°Okay.°

BRITTANY: So you have to pr↑:omise (3) you’ll never do anything like this again

JAX: ((head still down, arms crossed)) °Of course I will not do anything like this again° (1) But, you’re not perfect either! ((looks to Brittany)) so, I mean, there’s things=

BRITTANY:=I know, but you can::not ((finger pointed up, swiping hand motion)) turn this around and try to put it on me. [I know I’m not perfect, I know I-]

JAX: [Okay, but sometimes (.) you’re short with me, sometimes you go off on you fight like=

BRITTANY:=I kn↑ow I do that=

JAX:=There’s a reason they called you ↑“Brattney” when you were young

BRITTANY: I know it, I’m admitting that, I know I’m not perfect [but I would ↑n:::e↓ver cheat on you

JAX:[Okay, well then, just-own it, but ↑own it

BRITTANY: Never.

[cut to Brittany’s confessional]

BRITTANY: My imperfections a::re forgetting to take the dog out or taking one too many tequila shots, not f*cking one of my ↑friends

[cut to Jax and Brittany]

BRITTANY: But you talking to me like this [isn’t any better]

JAX: [°Jesus christ°]

BRITTANY: The way you talk-[Jax (.) Jax

JAX: [(shakes head)) You just-you just don't stop], you just keep going

(3)

BRITTANY: I just don't get why you're not like, lo::ving and=

JAX:=I ↑AM loving! >↑What do you want me to< ↑d:o? I'm-I'm not that kinda per:son, I don't do that

BRITTANY: You know this is hard, okay?

JAX: Right, well-I mean-don't you wanna live your life, like, be happy?

BRITTANY: I am

JAX: If you're not happy, then maybe you need to move ↑o:n

In this transcription, we can tell Jax does not like being confronted with his past mistakes. He tells Brittany that if she wants to be happy, then she should just stop bringing up his infidelity and telling people about it. It seems though, given what we have seen from Jax and his manipulative tactics, that he is not concerned with necessarily making sure she is happy, but more with ridding himself of marinating in the guilt of his wrongdoings. And to further relieve himself of the guilt, he tells Brittany that she is no saint either, and she should also admit to her bad behaviors too.⁸⁵ But, just like how Brittany points out, her wrongdoings appear significantly less trivial than Jax's cheating, lying, and manipulation.

We see Brittany expressing to Jax that even though they "made up", it is still hard to get over his infidelity, and Jax does not seem to care. She expresses her disdain for the way he speaks to her and expresses her desire for him to be more loving. Instead of addressing his partner's needs, Jax gets defensive and insists that if she wants to be happy, she just needs to get over it.

If Brittany used Hampton's contract test on her relationship with Jax, she would see the ways in which the relationship is not just. She is not an equal in the relationship as not only did Jax disrespect her as an autonomous being when Jax cheated on and lied to her, but her needs still continue to be unaddressed as Jax is not reciprocating any moral respect towards her. By violating the contract of their relationship, Jax is not valuing her as an intrinsically valuable human being, and since he so blatantly violates their contract, then according to Hampton, there is no real love present.

Analyzing Jax and Brittany's relationship gives students the opportunity to witness the negative impacts of infidelity and recognize signs of intimate domestic abuse. This situation is more than just simply cheating, but it presents an array of the subtle abuse tactics used by manipulative partners. Much to the viewers surprise—and despite Brittany's threats to leave—Brittany ends up staying

⁸⁵It is important to note that if we have grievances with our partner, we should be comfortable bringing them to our partner's attention. However, it appears Jax is bringing up grievances with Brittany not because he wants to have an honest conversation about them, but mostly as a defense mechanism. Also, by committing extreme wrongdoings like cheating, it makes other relationship problems appear trivial in comparison. If Brittany's "shortness" was such a problem for Jax, perhaps he should have sat down to have a conversation with her about it, instead of resorting to cheating.

in a relationship with Jax⁸⁶ and eventually marrying him in Season 8. This allows students to question why he has not only cheated on her, but cheated on her multiple times, lied *countless* times, berates her in front of her family and friends, has jealousy issues⁸⁸, makes sexist and body-shaming remarks to her, spreads rumors about her, tries to control her conversations, screams at her, and much more, yet Brittany continues to stay with him. Viewers may feel disappointed in Brittany for taking him back, but it is important we analyze why perhaps she took him back, and we can do this by analyzing his seemingly manipulative language and abuse tactics.⁸⁹

There are several people who stay with abusive partners knowing they are abusive (McCroskey et al. 2006) even though they know leaving them would inevitably be better for them (Ford-Gilboe 2009), and it may seem incredulous to some people to stay in these relationships however it is very common and worth discussing. Throughout the seasons, we have seen Jax at various times manipulating and lying to the girls he dates, and how Stassi and others have noted that he will say whatever he has to please whichever girl he is with, and many cast mates have agreed.

Charismatic and attractive people like Jax can easily swoon people into believing their lies, and some people—including Brittany—are not always immune to this type of manipulation. College students in particular are susceptible to abusive relationships. Nearly one third of college women report being in an abusive relationship and over half reported they knew a friend who was in an abusive relationship. On top of this, most do not know what to do when themselves or a friend is in an abusive relationship, and 70% of those who said they have been in an abusive relationship, were not aware it was abuse at the

⁸⁶There was a period of time this season they did break up, but got back together before the Season 6 reunion.

⁸⁷On February 29th, 2024, Brittany announced their separation on their joint podcast, *When Reality Hits with Jax and Brittany* Palmer, T. (2024, May 27). Jax Taylor and Brittany Cartwright's Relationship Timeline. *Peoplemag*. <https://people.com/jax-taylor-brittany-cartwright-relationship-timeline-7503018#:~:text=Jax%20Taylor%20and%20Brittany%20Cartwright%20have%20separated%20after%20four%20years, following%20rumors%20of%20marital%20issues>.

⁸⁸Another feature of intimate domestic violence is jealousy issues which fall under dominance-possessive behavior. When new SUR employer Adam was flirting with Brittany in Season 6, Episode 14, Brittany says in her confessional: "Jax is really, really, really jealous. If someone is flirting with me or if he thinks I'm flirting with someone, it kills him. He cannot handle it whatsoever."

⁸⁹Fans speculate she stayed in the relationship for so long because she wanted to be on TV. In fact, Brittany knew Jax was going to be in Las Vegas when they met and purposely "stalked" him there. This also makes sense as to why she was so quick to move across the country to live with a guy she just met. Still, there is no denying that Jax's manipulative tactics could not have also influenced her stay, and besides her following him to Vegas, many students can still relate to not wanting or being persuaded to stay with abusive partners.

time.⁹⁰ Given these statistics, it is crucial for us to discuss signs of manipulation and intimate domestic abuse manipulation signs in the classroom. When students are taught about these warning signs, they are less likely to end up in abusive relationships and make better choices concerning their romantic partnerships (Murphy & Smith 2010b; Vennum & Fincham 2011).

The *VPR* couples cheat on each other often, yet most end up staying with their cheating partners—or at least, that was not the final straw of their break ups. It perhaps is easy for those of us who have not been cheated on nor have been in an abusive relationship to think it is bizarre that people stay in such abusive relationships, but we must deconstruct the nuances of these affairs. Additionally, though perhaps we can empathize with the cheater in some situations, we must remind ourselves to not make excuses for our loved one's immoral behaviors and try to teach ourselves self-respect.⁹¹ By further analyzing the gaslighting and manipulative smooth-talking displayed by Jax in his and Brittany's relationship, we do have a better understanding of why Brittany has a hard time cutting ties altogether, but we should also acknowledge that this choice will likely damage her self-esteem (Wessells 2022) and restrain her in a relationship where moral respect is not reciprocated. Students watch the nonsensical mistreatment Brittany is subjected to in her relationship with Jax, and ideally, after analyzing Jax's abusive patterns on screen, students will be able to recognize similar patterns in behaviors in their own lives and hopefully have the courage and ability to confront and/or avoid them.

Here are some other ethical dilemmas in *VPR* concerning romantic relationships that could also be entertained in the ethics classroom:

- ❖ *Boundaries of Flirting When In a Committed Relationship* - Lala, Brittany, and Jax, Season 4
- ❖ *Dealing with an Affair* - Ariana and Sandoval, Season 11
- ❖ *Emotional Cheating* - Kristen and Sandoval, Season 2
- ❖ *Rage-Texting* - Katie and Schwartz, Season 4-5; James and Rachel, Season 8
- ❖ *Berating our Partner in Public* - Katie and Schwartz, Season 8
- ❖ *Verbal Abuse* - Kristen and James, Season 3-4; James and Rachel, Season 7-9; Jax and Brittany, Season 6-8
- ❖ *Dealing with our Partner's Addiction* - Shay and Scheana, Season 3; James and Rachel, Season 7-9
- ❖ *Invading Partner's Privacy* - Kristen and Sandoval, Season 2

⁹⁰Peugh, J., & Glauber, A. (2011). 2011 College Dating Violence and Abuse poll. In *Liz Claiborne Inc.* Knowledge Networks.

https://www.loveisrespect.org/pdf/College_Dating_And_Abuse_Final_Study.pdf

⁹¹Another point to make here is to try our best to stick to our decisions if we choose to leave an abusive relationship. Brittany saying she will leave Jax if she finds out the cheating rumor was true but then doesn't leave him teaches Jax that he will likely get away with his egregious behavior in the future.

- ❖ *Fighting Under the Influence* - Katie and Schwartz, Season 4-8; Kristen and James, Season 3-4, Rachel and James, Season 7-9⁹²
- ❖ *Breaking Up with Our Partner* - Laura-Leigh and Jax, Season 1; Scheana and Shay, Season 5; Brittany and Jax, Season 6
- ❖ *Getting Back Together* - Jax and Brittany, Season 7; Stassi and Patrick, Season 6
- ❖ *On-Again, Off-Again Relationships* - Kristen and James, Season 4; Stassi and Patrick, Season 4-6; Kristen and Carter, Season 6-8
- ❖ *Getting Into Another Relationship Too Quickly* - Kristen and James, Season 3; Ariana and Sandoval, Season 3; Scheana and Rob, Season 6; James and Ally, Season 10
- ❖ *Moving Too Fast* - Scheana and Rob, Season 6
- ❖ *On the Brink of Divorce* - Scheana and Shay, Season 5
- ❖ *Prenups* - Katie and Schwartz, Season 5; Scheana and Brock, Season 9
- ❖ *Commitment Issues* - Katie and Schwartz, Season 3-4
- ❖ *Conflict with In-Laws* - Brock and Scheana's Mom, Season 11
- ❖ *Establishing Boundaries with Ex* - Katie and Schwartz, Season 10; Ariana and Sandoval, Season 11
- ❖ *Living with Ex* - Ariana and Sandoval, Season 11
- ❖ *Jealousy of Our Ex's New Relationship* - Kristen, Sandoval, and Ariana, Season 3
- ❖ *Friendship with Ex Post-Divorce* - Katie and Schwartz, Season 10
- ❖ *Hooking Up with Ex's Best Friend* - Jax and Kristen, Season 2; Katie and Schwartz, Season 11
- ❖ *Mixing Romance and Business* - Ariana and Sandoval, Season 5; Katie and Schwartz, Season 9

Here are some potential supplementary readings about infidelity and feminist contractarianism that can complement this unit on romantic relationships:

- ❖ *Why, And To What Extent, Is Sexual Infidelity Wrong?* (2020), Natasha McKeever, 20 pgs
- ❖ *What's Really Wrong with Adultery?* (1986), Michael J. Wreen, 6 pgs
- ❖ *Why Feminist Contractarianism?* (2002), Ruth Sample, 21 pgs
- ❖ *On Not Making Ourselves the Prey of Others: Jean Hampton's Feminist Contractarianism* (2007), Janice Richardson, 21 pgs

Professional

VPR started as a reality TV show filming the lives of these struggling 20-somethings working at Lisa Vanderpump's restaurant SUR making professional life an essential component of the show's

⁹²Actually, most of the heated conversations and fights on the show are accompanied by large amounts of alcohol, but these ones in particular specifically addresses alcohol as the catalyst for blowing up these altercations into what they were.

dynamics. SUR is what unites the cast together. Viewers watch cast members get promoted, suspended, and fired, and also watch as they move onto different career ventures outside of SUR. And, yes, we get plenty of relational drama on the show, but there are plenty of opportunities to see the behind the scenes of what it takes to create and maintain a thriving business. For this unit, I want to focus on balancing personal interests and well-being with our professional obligations. I chose care ethics to pair with the two dilemmas I will discuss. I present the first dilemma through a conversation transcription from the employer's perspective, and the second dilemma is presented as a fictional hypothetical dilemma based on the real events from the previous one that I created from the employee's perspective.

More and more business departments at universities are requiring their students to take business ethics courses,⁹³ but I argue non-business majors can still benefit from discussing ethical business practices. If students are not already working, college may be the time where they start applying for part-time jobs alongside their studies. And of course, one of the main purposes of college is to prepare students for their future career which will inevitably become an important facet of their lives. Thus, it is important we equip them with the proper tools to navigate common workplace dilemmas.

As business owners, we want to create a stable atmosphere in the workplace, but perhaps our number one goal as a business is to generate as much profit as possible, and that may mean having employees suffer in a contentious workplace environment. There are times when employers have to decide between firing disruptive, yet profitable employees and potentially losing money, or keeping these disruptive employees because they guarantee profits.

Additionally, as employees, various personal troubles also may hinder our professional life. Personal troubles within our families, friendships, and romantic relationships; mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and more; difficulties jelling with our co-workers and superiors; or even simply feeling unfulfilled in our line of work can all significantly affect our productivity. Perhaps some of us may be able to shake it off and “stay professional”, but if we are spending 40 hours a week at our 9-5 jobs working in an environment that is unstable, unfulfilling, or problematic in some fashion, there may be a point where we have had enough. But, if we complain or take time off, it may make us look unprofessional in front of our boss or peers. Or, if it gets to the point where we would want to resign, that presents a whole new host of issues.

Care Ethics

I believe care ethics is a suitable philosophical concept to pair with this unit. Popularized by Nel Noddings and Carol Gilligan, care ethics is a moral theory that aims to cultivate and preserve

⁹³DePaul University. (2006). *Ethics education increases at world's top-50 business schools*. DePaul Newsroom Archives.
https://wdat.is.depaul.edu/newsroom/year_2006/1537.html#:~:text=Twenty%2Dfive%20percent%20of%20the,require%20coverage%20of%20all%20three

relationships and prioritizes the well-being and needs of the people within them. Often contrasted with ethical theories like utilitarianism and deontology, care ethics perhaps resembles a feminist-esque approach to ethical decision-making as it resembles a more care-giver methodology. Out of all the ethical theories, perhaps students are more likely to employ care ethics because it feels the most intuitive.

Care ethics is not typically associated with business which is why I find it especially valuable to discuss in this unit in particular. Students may believe that the workplace is supposed to be “professional”, and because of this, it is best to avoid getting too caught up in collegial relationships—perhaps particularly for employers. We should focus on producing whatever product and service makes the company money and less about forming emotional connections, and perhaps we should especially avoid making workplace decisions based on these emotional connections. But, most employees want to feel respected and cared for in the workplace (Murthy 2022), and if we care about controlling employee retention rate—or simply, making our employees happy—then perhaps we should cultivate a workplace environment that grounds itself in care and encourages workplace relations.

Most students have not been in positions of power at the workplace, but some will in the future. Additionally, they could very likely be in a position where they have to decide if they should prioritize their professional commitments over their health and well-being—especially if they have employees or patrons counting on them to fulfill those commitments. Through learning about care ethics and thinking about how we should balance our well-being with our professional obligations, here are some potential ethical questions regarding professional ethics we can entertain in the classroom:

- ❖ To what extent should a boss grow emotionally attached to their employees?
- ❖ Should we fire a misbehaving employee despite them generating a good deal of revenue for our business?
- ❖ Should our main focus as business owners be to generate max profit or maintain a compassionate workplace environment?
- ❖ Is a bad mental health day a fair excuse to not come into work?
- ❖ How much should we prioritize our workplace obligations over our mental health?
- ❖ How do we navigate having to work with an unpleasant co-worker or boss?
- ❖ What are the pros and cons of adopting a care ethics approach in business?

For this unit, I will be discussing a professional ethical dilemma from an employer’s perspective, Lisa, and an employee’s perspective, Katie. In the first dilemma, we see how Lisa’s care-ethics approach affects her business decisions. I took inspiration from the first dilemma to create a second hypothetical dilemma from Katie’s perspective on how to balance maintaining your mental health with your professional obligations. After discussing these dilemmas, students can then answer these self-reflective ethical questions about workplace dilemmas:

- ❖ What do you think counts as inappropriate behavior in the workplace?

- ❖ If you noticed immoral behavior in a co-worker you did not like, would you tell someone?
- ❖ If you noticed immoral behaviors in a co-worker you *did* like, would you tell someone?⁹⁴
- ❖ At what point would you quit a job you liked because you disliked a co-worker?
- ❖ Have you ever wanted to ask out of work for a mental health day? How did you handle it? How did your employer react?
- ❖ Would you like an employer like Lisa? Why or why not?
- ❖ In what ways do you think Lisa is a care ethicist? In what ways is she not?

Katie and Lisa

Original *VPR* cast member Katie has been working for SUR owner Lisa many years prior to filming *VPR*. Lisa respects and admires Katie, not only as an employee but as a person. Their relationship is deeper than your typical employer-employee relationship, as Lisa is Katie's confidant and role-model. She was even the officiant at Katie's wedding. And unlike many of the other SUR employees, Katie has done a decent job at not bringing drama into work⁹⁵, specifically around customers.

SUR employee James on the other hand has been known to cause chaos at work. He has been suspended and fired multiple times already for his egregious behavior such as getting drunk while working and starting fist fights. Lisa has said to James before that she has given him more chances than anyone else. And though James has caused chaos in the workplace on numerous occasions, Lisa still finds a way to rehire him, perhaps for a multitude of reasons.

Perhaps we could argue Lisa adopts a care ethics approach when managing her employees. On multiple occasions, Lisa appears on the brink of firing SUR employees, but because of her maternalistic nature and her emotional attachments to her employees, she usually settles on giving them another chance, even if they do not truly deserve it. She has frequently noted how such-and-such employee has worked with her for many years, thus she has loyalties to them which makes it that more difficult to let them go. But, from a business owner's perspective, another reason why we should endure the antics of these riotous employees is if they generate a lot of revenue to our business. And, it is important to note it is not just the boss who earns this extra profit, but perhaps the employees as well, so keeping these

⁹⁴This can also tie into our discussion on friendship loyalty. If a co-worker we are friends with is participating in behaviors that could negatively affect the business, should we tell someone? This can also become more of a dilemma if we are already in a position of power, i.e. we have more of a responsibility to prioritize the business over trivial workplace friendships.

⁹⁵Of course, there is always some drama at SUR, and since Katie works there, she is inevitably involved at times. However—at least from what I remember—there was not a time where Katie was creating the drama in front of customers. Typically, when she is confronting someone or participating in “drama”, she usually takes it in the back alley, away from any customers. And, she is typically conscious of the fact that she needs to get back to work and refrains from raising her voice for others to hear.

disruptive, albeit profitable employees can arguably be the more “caring” decision, depending on one’s interpretation.

As mentioned in the family unit, Lisa has known James’ family for years, so she has a special attachment to him. Despite James’ various screw-ups and antics, Lisa cannot help but try to nourish this potential for greatness she sees in him. We know how emotionally invested Lisa is in James’ life because James’ own mother even said to her “you’re like a mother figure to him” in Season 7, Episode 5. This is perhaps one reason why Lisa has given James more chances than anyone else. Additionally, from a business owner’s perspective, it makes sense to keep him because of the money he generates for SUR. James’ weekly DJ night, *See You Next Tuesday*, made typically slow Tuesdays into one of the most profitable nights for SUR. Without James DJing, SUR can expect to decrease in revenue which could be a potentially big hit not only for the restaurant, but the SUR employees checks.⁹⁶

James and Katie have not been the best of friends. In the past, James has made several body-shaming and other brutish comments to Katie as well as trash-talked her relationship with Schwartz. Unafraid to fire back, Katie also has shot cruel remarks towards James, but mostly in reaction to his egregious words and actions.

In Season 7 Episode 2, during SUR’s annual gay pride celebration, James is confronted by his girlfriend Rachel about allegations of him cheating on her with another SUR employee, Hope. Hope herself, along with former SUR employee and James’ ex-girlfriend Kristen, were the ones who told Rachel this news. Outraged by these accusations, James snaps at Rachel for believing them and storms off to the back alley of SUR where several other SUR employees and other customers are partying. His drunken and angry mood makes him shoot seething insults at his other cast mates.

While in the back alley, James has a conversation with Lala, one of his best friends. Lala expresses her disappointment in James’ behavior and pushes him to consider why the others are not cool with him. He urges Lala to stop “bringing them into the mix” because he misses hanging out with her. Lala tells him he “needs to get intense help”. Katie decides to share her two cents which causes James to fire a string of body shaming comments towards her. We cut to Katie in her confessional saying, “James has a history of pointing out someone’s insecurities, and then just—really using them as a weapon against them, and that is a pretty sh*tty quality to have.”

In Season 7, Episode 3, after Katie’s encounter with James at the pride celebration, she finally has had enough of James’ behavior at work and sits down with Lisa to talk about his body-shaming comments towards her:

LISA: Are you ok↑ay?

(1.5)

KATIE: Ye↑ah, I’m okay (1) ↓first and foremost, I’m okay, uh=

⁹⁶We could also offer a third reason being because of the show itself; perhaps it makes more sense for him to work at SUR if he is going to continue to be on *VPR*.

LISA:=What do you mean?

KATIE: Okay, s::o that=

LISA:=You're sca:ring me

KATIE: Heh >I'm sorry (h) no no, I'm sorry<=

LISA: =Have I got reason to be sc↑ared?

KATIE: °Uh.. I don't think so, no.° (1) Uh so I was out ba:ck, having a bre:ak (.) at Pri:de and James came back there, clear↑::ly very drunk. ↑All I said was like ↑'James, fix your shorts' [they're hanging all over the place like=

LISA: [Right

KATIE: An:d he just turns to me and goes, ↓“don't even get me started on you Katie”((mocking voice)) and he just like gave me this (.) disgusting stare, and just like “You should no↑t be wearing those shorts” °like-like “You're fat”°

LISA: Just like, nasty piece of work

KATIE: Just disgusting, it was just s:o (.) derogatory.

LISA: But, I don't want ↑you to go back to ↑questioning how beaut:iful you are.

[cut to Lisa's confessional]

LISA: I've seen before how these kind of comments have affected ↑Katie (.) An::d somebody like James is just taking a-a cheap shot

[cut to Lisa and Katie]

KATIE: H↑e's making me [back:↓slide] into that place

LISA: [Please don't]-but he's an idiot, okay?

KATIE: But he's an idiot that gets away with (.) speaking with abu:sive language towards wo↑men[and] I don't toler↑ate that anymore

LISA: [Well-] and nor should you

[cut to Katie's confessional]

KATIE: James Kennedy ha:s hurt and offended almost eve:ry sin:gle person that works at SUR

[cut to flashback of James insulting various VPR women]

KATIE: And his comments to me is just the last and final straw

[cut to Lisa and Katie]

KATIE: Like, I don't-I don't think it::s ri↑ght that I should have to show up to work and subject myself ↓t::o that kind of language=

LISA: =And you shouldn't

KATIE: If he thinks he can speak to-↑m::e that way, >is he gonna say it to a host? Is he gonna say it t:o< one of the other ser↑:vers, one of the ↑bartenders?

LISA: <I certainly didn't realize the level and extent of how ru:de and ignorant he was that day because I chose ↑not to deal with him then and there, because he was doing his DJ crap, and he was kinda, riding high and loving himself. Okay? And I'm glad you told me and I will deal with him>

[cut to Lisa's confessional]

LISA: I don't like ↑an::ything (.) that makes a woman feel (.) less about herself, an::d that pisses me off

[cut Lisa and Katie]

KATIE: So what-what are you going to do?

LISA: Well, I haven't decided yet

[cut to Lisa's confessional]

LISA: I want a place where people where co:me and they make mo:ney, and there's this joie de vivre, and the Tuesday night that James bu:ilt u:p and is really a fantastic night, ↑but I also have to realize that the people who wo:rk here do not want to be ↑insulted

[cut to Lisa and Katie]

KATIE: Can I tell you what I'm prepared to do?

(2)

LISA: I'd like to hear that

KATIE: I-this has be:en my ↑ho:me, a family for me for almost ni:ne years (4) I am not willing to work that it's ↑tolerated

(3)

LISA: So, basically, it's an ultimatum.

Based on the transcription, we can tell Lisa does truly care about Katie's well-being and how she is treated as an employee at her restaurant. We can also see Katie's pent up frustration bubbling over as she stands her ground in her ultimatum. She tries to appease not only Lisa's emotional side, but her business-minded side as she explains that James could say these cruel comments to her other staff which could create more conflict in the workplace. In the nine years Katie has worked at SUR she has cultivated new friendships and a strong relationship with Lisa, so this job is not easy for her to give up, thus this proves her agitation with James is a far more serious issue.

Similar to Schwartz's dilemma, whatever Lisa decides to do will inevitably lead to at least a slightly ruptured relationship. Lisa has strong emotional—and practically maternal—attachments to both Katie and James, so essentially Katie is forcing her to pick between her two "children". Katie is an unproblematic, hard worker. Not only that, but she has become quite skilled at restaurant serving and managing. On the other hand, James is the epitome of a problematic employee. However, his legendary Tuesday night DJ parties pull in a lot of revenue for SUR.

But, despite Katie's dedication and skill, James' DJ night, See You Next Tuesday makes James arguably "more essential" to SUR, monetarily-wise, while Katie is more or less "replaceable".⁹⁷ People come to See You Next Tuesday to see James specifically DJ, as this is what SUR manager Peter claims

⁹⁷Because of *VPR*, perhaps Katie is not *that* "replaceable" because people may request having Katie specifically as their waitress after watching her on the show. And even without the show, she still may have regulars, but 1. this is not explicitly stated on the show—to my knowledge at least, and 2. unless you have a lot of regulars or heavy-spending regulars, I do not believe it would come close to the revenue James' DJ night generates.

during a SUR staff meeting following James' firing. This invites students to entertain an interesting conversation about how bosses should balance bringing in money to their businesses and maintaining a healthy work environment for their employees. This also introduces the question similar to our friendship unit, that is, how do we determine and measure our loyalties—and, in the case for the professional—does maintaining loyalty override our goal to generate as much profit for our business as possible?

It is interesting to analyze how the care ethics approach works in this ultimatum. An employer who does not operate from a care ethics perspective would easily fire James after just one of the myriad of immoral acts he has committed without giving it a second thought. Yet, at the same time, a non-care ethicist employer may solely look at the numbers, and despite his immoral behavior, they see James generates a ton of money for a normally slow Tuesday night. This alone may lead to this employer choosing James over Katie.

We could argue if Lisa was a true care-ethicist, then she would fire James because he is hurting the people close to her. Additionally, if James cared about—or at least respected—Lisa, he would not cause this much conflict in her business. Because of this, it does not seem the consideration is reciprocated from James' end, thus similar to our discussion in the friendship unit, this does not appear to be a true “friendship” because one is subjugated to corruption of the other. Moreover, if Lisa truly does want to create a healthy working environment for her employees, perhaps she should remove James from SUR. Some workplace gossip and bullying can easily lead to even more gossip and bullying (De Clerq 2022) which are catalysts for these employee altercations. And, with a healthier work environment, employees potentially improve their work performance (Itani 2019).

Katie's Dilemma

Katie enjoys working at SUR, and over her nine years of working there she has developed worthwhile relationships with her coworkers and boss, but should she throw that all away because of her disdain towards James? Finding another job could be difficult⁹⁸, especially one that perhaps pays as well as this one. Besides finding a job that pays well, ideally, it should also be one that has the ability to foster such fruitful relationships like SUR did. So, is threatening to leave her job worth it? And, perhaps more importantly, should she have put her boss in this position to choose one employee over the other?

Clearly, she is not satisfied working with James and his comments are more than just petty insults. He knows how to target people's insecurities and exploits them in order to hurt people, and being around someone like this can really harm someone's mental health and self-esteem.

Here, I will start a discussion about whether we can or should prioritize our well-being over our professional obligations. Instead of using an exact dilemma depicted in *VPR*, I wanted to take inspiration from these events and construct a new twist on a possible dilemma Katie could be

⁹⁸Of course, Katie is still making money from filming *VPR*, but in any other case, this would be a significant concern.

confronted with. Similar to Schwartz's Dilemma, this can be another example of how we can take the situations from reality TV and use our imagination to alter them to propose new ethical dilemmas that may better fit our class discussion. To make it more of a dilemma, I added a dimension of contractual agreements. Here is the ethical dilemma that I created inspired by Katie's situation with James:

Katie's Dilemma

Katie has had a rough season filming with co-star James. James has frequently sneered hurtful comments to Katie and other cast members, but this particular season he was targeting Katie more than ever by insulting her weight and calling her names. Katie has noticed his hurtful comments take a toll on her self-esteem and mental health. Katie has threatened to leave her job at SUR if James continues to be employed, but she realizes that is not enough. She has been able to avoid James by not attending events he is invited to and blocking him on social media. Unfortunately, because she has signed a contract with Bravo, Katie must attend and film the Season 7 reunion where James will not only be there, but they will be forced to have conversations about all the mistreatment she was subjected to this season. Not only did Katie sign a contract, but she understands that Bravo and *VPR* fans are relying on her to discuss her story arc with James as that will aid more viewers and make a more enticing reunion special. Katie has an obligation to participate in this reunion special because not only is it her job, but her producers, co-stars, and millions of *VPR* fans are depending on her. However, she does not want to interact with someone who has hurt her this much, and who she predicts will not be remorseful for his words and actions.

This dilemma poses an interesting question: Should we risk our health and well-being in order to fulfill our professional obligations? We know that negative workplace gossip can harm an employee's organizational self-esteem (Song & Guo 2022). And even though Katie is a tough gal who courageously defends herself and others, that does not mean she is relieved from any less anxiety (Nielson 2017).

It seems like the obvious answer would be to not risk our health, but in this scenario, it gets more complicated. Katie has three sets of people relying on her to be present at the reunion: the Bravo TV network, her fellow cast mates, and the *VPR* fans. She has a contractual agreement with Bravo to film the reunion, and if she refuses to film, it may result in her termination from the show.⁹⁹ Breaking this contract could also harm her reputation when trying to get other jobs. Additionally, besides feeling incomplete in their friend's absence, her fellow cast mates will have one less fighter to stand behind them during the inevitable emotional bloodshed that is the reunion special. They depend on Katie as

⁹⁹Gillis, D. (2023, May 18). What happens to Vanderpump Rules if its cast can't stand each other? *The A.V. Club*.

<https://www.avclub.com/vanderpump-rules-if-no-one-will-film-together-1850451572>

not only a castmate but as their friend, to be present with them during such hectic and vulnerable times. Finally, the *VPR* fans depend on Katie's participation in the reunion because they have been invested in the Katie-James dynamic the entire season, and like all the other conflicts in the season, it is satisfying to watch the drama unfold as the cast members "have at it" during these reunion specials. Yes, viewers are not solely tuning in just for the James-Katie feud, but we can expect some disappointed fans if Katie is absent from the reunion.

Even with all these people relying on her, perhaps it is more important for Katie to look out for herself first. If James' comments hurt her this much and being in his presence is that bothersome, then perhaps her employers should adopt a more care ethics approach and empathize with her choice not to attend the reunion if she so pleases. But, we could also argue Katie knew what she was signing up for when she agreed to be casted on *VPR*, and that includes interacting with people she does not like such as James.

It can be frustrating as an employer for our employee to call out of work at the last minute, especially if the excuse is for a mental health day which an unsympathetic employer may interpret as "I just don't feel like coming". But, by watching the torture Katie and the other *VPR* cast must endure from James, we can see why Katie would refuse to be around him.

Though this dilemma is fictional, students can easily relate to Katie's dilemma. We have all experienced personal or health-related troubles that prevent us from wanting to fulfill our professional obligations¹⁰⁰, but at the same time, we do not want to let people down. We may be confronted with the possibility of having to put aside our mental or physical health to fulfill these obligations.¹⁰¹ There are various instances that can prevent us from fulfilling our professional responsibilities¹⁰², and it is important for students to realize that it is harder for people to take seemingly trivial professional responsibilities seriously when they are struggling with more severe circumstances.

A smaller-scale version of Katie's dilemma could happen while working on a group project. Perhaps a student finds themselves in a depressed state unable to complete their part of the project. Their depression may get worse when they think about how their group members are relying on them to complete their part, but they still find themselves unable to get it done. Additionally, the group members must understand to adopt sympathy towards their group members, but at the same time, they must now decide how to approach their task. Even though it may be frustrating to have to pick up the

¹⁰⁰Not just professional obligations, but familial, friendship, or partnership obligations too.

¹⁰¹This presents an opportunity to discuss with our students how our physical and mental health impacts our day-to-day life and what role health plays in making decisions involving others.

¹⁰²Another important discussion to note is how people can misinterpret you and your actions if they are unaware of your struggles. Throughout the show, Ariana has been called a "debbie downer" in multiple instances. But, in Season 8, she opens up about her fight with depression. This allows us to gain perspective on this seemingly "debbie downer" behavior. Hearing Ariana be vulnerable on screen about the struggles with depression makes her feel more human. Depression has skyrocketed in the last decade, thus many students may relate to Ariana's struggles.

slack of another group member, we could unknowingly be doing a big favor, and perhaps they will remember our kind gesture, and return the favor in the future.

Some of the other work-related situations on *VPR* seem trivial, but I believe they open larger discussions about loyalty, honesty, and workplace relations. Here are other situations surrounding professional life from *VPR* that students can explore in the classroom:

- ❖ *Romantic Relationships Between Employees* - Lisa, Jax, Brittany Season 6; Lisa, Kristen, Sandoval, Season 2
- ❖ *Personal Conflicts Between Employees* - Kristen, Ariana, Sandoval, Season 2; James and Katie, Season 6; Stassi, Katie, and Kristen, Season 8
- ❖ *Firing Employees* - Lisa and Kristen, Season 3; Lisa and James, Season 6-7
- ❖ *Rehiring Employees* - Lisa and Jax, Season 4 & 7; Lisa and James Season 3-8; Lisa and Lala, Season 6
- ❖ *Nepotism Hiring* - Lisa and James, Season 3
- ❖ *Hiring "Secret Diners"* - Lisa and SUR staff, Season 2
- ❖ *Reopening After Business Tragedy* - Lisa, Season 6
- ❖ *Philanthropic Business Practices* - Lisa, All Seasons
- ❖ *Disagreement Between Business Partners* - Sandoval and Lisa Season 6; Schwartz and Sandoval Season 7
- ❖ *Going Into Business with Romantic Partner* - Jax and Brittany, Season 7; Schwartz and Katie, Season 9
- ❖ *Going Into Business with Best Friend* - Schwartz and Sandoval, Season 7; Stassi, Katie, and Kristen, Season 8; Schwartz and Sandoval, Season 9; Katie and Ariana, Season 10
- ❖ *Friend as a Client Conflict* - Stassi and Sandoval, Season 7
- ❖ *Lying to Employer* - Lisa and Lala, Season 4
- ❖ *Walking Out Mid-Shift* - Sandoval and Ariana, Season 3; Schwartz, Season 3
- ❖ *Playing Up Injuries to Get Out of Work* - Lisa and Scheana, Season 2
- ❖ *Working During a National Tragedy* - Lisa and SUR employees, Season 5
- ❖ *Mean Girls at Work* - Stassi and Scheana, Season 1; Scheana, Katie, and Lala, Season 4; Scheana and Dayna¹⁰³, Season 8

Here are some potential philosophical readings that couple well with our discussion on adopting a care-ethics approach to running a business:

- ❖ *Care Ethics, Knowledge Management, and the Learning Organization* (2012), Maurice Hamington, ~9pgs
- ❖ *Sticks and Stones may Break Your Bones, but Words can Break Your Spirit: Bullying in the Workplace* (2005), Gina Vega and Debra R. Comer, 7pgs

¹⁰³Not Stassi's mom! This is another Dayna who was a SUR employee.

- ❖ *Care Ethics and Stakeholder Theory* (2011), Maurice Hammington and Maureen Sander-Staudt, 17pg
- ❖ *Care and Loyalty in the Workplace* (2011), Julianna Oxley and D.E. Wittkower, 20pg

Conclusion

As Nussbaum argues, compassion is the foundation for leading an ethical life. As the many scholars I discussed in this thesis will agree, engaging in narratives allow us to cultivate this empathy for others and gain access to new perspectives on how we ought to live. And, with reality TV, it is even more powerful since we are empathizing with *actual* people dealing with *actual* dilemmas.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1999) note that many times this mass art is the only access people have to art which, I believe, is all the more reason why we should take it seriously and should interact with it in the classroom. They argue that the audience cannot take advantage of the benefits of high art such as exposure to new ideas or opportunities for self reflection, but as I have proved, when taught in the correct way, reality TV and other mass art forms definitely have the ability to do these things, and in some cases, more. And though other mass art critics like Adorno and Horkheimer (1999) believe mass art can negatively influence our perceptions and desires, they will inevitably be engaging with this art, thus if we can teach them how to engage with it critically, and relate it back to their own lives, not only is this concern null, but students can have access a deeper perspective of their lives and judge it accordingly.

As much as these academics may expect students to rise to their level rather than adjusting to theirs, perhaps they ought to adapt their teaching methods to appease the modern educational climate if they want to foster a proper learning environment. I do not believe it is necessarily the case that students' inability to handle rigorous material is because they are too unmotivated, lazy, or unintelligent. And, I am under the impression that many students *do* want to learn, but perhaps they are not as excited to learn material that is dense, uninteresting, or unrelatable. If students cannot find the relevance in what we are teaching, or find the way in which we are teaching unstimulating, then we will not be able to win over these students. And, we should *want* to win them over. As educators, we should want our students to not only master the material we are teaching, but have a *desire* to learn it, and then take what they learned in the classroom to benefit their lives in some way.

By incorporating mass art such as reality TV in the classroom, we are not diminishing the goals of education. We are not just simply watching trashy reality TV. We should supplement our reality TV analysis with our philosophical material—and of course, the philosophical material should be somewhat digestible and free from too many abstract ideas that are too convoluted for the typical Intro to Ethics student. Reality TV not only draws the attention of the tech-dependent student, but has the potential to cultivate the compassion required for ethical decision-making which is more important to lead an ethical life than studying abstract theory alone. Additionally, these convoluted, abstract texts may likely bore the average non-philosophy major, and perhaps make them correlate these feelings of boredom and

frustration with philosophical study which we want to avoid. Studying philosophy is important. Not only for developing one's critical thinking skills but to lead a flourishing life well lived. If these non-philosophy majors cultivate negative feelings towards philosophy, then there will be a missed opportunity to explore it in their own lives.

Of course, I used *Vanderpump Rules* as my example of how we can incorporate reality TV into the ethics classroom, but educators have a myriad of shows to choose from, and if they more or less fit the criteria I highlighted in Section Two, then they should be great candidates for producing narrative imagination in the classroom.

But, I do believe *VPR* has some limitations. For one, although there are instances from the show that address global ethical problems such as animal and LGBTQ+ rights, the staff is not faced with dilemmas surrounding these large-scale ethical problems that perhaps we would want to discuss in an applied ethics class. Additionally, it may be harder for us to cultivate sympathy for these cast members because being famous reality TV stars places them in such a privileged position. However, we cannot deny that when people watch shows like *VPR*, many do see themselves within the cast members. Here are some comments from Reddit users about *VPR* fans' reflections of some of the dilemmas discussed in this thesis and their thoughts on the show overall:¹⁰⁴¹⁰⁵

- ❖ “I think you're really getting at why [*VPR*] has been so popular. It's because everyone in it, truly everyone, has terrible moments. They're not good people. But they each then have humanizing moments and you realize they are all just that: human”
- ❖ “James was a holy terror back in his first few seasons, but seeing his family dynamic and how he's responsible for them financially really was an ‘Aha’ moment for me. I'll never excuse him treating Kristin the way he did, but he was so young and was absolutely a product of his environment. It's never an excuse, but it is a reason.”
- ❖ “I'll never excuse James for the way he was back then, I still don't find him completely okay because of the stuff he's done but seeing the way he basically was the only ‘responsible’ adult in

¹⁰⁴[MoonberryAddict]. (2024, May). *When did you guys empathize with the cast the most?* [Online forum post].

Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/vanderpumprules/comments/1cwm4sl/when_did_you_guys_empathize_with_the_cast_the_most/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web3x&utm_name=web3xcss&utm_term=1&utm_content=share_button

¹⁰⁵[Emptyglassesamps]. (2018, January). *This relationship is terribly abusive* [Online forum post].

Reddit.

https://www.reddit.com/r/vanderpumprules/comments/7qra3j/this_relationship_is_terribly_abusive/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web3x&utm_name=web3xcss&utm_term=1&utm_content=share_button

the family made me actually feel for him and it kind of made sense why he was as f*cked up a person as he was back then”

- ❖ “Seeing just those few show interactions between James and his mom are enough to tell me he’s had a rough go of it. That doesn’t excuse any of his abusive behavior, but does show me that he’s fighting a bigger battle than most.”
- ❖ “Anytime Katie cries gets me. I relate so hard to her and I know what it takes to make her cry. You can’t fake that.”
- ❖ “I’ve been in a relationship with a guy just like Jax. The way he treats [Brittany] is so f*cked up that sometimes I feel hurt watching it because it takes me back to how I was treated. All the lies, all the gaslighting. I really wish she would get out but I’ve been in her shoes before and I know how hard it is to leave once you’ve invested time and effort into the relationship. That sunken cost fallacy is so real!”

Despite mass art critics like Collingwood (1938), Greenberg (1939), and MacDonald (1953) claiming mass art cannot contain any real value, it seems reality TV is valuable for many people. And based on these few comments from *VPR* fans and the several others out there, watching other people go through situations and traumas similar to our own makes us feel less alone and allows us to see others as more human. Even if reality TV is staged, the audience’s emotional reactions and compassion to the cast members’ tragedies are real. Similar to how we can relate to fictional characters in stories, we still feel the same compassion and empathy with these reality TV cast members.

In general, we tend to put on facades of what we expect others to see of us, and often that means feeling we must suppress our guilty pleasures (like indulging in reality TV for example) for the sake of appearing more sophisticated or sensible—and I believe this is especially the case in academia. God forbid, our colleagues discover we unironically enjoy Bravo reality TV! How despicable!

These mass art-loving undergraduates perhaps have similar reactions to the academic’s love for philosophy. How could they possibly find interest in something so seemingly dreadfully boring? However, we know that hidden underneath philosophy’s abstract concepts and grandiloquent verbiage, there is a real treasure, we just need to encourage students to seek it.

As educators, we should find a way to bridge the gap between these two opposing worlds. And I believe incorporating the ideas discussed in this thesis could help. Perhaps bridging these two opposing worlds will allow us not only to cultivate compassion in our students, but to cultivate compassion within ourselves.

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