



In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful  
به نام خداوند بخشنده مهربان

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## An Introduction to Applied Ethics

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# **An Introduction to Applied Ethics**

**Mohammad Javad Movahedi**

## **Publisher's Forward**

To begin and execute a research is like walking in the path of development and evolvement. When the seeds of the “questions” are planted, in the soil of the mind of the researcher, this phase initiates, and its end is culminated when the result and the outcome of knowledge and wisdom is gained.

Evidently, this end is a new chapter in itself, for growth, and announces beforehand this good news to humans. For the result of all those mental efforts will not only bring the blooming and flowering of talent and all kinds of Blessings to humans, but it also makes the mind of the researcher to ponder and shape new, more questions.

This will produce a great collection of growing plants and flowers for the seeking mind... Those “questions” are in fact, the seeds, which according to the necessities of Time and the strength of the researchers will grow and bloom by themselves. They will make Culture and Civilization to move forward.

In like manner, the increasing rate of transferring oneself from one place to another place and the decrease of the distances will make those seeds travel miles and miles, to faraway places, in order to install them inside the curious mind of other seekers. This will bring an amazing diversity and a novelty for another civilization...

It is true then, that the presence of knowledge and a good, capable management will help this project to develop itself and one has to admit indeed, that it has always played an important role...

Al-Mustafa International Publication and Translation Center, because of its global mission, and its special position among the Religious Schools and the colorful human diversity that it has developed inside itself, sees it as a moral duty to procure all the appropriate conditions for any research works, and takes its role in this matter, most seriously. To procure all kinds of necessary grounds, with an excellent management of all the existing possibilities and talents, and to care and protect all its researchers in religious fields; these are the most crucial responsibilities of the Department of Research in this International center.

We dearly hope that by being attentive to all these autonomous scientific movements, and by fortifying all the existing motives, we shall be able to witness the blooming of the Religious Culture in every part of this wide world!

**Al-Mustafa International  
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## **Chapter 1: An Overview of Applied Ethics**

### **OBJECTIVES:**

*When you have read and discussed this chapter, you should gain the following:*

- An understanding of the nature and definition of applied ethics
- An awareness of the methods in applied ethics
- An understanding of the relationship between applied and normative ethics
- An understanding of the relationship between applied ethics and meta-ethics

## Lesson One: The nature and definition of applied ethics

### Introduction:

The field of ethics (or moral philosophy) involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior. Philosophers today usually divide ethical theories into three general subject areas: meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. *Meta-ethics* investigates where our ethical principles come from, and what they mean. Are they merely social inventions? Do they involve more than expressions of our emotions? Meta-ethical answers to these questions focus on the issues of universal truths, the will of God, the role of reason in ethical judgments, and the meaning of ethical terms themselves. *Normative ethics* takes on a more practical task, which is to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct; this may involve articulating the good habits that we should acquire, the duties that we should follow, or the consequences of our behavior on others. Finally, *applied ethics* involves examining specific controversial issues, such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights, environmental concerns, homosexuality, capital punishment, or nuclear war.

By using the conceptual tools of meta-ethics and normative ethics, discussions in applied ethics try to resolve these controversial issues. The lines of distinction between meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics are often blurry. For example, the issue of abortion is an applied ethical topic since it involves a specific type of controversial behavior. But, it also depends on more general normative principles, such as the right of self-rule and the right to life, which are litmus tests for determining the morality of that procedure. The issue also rests on meta-ethical questions such as, “where do rights come from?” and “what kinds of beings have rights?”<sup>1</sup>

### Applied Ethics<sup>2</sup>:

Applied ethics is the art or science of reflecting on moral dilemmas and moral problems in different social contexts. One of the most influential philosophers in the field of applied ethics, James Childress, defines applied ethics as follows:

The terms "applied ethics" and "practical ethics" are used interchangeably to indicate the application of ethics to special fields of human activity, such as business, politics and medicine, and to particular problems, such as abortions (Childress, 1986).

The number of "special fields" has constantly increased, and, hence, applied ethics is an expanding field. Medicine and health care were starting points, and politics and business followed. Now, more and more human activities are assessed from an ethical

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1-From: James Fieser, Ethics, in: internet encyclopedia of philosophy, for more info: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ethics>, Accessed in June 2019.

2-From: göran collste, applied and professional ethics, kemanusiaan vol. 19, no. 1, (2012), 17–33

point of view: farming, animal breeding, technology, etc. Recently, I even came across a research project in "space ethics"! Since the 1970s, applied ethics has developed as a discipline with numerous sub-disciplines: medical ethics, animal ethics, environmental ethics, business ethics, Research ethics, technology and ethics, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) ethics, politics and ethics and etc.

However, one phrase in Childress's definition warrants additional consideration. What does Childress mean when he says that applied ethics indicates "...the application of ethics to special fields of human activity"? The expression mirrors perhaps an oversimplified, deductive view of applied ethics. Many authors have questioned the view that applied ethics is just an application of ethical theory to practical problems. In contrast to Childress, these authors stress that for the sake of relevance, applied ethics presupposes interplay between theory and practice, experience and reflection and intuitions and principles.

Tom Beauchamp suggests the following definition of applied ethics: "... 'Applied ethics' refers to any use of philosophical methods to treat moral problems, practices, and policies in the professions, technology, government, and the like"(Beauchamp 2003, 3). Obviously, analyzing ethics implies using philosophical methods. However, against the background of the recent tendencies of multi-disciplinary research in applied ethics, attaining well-grounded conclusions requires using various methods.

### The history of applied ethics

Interest in increasing our understanding of ethical issues concerning health care, business, the professions, and the environment has grown markedly over the last quarter century. When considering the main forces giving rise to this increased interest in applied ethics, one naturally thinks first of biomedical ethics, the most mature and well-defined of the divisions of applied ethics. Although abetted by the 'liberation' movements of the 1960s and 1970s, biomedical ethics emerged principally in response to various issues and choices that were created by new medical technologies<sup>1</sup>.

In a famous expression, philosopher Stephen Toulmin said that "Medicine saved the life of ethics" (Toulmin 1982). In the 1960s, the academic discipline of ethics was in decline. Most moral philosophers worked with conceptual and epistemological questions. Not many were engaged in normative ethics, and even less bothered to analyze moral problems in the real world. Consequently, many people considered academic ethics a peculiar philosophical subject. In the early 1970s, the situation changed. Medicine saved the life of ethics; new and acute moral problems in medicine that had no ready-to-hand answers emerged. Ethicists were wanted once more.

Different reasons lie behind the development of applied ethics. Three of these reasons are as follows. During the 20th century, the Western world experienced a period of secularization. Fewer and fewer people attended church, and fewer and fewer people asked for moral advice from the church. In the words of sociologist Max Weber, "moral heteronomy", whereby moral answers were provided by an authority,

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1 -Ruth Chadwick, 1998, Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics, Academia Press, P: 175.

often the church became "moral autonomy", whereby individuals themselves had to formulate answers. This development took place at a time when, in medicine and in other social fields, new and difficult moral problems were arising: should limits be applied to pre-natal diagnostics? Should euthanasia be permitted? How should we address new genetic possibilities like stem-cell research and human cloning?

A second, complementary explanation of the development of applied ethics relates to new moral problems facing society as a consequence of new technologies. For example, in neonatal intensive care, the lives of extremely premature infants could be saved. However, in many cases, the babies were saved only to live short and handicapped lives. Where the doctor should set the limits of treatment? When should a baby be saved and when allowed to die? In another example, from another field, the development of computer technology has made possible the storage of more and more information, including personal information about individual people. However, this development may threaten the right to privacy. How should one find the right balance between the need for information and the protection of privacy?

The problems mentioned are examples of policy vacuums: we do not know how to handle new situations, and we lack moral and legal concepts and principles to address them (Moor, 1985). Thus, the rise of applied ethics can be explained by a need to fill policy vacuums.

Developments in the social sciences and the humanities often mirror social change. At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of 1970s, the student movement and the New Left challenged established society. Heated discussions took place on topics such as the Vietnam War, social injustices, poverty in the Third World, gender inequality and the maltreatment of animals. Many philosophers were engaged in these discussions. From this perspective, the development of applied ethics can be seen as a philosophical response to a new social environment.

I will illustrate the development of applied ethics in the 1970s by referring to three books published during the decade. These books can still be considered the three most important works in the modern history of applied ethics.

The first book is John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971. *A Theory of Justice* is a comprehensive and theoretical investigation of the meaning and justification of justice. Partly in opposition to utilitarianism, Rawls argues for a neo-Kantian contract theory and ends up with two principles of justice that incorporate the meaning of justice. Furthermore, Rawls develops a method of justification of moral beliefs called "reflective equilibrium", which is still the most influential in the field. With the publication of *A Theory of Justice*, justice became a key issue in applied ethics. The comments on and critiques of Rawls's theory number in the thousands.

The second contribution to applied ethics that I will refer to is Peter Singer's book *Practical Ethics*, published in 1979. In *Practical Ethics*, Singer discusses several moral issues from a utilitarian perspective. Among the issues discussed are war, poverty, abortion, euthanasia, the treatment of animals, etc. Singer argues compellingly, and he does not hesitate to draw radical and often counterintuitive conclusions. Singer's critique of the principle of human dignity led to heated



controversies, and he was, for some years, even banned from speaking publicly in Germany. The reaction of the German authorities to Singer's work showed that applied ethics has a strong social impact.

The third book is a contribution to medical ethics that is considered the modern classic in the field. One of the authors, Tom Beauchamp, is a utilitarian philosopher, while the other, James Childress, is a Kantian philosopher. One of the aims of the book, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, first published in 1977 (and followed by numerous new editions), was to construct ethical principles acceptable to people belonging to different moral traditions, religious backgrounds and having different philosophies. Beauchamp and Childress proposed the following four principles as a basis for moral decision making in medicine: the principle of non-maleficence, the principle of beneficence, the principle of respect for autonomy and the principle of justice. Other authors have applied the four principles to other areas in applied ethics, like research ethics and business ethics.

Common to these three works in applied ethics is that each of them has influenced the discussion in applied ethics in a profound way. Thus, they can be considered "classics" in applied ethics.

The turn to applied ethics took place in the 1970s and 1980s. The turn involved many philosophers changing their focus. Moral philosophers were traditionally engaged in analyzing moral semantics and other issues in meta-ethics. Now, more and more philosophers worked with moral problems in society. However, the turn to applied ethics was not a turn away from issues in meta-ethics. The discussion about methods in applied ethics and theories of justification has been lively, and different alternatives, such as *Principlism*<sup>1</sup>, *Specificism*<sup>2</sup>, case-based theories (casuistic) and Rawls's theory of reflective equilibrium, have been developed.

The turn to applied ethics was a turn from descriptive ethics to normative ethics. Many early 20th century philosophers believed that ethics as a philosophical discipline should be restricted to describing and analyzing concepts and theories. For academic philosophers to engage in normative argumentation was not appropriate. For example, in his 1911 inaugural lecture, the Swedish philosopher Axel Hägerström emphasized that "Moral philosophy should not be a subject in morality but a subject about morality" (Hägerström, 1966). Rawls and Singer took a different position. According to them, for an ethicist to take a stand on controversial issues is possible and legitimate. What is important is that the ethicist has good arguments.

However, one may still question whether the turn to applied ethics was something new. Brenda Almond argues "...the inception of applied philosophy (including applied ethics) coincides with that of the Western philosophical tradition as a whole" (Almond, 2000, 13). Remarkably, she mentions the pre-Socratic philosopher Thales (c.585 B.C.) as a pioneer in the field of ethics and economics. Other examples of

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1-Principlism, much as other multi-principled theories, is applied to situations in which two or more obligations hold and only one can be satisfied (for more info: DeMarco. J P, Principlism and moral dilemmas: a new principle, J Med Ethics 2005; 31:101–105).

2-Specificism vs. Generalism

important contributions to the history of applied ethics are works by Plato and Aristotle, philosophers who, among other things, worked in the areas of ethics and politics (for example, Plato's *The Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*). Later philosophers engaged in applied ethics include Immanuel Kant, John Locke and John Stuart Mill, all of them inspiring authors for present-day ethicists.

Applied ethics also has roots in theological ethics. As classic examples, one can mention the theories of a just war of Augustine (5th century) and Aquinas (13th century). The conditions these theories set for a war to be judged just, namely, that the war must be fought with the right intentions, waged by a legitimate authority and aimed at redressing a wrong suffered, are still highly relevant to the present discussion on just war. Furthermore, Catholic and Protestant ethicists were amongst the first to engage in medical ethics (see, for example: Ramsey, 1970 and Häring, 1974).

### Moral guidance from an ethicist

What is the role of ethicists? Should they answer questions and make recommendations regarding specific decisions? Or should they only provide information about, for example, methods for decision making, relevant ethical principles and previous decisions in similar cases? Different ethicists answer this question differently. According to Peter Singer, nothing prohibits ethicists from arguing for particular positions in applied ethics, if they have good arguments. Singer himself argues vigorously for liberal immigration policies, for generous aid to poor countries, against hunting etc. (Singer, 1977).

Ronald Dworkin advocates a less normative position. According to Dworkin, under the methodological program of "philosophy from the inside out", the primary task of the ethicist is to listen to conflicting views, to interpret and even reconstruct them to grasp their ethical substance and clarify how they are related. Thus, according to Dworkin's view, the role of the ethicist is rather one of an interpreter and moderator than a judge (Dworkin 1993).

### Some of the Issues in Applied Ethics<sup>1</sup>:

As noted, there are many controversial issues discussed by ethicists today, some of which will be briefly mentioned here.

*Biomedical ethics* focuses on a range of issues, which arise in clinical settings. Health care workers are in an unusual position of continually dealing with life and death situations. It is not surprising; then, those medical ethics issues are extreme and diverse than other areas of applied ethics. Prenatal issues arise about the morality of surrogate mothering, genetic manipulation of fetuses, the status of unused frozen embryos, and abortion. Other issues arise about patient rights and physician's responsibilities, such as the confidentiality of the patient's records and the physician's responsibility to tell the truth to dying patients. The AIDS crisis has raised the specific issues of the mandatory screening of all patients for AIDS, and whether physicians

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1-1-From: James Fieser, Ethics, in: internet encyclopedia of philosophy, for more info: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ethics>, Accessed in June 2019.

can refuse to treat AIDS patients. Additional issues concern medical experimentation on humans, the morality of involuntary commitment, and the rights of the mentally disabled. Finally, end of life issues arise about the morality of suicide, the justifiability of suicide intervention, physician assisted suicide and euthanasia.

The field of *business ethics* examines moral controversies relating to the social responsibilities of capitalist business practices, the moral status of corporate entities, deceptive advertising, insider trading, basic employee rights, job discrimination, affirmative action, drug testing, and whistles blowing.

Issues in *environmental ethics* often overlap with business and medical issues. These include the rights of animals, the morality of animal experimentation, preserving endangered species, pollution control, management of environmental resources, whether eco-systems are entitled to direct moral consideration, and our obligation to future generations.

Controversial issues of *sexual morality* include monogamy versus polygamy, sexual relations without love, homosexual relations, and extramarital affairs.

Finally, there are issues of *social morality*, which examine capital punishment, nuclear war, and gun control, the recreational use of drugs, welfare rights, and racism.

## The Main Points

- Applied ethics is the art or science of reflecting on moral dilemmas and moral problems in different social contexts.
- *Applied ethics* involves examining specific controversial issues, such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights, environmental concerns, homosexuality, capital punishment, or nuclear war.
- In the early 1970s, Medicine saved the life of ethics; new and acute moral problems in medicine that had no ready-to-hand answers emerged. Ethicists were wanted once more.
- The turn to applied ethics took place in the 1970s and 1980s.
- The turn to applied ethics was a turn from descriptive ethics to normative ethics.
- There are many controversial issues discussed by ethicists today, such as biomedical ethics, business ethics, environmental ethics, and so on.

## Questions:

- 1) What is applied ethics?
- 2) When and why did applied ethics appear?
- 3) How do we engage in applied ethics?
- 4) What are the issues in applied ethics?