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APPLIED ETHICS – A BRIEF OVERVIEW¹

What distinguishes us humans from other primates is our delicate and complex brain structure and function. These features of ours allow us to perceive ourselves and the world that surrounds us in a very special way: while all other creatures seem to take their own and the overall existence for granted, we are the only species capable of wondering about both. Wondering leads to posing questions, and posing questions promotes wondering even more. This is the reason why the human condition could be described as a constantly inquiring one: we keep asking about almost everything, including even our ability to ask.

The task of philosophy even from its emergence has been to provide answers to the most demanding questions that dominate the minds of humans²: Is there a God or many of them? Is there an afterlife? Why do we have to die? Where were we when we before we were born? Questions as such are the task of Metaphysics to answer. How do things exist, and which of them actually do? These are questions usually addressed to Ontology. Do things exist in our mind only, or is their existence independent of our intellectual grasp of them? Is thought capable of producing existence, or is it just the product of what exists? Do we perceive reality through our senses alone, or is it the mind that creates reality? The Theory of Knowledge has over the ages provided some extremely delicate answers to questions as such. Is beauty an inherent quality of beings, or is it just being attributed to them by our intellect? This question and others as such, are for Aesthetics to answer. Every sub domain of philosophy is assigned some kind of questions; these questions remain by their very nature *always open*, because no adequate or final answer can ever be provided to them. If there could, this would mean the end of philosophy or, at least, of its particular sub domain; this, however, is highly unlikely to happen, at least as the history of philosophy clearly shows.

While Metaphysical, Aesthetical, Ontological etc questions are of extreme significance, by no means do they constitute an everyday occupation for the human intellect. Most probably you who read these lines right now have woke up in the morning, done what you had to do and returned back to open this book without having in the meanwhile wondered about the existence of God, the meaning of death or the import of beauty. Such issues of a somewhat existential nature are reserved for special instances in our lives. There is one kind of questions, however, that no person can avoid dealing with in one's everyday life, and that in multiple occasions. These are

¹ This essay was written to be translated into Serbian as an introduction to the book *Primenjena Etika* (Novi Sad: Mediterran, 2014), which I co-edited together with Duska Franeta.

² Both Plato and Aristotle believed that philosophy originates in wonder. See, respectively, *Theaetetus* 155c-d and *Metaphysics* 982b.

the ones concerning *the proper way* to act or to react to various circumstances and events in life, and they outline the territory of Ethics.

Ethics are about doing the good, or the right, or the decent, or the proper, or the virtuous thing in everyday issues. It is also about doing what would render one good, or right, or decent, or virtuous. Ethics stem from moral dilemmas, and moral dilemmas exist only where one has at least two options and is free to choose among them. The key question in Ethics is “What is the right thing to do in this case?”, and it means that there are *at least two things* to do, and that one is able to do *either this or that*. Every other question in Ethics can be reduced to the one above: those concerning justice; the ones that make reference to rights; those that focus on virtue etc. This question might seem as a single one, but it actually is of a twofold character, depending on whether one stresses the “right thing to do” part, or the “in this case” one.

All moral philosophers from the classical period up to Immanuel Kant have obviously focused on the first part of this question, and invested all their efforts to the pursuit of what could be right, good, fair, just or decent *in general*. Therefore they first sought to come up with a satisfactory definition of these terms, sharing the belief that, if the import of each one could become clear, *all* moral issues would be clarified and thus solved. Seeking to provide a *general norm* that would apply to all particular moral problems and issues is to create a *system* or a *moral theory*. Such approaches to Ethics constitute what in the History of Philosophy is being usually referred to as Normative Ethics. The most influential among the moral theories or systems that have been proposed over the ages are Virtue, Deontological, and Utilitarian Ethics. We consider it useful for the reader to provide a rough outline of each one.

Virtue Ethics starts with Aristotle, and it constitutes a quite delicate answer to the riddle. From a virtue-ethicist’s point of view, the good thing to do is what the virtuous person would have done in the circumstances. But who counts as a virtuous person? Of course one who possesses the virtues. And what exactly are the virtues? Aristotle argues that they are character traits that lead to happiness, or *eudemonia*³. How, then, can one be virtuous under the light of all these? Obviously, one can achieve virtue by adjusting one’s behavior to that of another person of irrefutable virtue. If this is not possible, then one has to resort to one’s reason in order to find the desirable mean (the *golden mean*) between excess and deficiency, which is identical to virtue. This one is a charming moral theory, but it is not flawless. For one, it tries to establish a connection between virtue and happiness, which doesn’t seem to be based on fact: many virtuous persons are not happy, and many vicious are. In addition to this, Aristotle’s trust in the ability of the human intellect to locate the so called *golden*

³ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1100b 11-12: “The happy man therefore will possess that element of stability ... since he will be always or at least most often employed in doing and contemplating the things that are in conformity with virtue... being as he is ‘good in very truth’ and ‘four-square without reproach.’” Also, and more characteristically, 1102a 13: “...happiness is a certain activity of soul in conformity with perfect virtue.”

mean seems to disregard not only the restrictions of human nature, but also the fact that there are cases in which *there just seems to be no golden mean*. Furthermore, this eternal quest for virtue sometimes proves to be either misguiding or undesirable in everyday life: the virtue of bravery, for instance, has led the six hundred horsemen of the Light Brigade to their doom driving them into a heroic but hopeless charge during the battle of Balaklava, a narrow valley in Ukraine, which right afterwards became famous as “the valley of death”; the virtue of sincerity, on the other hand, might make you look impolite or even inhumane in everyday intercourse. These frequently raised objections towards the consistency and functionality of Virtue Ethics do not necessarily do justice to Aristotle’s system, nor are they always bolstered with solid argumentation – at least all of them. The fact, however, that they are often being raised, proves that Virtue Ethics are not easily accessible by all moral agents and in every occasion.

The most prominent figure in Deontological Ethics is undoubtedly Immanuel Kant, who seems to share the same – almost romantic – trust in human intellectual supremacy with Aristotle⁴. In his views the right thing to do when in the horns of a dilemma is that which could under the same circumstances become a universal law⁵. Whether an option could or should ever become a universal law or not is obviously a matter of intellectual assessment, a decision which falls under the domain of an agent’s logical capacities. The problem with this is that not every moral agent can proceed with such a delicate logical assessment and concerning every moral dilemma. Furthermore, there are some moral dilemmas with regard to which reason alone might come up with an outcome that would be abominable to our moral sentiments. When having to tell the truth or lie, for instance, reason according to Kant can only dictate that lying could never become a universal moral law, even if by telling the truth one would have to reveal to murderers one’s brother’s hide. Kantian ethics, in general, sometimes seems so lofty, that it is inaccessible to normal moral agents. Kant, however, though probably the most influential, is not the only ethicist in the field of Deontological Ethics. According to Rosalind Hursthouse’s brief but excellently descriptive account⁶, for Deontological Ethics the right, proper, fair or just thing to do is that which abides by some moral norm or axiom; a moral norm, in turn, is something either [a] given by God, or [b] in accordance with the laws of nature, or [c] dictated by reason. Apparently Kantian ethics belong to the third category. The first one leads to deistic moral approaches, which can be effective only for believers. Although the answers provided by deistic ethical theories are totally satisfactory to the

⁴ He also invested all his efforts in the formulation of an objectively (logically) necessary means of moral assessment, a categorical instead of an hypothetical imperative, which “would be that one which represented an action as objectively necessary for itself, without any reference to another end.” Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, edited and translated by Allen Wood (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2002), 31 [Ak 4:414].

⁵ “The categorical imperative is thus only a single one, and specifically this: Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it becomes a universal law.” Ibid., 37 [Ak 4:421].

⁶ Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory and Abortion”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20.3 (1991): 223-246, 224.

members of a particular cult or religion, they leave out everyone else, thus they are not suitable for philosophical meditation. In the second category the most influential theory is probably Hedonism, either in its Aristippian or its Epicurean form. For both Aristippus of Cyrene and Epicure from Samos all beings in nature seek pleasure and try to avoid pain. Therefore, the right choices are those that promote pleasure and repulse pain⁷. Aristippus pays no special attention to the nature of pleasure, as long as any specific pleasure is easily and promptly accessible; Epicure, on the other hand, distinguishes between static and dynamic pleasures, or between the pleasures of the flesh and those of the mind, favoring – although in an ambiguous manner – the static ones⁸. In any of its forms Hedonism falls prey to the naturalistic fallacy⁹, since from a premise that describes what actually *is* (all living beings seek pleasure and avoid pain) it infers what *should* be (moral agents *ought to* seek pleasure and avoid pain). If this was so, however, moral agents would enjoy full moral permission to take advantage of others according to their powers, since this is what actually happens in nature; in ethics, however, this is usually considered entirely unjustifiable – even by Epicurean or Aristippian hedonists.

Consequentialism (and, in particular, its most vibrant and characteristic trend, Utilitarianism) follows an equally simple thread: good is what brings about the best consequences for everybody engaged to – or affected by – a moral choice. The best consequences, in turn, are those due to which human happiness is being maximized. Therefore, moral agents – before undertaking any action – should calculate the amount of happiness that would be produced by each one of the options they are allowed according to some kind of objective means (for this purpose Bentham proposed his famous so-called *hedonistic or felicific calculus* for this purpose)¹⁰. Consequentialism promised to become an objective and infallible instrument for moral guidance; to Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, its pioneers, rejecting subjective means of moral assessment – such as the motive of the moral agent – and resorting to obvious and countable ones – such as the consequences of any possible option – would spare normative ethics of ambiguity, sophistry and inability to guide moral agents through everyday life. Despite the initial good hopes, even for Consequentialism this proved to be a hard goal to achieve: calculating the best possible outcome is not an easy task for the average moral agent. *A fortiori*, it seems an impossible task for everybody, unless one knows precisely what the future is about to bring. Let's take abortion, for example: how is a young girl able to assess the outcome of either one of her choices, to interrupt her pregnancy or to maintain it? Furthermore, the choice that brings about the best possible outcome is not always

⁷ Epicurus, *The Art of Happiness*, translated by George K. Strodach (New York: Penguin, 2012), 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁹ Also referred to as the “*is-ought* problem”, first articulated by David Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (New York: Dover, 2003), 334. It was later developed in a different sense by G. E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica* (New York: Dover, 2004), 9 ff.

¹⁰ According to Bentham the moral assessment of any possible action should take into account seven specific *circumstances*: 1. Its intensity, 2. Its duration, 3. Its certainty or uncertainty, 4. Its propinquity or remoteness, 5. Its fecundity, 6. Its purity, and 7. Its extent. See Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 38-41.

morally acceptable, as Bernard Williams clearly showed¹¹. If wiping from the map a village of 200 people would make everybody else happy, it is still morally objectionable to do so only for the purpose of maximizing overall pleasure.

So much for normative ethics. The fact alone that none among normative ethical theories proved to be sufficient for everyday moral guidance seemed to speak of the need for a different approach, a maybe non-normative one. This became prominent in the twentieth century, during which the humanitarian (to wit, moral) failure of our species became clearly manifest in the two consecutive world wars; most notably, in the skeletal bodies of the victims of Auschwitz and Treblinka, and in the continuous nuclear disaster in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Normative ethical theories proved themselves unable to prevent even the most hideous crimes against humanity; on the contrary, in some circumstances they seemed to provide the theoretical background – or just an alibi – for morally abominable options, as in the case of the nuclear disaster in Hiroshima that has been defended mainly through utilitarian argumentation.

The situation at the time seemed to call for a different approach to ethics, and philosophers did not turn a deaf ear to this. Nevertheless, their first response to the obvious failure of Normative Ethics has been a defensive one: they limited themselves in a more or less fruitless debate over the precise import of the key-terms used in the language of Ethics, as well as on the nature of morality and the meaning of moral judgments. This came to be known as Meta-ethics, a term that, according to Peter Singer, “... signified that [moral philosophers] were not actually *taking part* in ethics, but were engaged in a higher-level study *about* ethics.”¹² Moral philosophy was now considered to be unsuitable for moral guidance, as A. J. Ayer put it¹³, since, in the words of C. D. Broad, “... moral philosophers... have no special information not available to the general public about what is right and what is wrong...”¹⁴ The “general public”, however, never seemed to share such views: someone had to be able to offer guidance concerning what is right and what is wrong; and if moral philosophers weren’t suitable for this, then who else might be? Meta-ethics was meant to remain a strictly academic domain accessible only by experts; ethics, however, have always been for average people with actual problems who seek *ad hoc* answers and practical guidance. It didn’t take philosophers long to realize this; when they did, it was the time for Applied Ethics to come to the foreground.

For Applied Ethics the previous century has been the time of its emergence, but not of its birth¹⁵; Applied Ethics has always been there, even in the works of normative ethicists such as David Hume¹⁶, John Stuart Mill¹⁷, Immanuel Kant¹⁸ and others. This

¹¹ See his “Critique of Utilitarianism”, in Bernard Williams and J. J. C. Smart, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 77 ff.

¹² Peter Singer, *Applied Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 2.

¹³ “...many people find moral philosophy an unsatisfactory subject... for they mistakenly look to the moral philosopher for guidance.” A. J. Ayer, *Philosophical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1954), 246.

¹⁴ C. D. Broad, *Ethics and the History of Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), 244.

¹⁵ See Peter Singer, op. cit., 1 ff.

¹⁶ See his *On Suicide* (London: Penguin, 2005)

is not without a good reason; ethics, even from its establishment as a field of philosophy during the classical period, has been considered to be practical philosophy that tends to be applicable to everyday life¹⁹, and needs to be so in order to meet with its purpose. Therefore, instead of implying that normative ethics are not applicable to everyday life, this brand new subfield of Ethics rather indicates a *Copernican shift* in the approach towards moral issues: while normative ethics are systematical theories that proceed from general maxims to particular cases or distinct issues, Applied Ethics instead focus right from the start to individual cases or issues, trying to apply normative ethical theories to real ethical problems²⁰.

Applied Ethics had to wait till the second half of the 20th century, “when first the American civil rights movement, and then the Vietnam war and the rise of student activism began to draw philosophers into discussions of moral issues: equity, justice, war and civil disobedience.”²¹ Philosophers like Ronald Dworkin, Philippa Foot, Michael Tooley, H. L. A. Hart and Judith Jarvis Thomson tried to clarify the muddy waters of popular moral debates such as the ones concerning abortion, euthanasia, sexual morality, suicide, human rights, political disobedience and professional conduct. In 1971 James Rachels published his *Moral Problems*²², an anthology compiled of papers on such issues that was going to become one of the most widely used texts in Ethics at its time. At about the same time was founded the journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, that soon became the ideal forum for philosophers focusing on practical issues. The final touch, however, came by Peter Singer in 1979 with his *Practical Ethics*²³, and then with his notorious anthology *Applied Ethics*²⁴; the latter was destined to award the new field its final name. Since then Applied Ethics has broadened its scope so as to encompass various sub-fields. The most prominent among them are the following:

[a] Bioethics. The first part of the term (bio-) stands for biotechnology. Bioethics seeks to address moral issues that have arisen from the immense and rapid advance in biotechnological sciences such as Biology, Genetics, Medical Technology etc. Some of the more controversial current debates in Bioethics are those on human and animal cloning, euthanasia, surrogate motherhood, abortion, sex selection etc.

[b] Medical Ethics. Medical deontology leaves many moral issues open for doctors and medical staff such as selective treatment, deceitful therapies (such as placebo ones), information disclosure, doctors’ duty to consent to patients’ demands of

¹⁷ See, for example, his “Speech On Capital Punishment Against Amendment to Capital Punishment within Prisons Bill”, in *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series, 1047-1055 (London: Hansard, 1830-1888)

¹⁸ See his *Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals*, translated by Ted Humphrey (Cambridge; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983).

¹⁹ For Aristotle “...virtue in active exercise cannot be inoperative – it will of necessity act, and act well.” See *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a 9.

²⁰ Peter Singer, op. cit., 3.

²¹ Ibid.

²² James Rachels, *Moral Problems* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

²³ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979)

²⁴ Op. cit.

ambiguous moral character (demands for euthanasia or abortion, for example), etc. Issues as such, that are not fully – or satisfactory – addressed by deontology, fall under the domain of Medical Ethics.

[c] Environmental Ethics, although present in philosophy as early as the Hellenistic period, was established as a sub-field of Applied Ethics during the 15th World Congress of Philosophy in Varna, Bulgaria. This was due to a presentation by the young and not well-known at the time Australian philosopher, Richard Routley (later Sylan)²⁵. Henceforth it focuses on the moral status of non-human beings and the environment, on the moral relations between humans and the natural world, on whether humans have duties towards the non-human world, or whether non-human beings or entities can be considered as bearers of moral rights.

[d] Business Ethics deal with individuals' or organizations' moral conduct in a business environment, as well as with the moral issues that are being raised in such an environment. It also focuses on general principles that should guide professional conduct concerning intellectual property, human resources management, professional strategy, corporate social responsibility etc.

[e] Computer-Cyber Ethics encompasses user and network duties and rights, proper conduct at both ends, the protection of personal sensitive data, the proper function of social media, issues concerning web pornography (especially child pornography), online gambling, the protection of property (including intellectual) etc.

These, of course, are not the only sub-fields for Applied Ethics, only the currently most debated and controversial. Next to these are usually also being referred Law Ethics, Media Ethics, International Relations Ethics, Financial Ethics etc. As long as it would be only wishful thinking to set as a purpose for this book to present Applied Ethics in all its sub-fields, we decided instead to focus only to some of them – the most characteristic ones according to our taste – and offer the reader an introduction that would afford him a general overview of Applied Ethics and the best possible insight concerning it.

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Athens, 12th of September 2013

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