

Introduction to Applied Ethics

historical and social conditions of the emergence of the field

doc. MgA. Jan Motal, Ph.D.

[1] Sts Cyril and Methodius Faculty of Theology
Palacký University Olomouc

[2] Faculty of Social Studies
Masaryk University

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MUNI



Cyrlometodějská
teologická fakulta

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Section 1

The Emergence of Applied Ethics

Ethics or Morality?

In everyday communication, we usually do not distinguish between the words *ethics and morality* — we use both to evaluate conduct or to establish criteria for it (lying is not ethical; he is an immoral person). In general, both concepts refer to distinguishing *good and bad* and *right and wrong*. In colloquial usage, ethics is often used to refer to social principles, while morality is associated with personal — individual — ones. The word morality is also often linked to philosophy or theology (moral philosophy, moral theology), while ethics is associated with the principles of a profession (journalistic ethics, medical ethics). We will use the word ethics in line with the tradition that uses the concept to designate rational, logical, philosophically grounded reflection on morality.

Definition

Ethics is concerned either with the study of how people evaluate conduct (*descriptive ethics*) or with establishing mechanisms for decision-making — norms (*normative ethics*). At the same time, ethics includes various subdisciplines, among them applied ethics, also called practical ethics (or professional ethics, which is closely related to these terms). One of the founders of the field, James F. Childress, defined it as follows:

The terms "applied ethics" and "practical ethics" are used interchangeably to designate the application of ethics to special areas of human conduct, such as business, politics, and medicine, and to concrete issues, such as abortion.

Ethics has always asked "practical questions," from its very beginnings in antiquity. Only in the twentieth century, however, did the independent academic field of *applied ethics* become established as a response to social and technological developments after the Second World War.

Conditions for the Emergence of Applied Ethics

Applied ethics emerged in the 1970s and 1980s because:

- technological development confronted humanity with new problems and questions, including robotics and discoveries in medicine, genetics, and biology
- the cultural revolution of the 1960s expanded the discourse of human rights and opposed the paternalism of experts, institutions, and governments — a demand for equality and democratization
- in the 1950s and 1960s, moral philosophy turned toward (abstract) metaethical questions and ceased to be credible for addressing practical problems — a new platform had to be found
- in academia, under the influence of these developments, topics such as abortion, euthanasia, the protection of human and animal subjects in research, racism, sexism, working conditions, and others were discussed from an ethical point of view — and in the 1970s the term "applied ethics" began to be used for such reflections

Conditions for the Emergence of Applied Ethics

At the same time, new ethical theories were developing in response to cultural, social, and economic shifts (the rise of neoliberalism, the environmental movement, etc.), for example:

- Elisabeth Anscombe's essay *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1958) renewed interest in virtue ethics, which was then developed above all by Philippa Foot and Alasdair MacIntyre and which encouraged thinking about community
- Nel Noddings formulates *relational ethics*, which turns against Enlightenment rationalism that privileges individual autonomy and redirects attention to interpersonal relationships and human needs
- building on her work and on Carol Gilligan's research, *the ethics of care* emerges and brings a feminist critique of an individualized, paternalistic society into ethical reflection
- in 1971 John Rawls publishes *A Theory of Justice*, in which he defines an ethics of justice in relation to the weakest and most vulnerable social groups

Neutral or Engaged Ethics?

In field-specific ethics, the question is often discussed whether professional principles are neutral or whether they reflect values of social engagement. Although the debate continues, on the basis of what has been said above we can say that applied ethics historically grows out of the paradigm of *social responsibility* and is therefore markedly social and democratic in orientation. Although applied ethics does not formulate its own political ideology, it serves to establish *policies* and is also part of political discussions and conflicts, especially between so-called progressives and conservatives. As Anat Matar explains, ethical thinking necessarily includes fundamental values of justice or equality, which practical ethics pushes into the background in favor of "neutral" principles embodied in professional codes. Ethics is in fact not apolitical; it makes concrete, democratizing demands.

How to Assess?

- *top-down* – starting from an existing norm, which is then applied to a new situation
- *bottom-up* – starting from experience, casuistry
- *coherentism* – reflective equilibrium (John Rawls), the gradual narrowing of a broad set of moral judgments through testing them

Where Should Principles Come From?

- *externalism* – principles are formulated by society, the state
- *internalism* – principles are formulated by the profession or the group concerned
- *mixed approach* – reflective equilibrium
- sometimes also *pragmatism* – a focus on practical consequences

Section 2

Founders

Judith Jarvis Thomson



J. J. Thomson (*1940, †2020) was a pioneer of applied ethics and worked on deontology. In the early 1970s she published the important article *A Defense of Abortion*, in which she introduced a completely new argument based on acknowledging the fetus's right to life. She used a thought experiment in which a person was asked to imagine being involuntarily attached for nine months to the body of a famous violinist in order to lend him a kidney. Even part of the anti-abortion movement accepted and works with her arguments. She also addressed the issue of privacy. Together with Philippa Foot, she is associated with the thought experiment known as the *trolley problem*.

James Franklin Childress



J. F. Childress. (*1940) is one of the founders of applied ethics. A philosopher and theologian, he focuses primarily on biomedical ethics and works at the University of Virginia, one of the oldest institutions devoted to applied ethics. He has served in organizations concerned with organ transplantation, gene therapy, and the oversight of data from patients participating in biomedical research. With Tom Beauchamp he wrote the book *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (1978), which is a classic of the field and continues to appear in new editions. He has also written books on civil disobedience and essays on nonviolence, war, and Christian social ethics.

Basic Principles of Biomedical Ethics

- *autonomy*
- *nonmaleficence* – do no harm
- *beneficence* – promote good
- *justice*

Tom Beauchamp



Tom Beauchamp (*1939), together with J. F. Childress, was present at the birth of biomedical ethics. A philosopher specializing in the philosophy of David Hume, bioethics, and animal ethics, he works at the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University. He contributed to the *Belmont Report*, which in 1978 formulated basic principles for research involving human subjects that remain valid today, and he defended animal rights.

The Belmont Report

Basic principles of research involving human subjects:

- *respect for persons*
- *respect for human dignity*
- *do no harm and promote good* – nonmaleficence and beneficence
- *be just*
- *informed consent*
- *anonymity*
- *confidentiality*

Peter Singer



Peter Singer (*1946) is an Australian philosopher and activist, a major figure especially in animal ethics. He is a descendant of Jewish emigrants from Vienna. His grandfather was a collaborator of Freud. He works at universities in Melbourne and Princeton. He develops so-called preference utilitarianism, which enabled him to critically expose the moral shortcomings of "speciesism" – prejudiced judgment that privileges one's own biological species. He advocates effective altruism, that is, the imperative not merely to reduce suffering but to do so effectively. His book *Animal Liberation* is a classic of the field. He founded The Life You Can Save, an organization focused on effective altruism.

Preference Utilitarianism

It divides moral obligation toward beings according to how they are able to perceive and become aware of suffering.

- *beings without consciousness* – without a central nervous system. No ethical obligation. For example, plants.
- *conscious sentient beings* – they have a central nervous system and feel pain. We have obligations toward them deriving from classical utilitarianism. However, they do not have self-consciousness and are replaceable. For example, farm animals.
- *persons* – they have self-consciousness and are aware of both the past and the future. We must take their preferences into account. All persons have equal value, but they are not replaceable. Individual right to life. Humans, primates.

Carol Gilligan



C. Gilligan (*1936) is an American psychologist and a pioneer of the feminist movement. She was present at the emergence of the ethics of care when, in her book *In a Different Voice*, she criticized Kohlberg's theory of moral development and proposed her own classification based on research with women. In the conventional stage of moral development, a woman identifies with motherhood; this is followed by a transitional stage based on a conflict of needs; finally, the postconventional stage does not lead to full autonomy, but to the recognition that satisfying one's own needs is not in conflict with the female role and with care.

Section 3

Summary

Summary

- Applied ethics assesses professional conduct not only on the basis of its effectiveness (whether the purpose was achieved), but also on the basis of the means chosen and whether the practice produces moral good.
- We distinguish three basic approaches to where moral content comes from: established practices (internalism), external theories (externalism), or a dynamic relationship between culture and profession (mixed approach).
- Applied ethics takes over ethical theories from philosophy, such as virtue ethics, deontology, utilitarianism, the ethics of justice, and the ethics of care.
- We address moral dilemmas, that is, conflicts of duties and values; if it is impossible to decide which duty takes precedence, we speak of *genuine ethical dilemmas*.
- When constructing moral rules and deciding dilemmas, we proceed either from grand theories (top-down), from practice (bottom-up), or we attempt, through the gradual revision of conflicting norms, to achieve their coherence (reflective equilibrium).

Applied ethics focuses on formulating rules specific to a particular practice and provides tools for resolving moral dilemmas. Decision-making models serve this purpose by ensuring a structured, rational decision-making process.