MORALITY'S PROGRESS

Essays on Humans,
Other Animals,
and the Rest of Nature

DALE JAMIESON

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In memory of my father
Dale Walter Jamieson
and for my mother
Betty Jo Jamieson
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This essay will end where moral change begins. What I have tried to do is to characterize moral progress, and provide a brief account of two cases in which it has occurred. In both of these cases philosophers have had some role in bringing it about. Professional philosophers have been quite important in the animal liberation movement, and both Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were, in their own way, philosophers. In the background and in the rhetoric of both movements, we can hear the voices of Kant, Bentham, and Mill. Thinking about these movements in such terms is important because identifying with the aspirations and ideals that underlie them can inspire us to feel part of a struggle directed towards world-historical changes. Still, in the end it is difficult to live at a level as general and abstract even as the American fight for civil rights and animal rights. Ultimately, most of us live short lives compared to human history, and in small neighbourhoods compared to the global community. It is from this point of view that our lives are lived and our motivation is gathered. Small moments of success should be savoured. Thus I return to where I began. The moral progress that is palpable in the Kernast family over several generations is real and important. This, as much as anything, makes me feel that it is worth devoting one’s life to the pursuit of moral progress, even in the tortured, precious way of a moral philosopher.

26 For a more detailed discussion of the role of philosophers in moral change see Janinna (1990).
27 A fuller treatment of the twentieth-century civil rights movement in America would explicitly discuss the work of such black philosophers and intellectuals as Alain Locke Jr. and W. E. B. Du Bois.
28 I thank the members of 40t (Minnesota Monthly Metaphilosophy Meeting), especially Valerie Tiberius, for discussing an earlier draft of this essay; and Simon Rogers, Peter Singer, Elliott Sober, and David Sloan Wilson for their comments on the penultimate draft. Some of the ideas expressed in this essay are further developed in Janinna (Reclaiming It).

Is Applied Ethics Worth Doing?

Throughout most of this century philosophers have sharply distinguished moral theory from moral practice, and many have held that moral theory has little or nothing to do with acting morally. It was commonly said that the proper domain of moral philosophy is moral theory: moral practice is the province of Everyone. The following passage from C. D. Broad (1990: 285) is a characteristic expression of this view.

We can no more learn to act rightly by appealing to the ethical theory of right action than we can play golf well by appealing to the mathematical theory of the flight of the golf-ba. The interest of ethics is thus almost wholly theoretical, as is the interest of the mathematical theory of golf or billiards.

Anticipating the disappointment some might feel about the irrelevance of moral philosophy to practical concerns, Broad quotes the following Latin phrase, Non in dialectica complacuit Deo salutum facere populum suum, commenting that “salvation isn’t everything.”

Although salvation may not be everything, it is certainly something, and something quite important. It seems inevitable that sooner or later philosophers would again try to bring their methods to bear on matters of salvation. What was needed was a spark, and it was provided by the civil rights and

This essay was largely written in 1985. For this reason some of the examples may seem dated, though I believe that the substantive points they are meant to illustrate still hold. Since this essay is a kind of personal apology, it seemed natural at the time I was writing it to use more pressure to refer to the applied philosopher. I hope that this will not give offense to any of my readers. I am honorably indisposed, especially in Sections 2. Richard Sherry’s unpublished article, “Which is to Say What’s Right or Wrong” People Who Have Ph.Ds in Philosophy, That’s Who,” Section 7 largely follows Peter Singer (1979). In addition, I have benefited from the suggestions of Nancy Tish, John A. Fisher, James W. Nickel, Elizabeth Robertson, David M. Rosenzweig, Athine Silver, and especially Tom Bagan.

1 The most striking exception to the dominant view is John Dewey and the pragmatist tradition.
anti war movements of the 1960s. By the 1970s philosophers were, for better or worse, "back on the job.”

I first became acquainted with this new work in applied ethics when I heard Roger Wertheimer read "Understanding the Abortion Argument." Wertheimer’s paper had not yet appeared in Philosophy and Public Affairs, and indeed that journal had not as yet published a single issue. I was both intrigued and irritated by Wertheimer’s paper. On the one hand he was using his philosophical skills to address a real issue in people’s lives. On the other he seemed to conclude in a fit of Wittgensteinian despair: we could and should appreciate both sides of the abortion argument, but there was little or nothing that philosophers could do to help bring it to a rational conclusion. It seemed to me that, if philosophers could only listen while real people had it out, then we might as well stick to the Problem of Universals.

Wertheimer’s article was just an opening shot in what soon became a deafening barrage. Undoubtedly different pieces moved different people in different ways. For me the crucial year was 1975. The first publication that made me think that there might be a place for philosophers in the real world were Peter Singer’s Animal Liberation and Tom Regan’s “The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism.” It is no doubt true that, in part, the power of these works comes from their vivid portrayal of animal suffering. Before 1975 most of us thought of happy chickens and contented cows rather than of battery hens and totally confined, anaemic veal calves. Probably we also thought that all or most experimentation on animals was necessary and carried out in the most humane way possible. But, in addition to confronting us with the facts of animal exploitations, itself an important departure from mainstream ethics, these works were also solid pieces of “analytic” philosophy. What was striking was that they arrived at utterly un intuitive conclusions about how we ought to live. When I first read them I didn’t think there was a chance in a hundred that they could be right. A year later I concluded, with lots of minor quibbles and qualifications, that they were right.

I mention the work of Singer and Regan and its effect on me for one reason. It is the case that philosophers can construct sound arguments about how people ought to live which lead to conclusions that would seem indicative to most people who have not studied moral philosophy, then it must be the case that, in some sense and to some degree, there is some connection between being a moral philosopher and being a moral expert. And, just as there is

reason for architectural experts to do architecture, so there is reason for moral experts to do applied ethics.

In a remarkably short period of time the view that moral philosophers are moral experts has become very prominent, and applied ethics is one of the few growth areas in a depressed academic job market. A glance at John for Philosophers shows that virtually every philosophy department in the country wants someone in applied ethics. Several universities, like my own, have established new centres for research in applied ethics or in the philosophical foundations of social policy. Philosophers have also successfully insinuated themselves into schools of public policy, medicine, law, engineering, business, journalism, environmental science, and so forth. They have also done well with funding agencies. During the Carter administration the National Endowment for the Humanities looked upon programmes in philosophy and public policy with great favour, and many private foundations continue to do so.

Undoubtedly many of our patrons in government and business have affection for us for all the wrong reasons. They think of us as secular priests or as technocrats whose field is ethics rather than, say, public finance. Many of us have probably felt all along that, when and if our patrons find out what we really do, the jig is up. But our severest critics have been not professionals in business or government, but rather ideologues of the political right and left. The right dislikes us because we are left-leaning irreligious college professors who are usurping the role of the church and family in moral education. The left dislikes us because we treat individual morality as if it were important, instead of focusing on the economic structures and class divisions which are the real forces of history. Some of our colleagues are also dubious about what we do. Worldly success is viewed with suspicion in a discipline whose founding father was rewarded for his work with execution.

Most of the criticisms of applied ethics that I have heard have been expressed in conversation. It is only recently that articles critical of this field have begun to be published in professional journals. Still, it seems clear that times have changed and reaction has begun. There are signs all around us: the shift in direction at the National Endowment for the Humanities away from public policy towards more traditional concerns; articles critical of applied ethics in such journals of opinion as Commentary and the Public Interest; the revival of virtue theories in the philosophical literature. It would not be too surprising if applied ethics, which had a meteoric rise in the 1970s, suffered an equally meteoric decline in the 1980s.

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1 "Philosophers Are Back on the Job" is the title of an influential article by Peter Singer (1975).
2 1975: 5-25.

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For criticism from the right, see Lila (1991); from the left, see Noble (1982).
This might make us wonder whether the decline and fall of applied ethics would be lamentable. I think it would indeed be lamentable, even though applied ethics as it is usually practised is open to well-founded criticisms. But, before I discuss some criticisms of applied ethics, well-founded and otherwise, some misunderstandings about it should be put to rest.

First, much of what is said about applied ethics, and probably much of what I have said so far, suggests a picture in which the distinction between the theoretical and the applied is very sharp and clear. Unfortunately life is more complicated than that. Still, the difference between the theoretical and the applied can be illuminated to some degree in the following ways. Theoretical and applied ethics have the same subject-matter: the moral lives of agents and patients. What is different about them is their perspective on this subject-matter. Theoretical ethics takes the broad view; it is the telescope through which we observe the phenomena. Applied ethics views a narrow band of the same terrain in greater detail. It is the microscope through which we examine our moral lives.

A second misunderstanding concerns the relationship between applied ethics and the history of moral philosophy. Some people write as if applied ethics were something very new and different which appeared from out of nowhere about 1970 and as if, before this time, ethics just was theoretical ethics. Such a view cannot survive even a casual reading of the history of moral philosophy.

The Goundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals is certainly a paradigm work in theoretical ethics; yet Kant applies his theory to such practical matters as capital punishment, suicide, and the duty to tell the truth. Both Bentham and Mill move quickly from discussions of fundamental principles to dispositions on particular cases and back again. There is nothing new about applied ethics as a subject of philosophical concern. The banishment of applied ethics in this century, a position for which I invoked Broad as a spokesman, was a relatively brief and novel interlude in the history of moral philosophy. What is new about the recent revival of applied ethics is the way in which it has become entrenched in our educational and cultural institutions, but that is part of the larger social and cultural history of philosophy rather than the history of moral philosophy proper. Kant, Bentham, and Mill discussed practical matters in the same breath as theoretical issues because they understood that doing ethics in the full sense involves both. Applied ethics requires theoretical ethics as a foundation for its claims and arguments. Theoretical ethics is vacuous if it does not bear on human conduct. To paraphrase something Kant might have said but didn’t: applied ethics without theoretical ethics is blind; theoretical ethics without applied ethics is empty.

Finally, we should be aware that many different things go on under the rubric of applied ethics. My work in this area concerns on teaching courses in environmental ethics and contemporary moral problems and on doing research on the morality of killing. I am also involved in trying to bring the results of philosophical investigation to bear on issues of social policy. Other practitioners of applied ethics do not teach in philosophy departments, but work in a variety of other settings, some of them non-academic. Some practitioners even wear white coats and beakers and help make life-and-death decisions in clinical situations. Quite obviously, my problems are different from theirs and theirs from mine. In what follows, my remarks will be from the perspective of one who does "academic" applied ethics rather than the "clinical" version.

I shall discuss six criticisms of applied ethics. Some of these criticisms are good ones, and I shall try to say what we should learn from them. Others are not so good, and I shall try to say why. In the concluding section I shall say why I think applied ethics is worth doing.

1. RELATIVISM AND SUBJECTIVISM

Much of the hostility towards applied ethics is rooted in metaethical views concerning the possibility of moral knowledge. A class of freshmen, asked whether it is wrong to let people starve in the Third World while we destroy most of our vegetable protein in the process of converting it into meat, all too often will not say "yes" or "no" or even plead agnosticism. Instead their response is: "Who’s to say what’s right or wrong?" Although this response has the grammatical form of a question, it is meant as an assertion: the only conceivable answer is that no one can say what’s right or wrong. This is a depressing experience for an ethics teacher, but there is a bright side. Freshmen are in college in order to learn, among other reasons, and usually by the end of the semester this particular response has been purged from their behavioral repertoires. What is more depressing is that the views of untutored freshmen on the subject of morality are often no more or less sophisticated than the views of social scientists and non-academics. Even many people who favour the teaching of ethics in professional schools do not believe in the possibility of moral knowledge. They have the peculiar view that it is a good thing to spend one’s time trying to answer questions that are in principle unanswerable. Although there
is no right answer about, say, whether or not it is permissible to take a bribe from Lockheed, reflection upon the question functions as erasure justification. From this it is a short step to the view that it doesn’t matter what you do so long as you know what you are doing. By this process the callous and calculating are transformed into the virtuous.

The position that drives the question, “Who’s to say what’s right or wrong?” is what I shall call the denial of moral expertise. On this view ethics is importantly different from accounting, surgery, carpentry, and so forth. In these areas there are experts. In matters of morality there are not. We are all equal. I take it that research and teaching in applied ethics is directed towards the development of moral expertise, at least to so far as that is taken to mean greater understanding of moral truths concerning practical issues. If moral expertise is not possible, then applied ethics is not worth doing.

There are at least two bases for the denial of moral expertise. One is subjectivism, and the other is relativism.

Subjectivism can take at least two forms. One holds that ethical statements are the expressions of non-propositional inner states. They do not have truth conditions, so the concepts of verification and proof do not apply to them. A second version holds that ethical statements really are statements, but they are about the beliefs, desires, feelings, and attitudes of the speaker. On both views an apparent dispute about the morality of suicide, for example, is not really a dispute about suicide, but at best a dispute about the sincerity of those who are arguing.

Relativism holds that ethical statements are true or false only relative to particular cultures. Just as “Snow is white,” is true in English, so “Murder is wrong,” is true in England. Unsound relativists think of cultures as very small, perhaps constituted by the speaker and his friends. When a “culture” has only one member, relativism collapses into subjectivism, or at least is pragmatically indistinguishable from it.

We should see first that, if subjectivism or unsophisticated relativism can be sustained, then not only applied ethics is threatened but also theoretical ethics in the grand tradition of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. If either of these views is correct, the task of the moral philosopher is just to pick up the pieces that are strewn about by the moralist and the casuist, who, unencumbered by philosophical knowledge, can continue to claim the authority to tell people what to do. Neither of these positions, then, provides the ground from which critics of applied ethics can mount an attack, if they also wish to defend theoretical ethics as it has traditionally been conceived.

For familiar reasons which I shall not rehearse here, both subjectivism and unsophisticated relativism are false. Still it is striking that, despite our best efforts to keep them down, these views keep bouncing back. I believe that part of the reason it is so difficult to exterminate them completely is that, though false, they are based on real insights. Morality is subjective in that moral rules, principles, and judgments are ultimately validated by reference to the welfare of individual beings. Morality is relative in that there is a class of possible moralities for societies of intelligent social animals such that all members of the class are adequate and all can be defended on rational grounds. What is important to see is that we can give both subjectivism and relativism their due without being driven to the denial of moral expertise.

Thus far I have claimed that the denial of moral expertise is often based on subjectivism or relativism and that both of these views, at least in the forms that directly support the denial of moral expertise, are false. Moreover, I have argued that these views can be espoused only by those who are also prepared to reject theoretical ethics as it has traditionally been conceived.

2. VIRTUE CANNOT BE TAUGHT

Another reason often cited for believing that applied ethics is not worth doing is that virtue cannot be taught. Put this way, however, the claim is overstated. What people say who use this usually mean is that virtue cannot be taught by the classroom methods of the moral philosopher with their emphasis on reason and argument. This view is not new. We can find its origins in the work of Aristotle and the eighteenth-century Scottish philosophers. The following passage from C. S. Lewis (1947: 55–6) expresses it eloquently.

It still remains true that no justification of virtue will enable a man to be virtuous. Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism. I had sooner play cards against a man who was quite skeptical about ethics, but heed to believe that "a gentleman does not cheat," than against an irrefutable moral philosopher who had been brought up among sharpeners.

Much of what Lewis says in this passage is true, but it does not show that applied ethics isn’t worth doing. To suppose otherwise is to misunderstand the role of applied ethics in moral thinking. R. M. Hare’s distinction between two levels of moral thinking, the "intuitive" and the "critical," can help us see that this is true.†

† References of subjectivism and unsophisticated relativism occur in almost every introductory ethics book, see e.g. Williams (1972).

‡ Hare (1967, part 1).
The intuitive level is characterized by deeply entrenched dispositions and the feelings that go along with them. We are trained not to cheat at cards, and we may have feelings of guilt at the mere thought of cheating. Most of our moral life is conducted at the intuitive level. We do not ordinarily reason about what to do. We follow our heart’s command. But there is also a role for critical thinking, and that is the level at which we do applied ethics.

The first reason why critical thinking is important is that sometimes the head should override the heart. Lewis seems to suggest that this is impossible, but that is surely wrong. It may well be my duty to cheat at cards, if it would not seriously harm my victim and my family would otherwise starve. That this is my duty could be shown only by reasoning about this particular case in conjunction with some knowledge of moral theory. Our emotions are not likely to be convinced, however. We might feel as sickened by cheating in a good cause as by cheating in a bad one.

A second reason why critical thinking is important is that we need to know which moral dispositions to encourage in ourselves and in our children. Perhaps Southern plantation owners did not feel remorse for the pain they caused their slaves. Perhaps they raised their children to feel remorse when they harmed whites but not when they harmed blacks. Critical thinking could show them that they were wrong.

A third reason why critical thinking is important is that many of the moral problems we face today are novel; we have no deeply entrenched dispositions to guide us. It may well be wrong to keep alive for years someone with no hope of recovery who is barely conscious and in pain, but the opportunity to do this is so recent in our history that it is not surprising that our dispositions concerning cases like this tend to be contradictory, vague, and ill focused.

Finally, critical thinking is important because some practitioners of applied ethics are interested in evaluating alternative social policies as well as in providing moral advice about personal problems. Our moral psychology, however, is remarkably unresponsive to complicated large-scale issues, especially those which involve people and events that are not close at hand. We do not respond strongly to the suffering of distant strangers in Assam or to issues like the New Federalism. Yet there are important moral dimensions to these issues which can be appreciated only by reason, since they outstrip our capacity for heartfelt response.

There is another point that should be made, though too much should not rest on it. A professor of philosophy is not just a machine for producing and evaluating arguments. He is also a person whose behaviour while teaching and lecturing reveals his conscientiousness, his intellectual honesty, his willingness to treat others with respect, and his commitment to his ideals. For these reasons he, like all people, is continually involved in moral education by example as well as by argument. Because of the nature of the subject and the fact that he is guaranteed an audience, a moral philosopher is often an especially important role model for his friends and students.

Although not everything important to behaving morally can be taught in a classroom by a moral philosopher, some of it can be. Applied ethics is worth studying and teaching even if it is only part of a complete moral education.

3. DIVERSITY OF OPINION

A third argument against applied ethics is really a moral argument. Virtually everyone has moral beliefs. These are obtained from our interactions with parents, schools, religious institutions, and so forth. These beliefs do not always, or perhaps even usually, form a consistent set. Nor can most of us articulate the reasons we have for holding the beliefs we hold. Despite this, we succeed in muddling through with a fair degree of success. There is of course plenty of room for improvement in our moral thinking. But the problem is that applied ethics is not conducive to such improvement. Indeed, it is often harmful.6

When a student takes a course in applied ethics he immediately finds that his moral beliefs are under attack. They are shown to be inconsistent, and he discovers that he cannot do a very good job of defending most of them. Simultaneously he is confronted with a whole cafeteria of competing moral theories and beliefs. Some august thinkers say that acts are justified by their consequences; others vigorously disagree. Some speak of natural rights; others condemn such talk as "nonsense upon stilts". Some claim that the foot soldiers potential is sufficient for ascribing to it full moral rights; others hold that killing footsies is morally equivalent to killing fish. This madstrom of radically different conflicting views emantes from the very people who are supposed to be moral experts. If they cannot get their act together, is it any wonder that an intelligent student who has been argued or perhaps brow-beaten out of his native morality retreats to scepticism? His old views have been

6 Bennett (1980) makes this argument.
dissuaded, and the new ones have committed "fratricide". He is left with nothing, and it is the fault of the practitioner of applied ethics, who turns out to be responsible for contributing mightily to the thing he abhors: the denial of moral expertise. In order to save theoretical ethics from scepticism and in order to preserve a society in which people have moral beliefs and ideals, we should jettison applied ethics.

There are really two arguments here. One is that widespread disagreement among practitioners of applied ethics is sufficient for thinking that applied ethics isn’t worth doing. The other is that widespread disagreement among practitioners of applied ethics has pernicious consequences, and that is sufficient for thinking that applied ethics isn’t worth doing. We shall examine the first argument first.

The problem with this argument is that it underestimates the amount of agreement among people working in applied ethics, overestimates the disagreement, and makes too much of both. There are probably few important propositions to which every moral philosopher assents, just as there are probably few important propositions to which every physicist or chemist assents. Still, there are propositions about which there is considerable agreement. Perhaps more importantly, the views of moral philosophers on many issues diverge sharply from those of most ordinary people. Consider some examples. Most moral philosophers reject the view that moral problems can be resolved by appeal to divine commands. They know that justifying ultimate ends is very different from justifying instrumental ends. They know that pleasure is not a sensation and that no simple version of hedonism is true. Concerning more practical issues, most moral philosophers agree that abortion is not murder. Most would deny that life itself, independent of its quality, has value. Most would hold that the distinction between acting and omitting is without moral significance in a broad range of cases. They would say that we should do more to help desperate people even if they are not citizens of our country. And most would agree that the interests of non-human animals should be taken more seriously than they are usually taken. Let me say again that I do not mean to suggest that every person working in applied ethics holds these views. Philosophers are cranky by profession, and any statement of the form "Most philosophers believe that ___ is certain to provoke a flurry of activity on behalf of not-___. My claim is just that there is some consensus among people working in applied ethics and that this consensus is unlikely to be mirrored in the thinking of non-philosophers.

But even if I am wrong in supposing that there is consensus about some issues in applied ethics, the fact of widespread disagreement would not be sufficient for thinking that applied ethics is not worth doing. Such an argument, if it proves anything at all, proves too much. There is no unanimity among interpreters of Plato. Metaphysicians and epistemologists do not speak with a single voice, nor do physicists or biologists. Perhaps it is true that moral philosophers disagree more among themselves than physicists do, but, if that is so, one reason is that in certain respects moral philosophy is harder than physics. Whether an action or a policy is right depends on many things: the welfare of those affected by it; how it is institutionally embedded; the prevailing beliefs, desires, and expectations of those in the affected community; the intentional states of the actor; and undoubtedly much more besides. Regularities concerning these matters are very difficult to discover because they involve the behaviour of intelligent social animals. Secular moral philosophy is in its infancy. It is a wonder that we know as much as we do.

The second argument is more interesting. It claims that widespread disagreement among those who do apply ethics has pernicious consequences and that, for that reason, applied ethics is not worth doing. We might formulate this as the charge that the practitioners of applied ethics are guilty of corrupting the youth.

Note first that the question of whether or not applied ethics is worth doing itself a question in applied ethics, for it concerns the value of one of our everyday activities. Perhaps applied ethics can be avoided only by remaining silent.

More importantly, I doubt that applied ethics has the pernicious consequences that this argument attributes to it. I have seen many cases in which study and research in this area improve the moral sensibility of those who undertake them. I have even seen people's behaviour change radically for the better when they became convinced of the soundness of an argument. When the study of applied ethics does have pernicious consequences I think it is almost always because of the way in which the subject is taught and studied. But, ultimately, I and the critics are at a standoff on this point. The question of whether or not studying applied ethics is conducive to moral improvement is an empirical question which is not easily settled. For its answer depends in part on what our conception of moral improvement is, which is itself a moral question. But there is another point that I think is telling against the argument. Other things are valuable besides maintaining a culture in which people believe in the possibility of moral knowledge. One of them is the attainment of moral knowledge. If the price of such knowledge is the creation of some moral sceptics, that is a price we should be willing to pay.
4. SINGLEASE OF OPINION

A fourth argument against applied ethics denies a crucial premise of the previous argument. This fourth argument holds that applied ethics is worthless because only a narrow range of views is usually countenanced. It is not worth our while to study a field that, after a lot of hot air and bother, merely reinforces our prior beliefs. Cheryl Noble has claimed: "Starting from a position of political and historical naivety, they [applied ethicists] inevitably arrive at conventional and tame conclusions, drawn from a preexisting range of alternatives" (1982: 8). It is hard to see how someone could believe this. In the last ten years philosophers have defended a host of views that most people would consider shocking. Here are some examples. Peter Singer has argued that we should give until it hurts to relieve world hunger; Tom Regan that it is wrong to harm any animals at all in the course of scientific research; Holmes Rolston that even a smallpox virus has intrinsic value; Michael Tooley that infanticide is often permissible; Hugh LaFollette that parents should be licensed.* Noble (1983: 13) has responded to such obvious counter-examples by claiming that most of them "could be joined together to form a good profile of one garden variety liberal," This claim is just false. Peter Singer's prescriptions concerning our duties to the Third World go far beyond those of anyone who could reasonably be called a liberal. The loading of our relationships to the natural world that Regan and Rolston advocate would be as shocking to Stewart Udall as to James Watt. And only the most extreme feminists have gone as far as Michael Tooley in defending infanticide as well as abortion. Still, much work in applied ethics is open to serious criticism, and there is something important that is on Noble's mind, as we shall see in the next section.

5. PROBLEMS OF METHOD

Work in applied ethics has often been criticized for placing too much weight on moral intuitions. The critics echo Mill's attack on those who make "ethics not so much a guide as a consecration of man's actual sentiments." Noble takes Thomas Nagel as an exemplar. He defends the "conventional, modern Western view of how wars should be fought" on the basis of intuited absolutist principles. "Whether he is discussing war or equality, Nagel ends up saying that the way things are is pretty much the way they ought to be." He

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*Singer (1972a); Regen (1972); Rolston III (1983); Tooley (1973); LaFollette (1983).
**Mill (1866/1955: 3).

harm in relying on prior beliefs and intuitions, however, so long as each individually is open to revision. When we think about moral questions, it is also important that the route from the stock of prior beliefs to the conclusion of an argument not be too direct. Although this point cannot be pursued further here, I hope that enough has been said to make plausible the view that problems about the role of intuitions in moral philosophy are not different in kind from problems that arise in general epistemology; and just as those problems do not lead us to the conclusion that epistemology is not worth doing, neither should they lead us to the conclusion that applied ethics is not worth doing.

Another methodological trap for the practitioner of applied ethics is baited by the very name of the field. The expression 'applied ethics' suggests a field in which ethical theories are applied to particular cases in much the same way that a mechanic applies automotive theories to the transmission of a Volvo. Inspired by this picture, classes in applied ethics often centre on laying out the deontological, consequentialist, and contractarian views of various contemporary problems. Although it is undeniable that some moral theories are more at home with some conclusions than with others, this simple-minded way of "applying" theories to cases is indefensible. It ignores the fact that these are all families of theories. 'Consequentialism' refers to a class of theories of which utilitarianism is a member. But utilitarianism too adrifts of many varieties. There is no unique utilitarian view of affirmative action, euthanasia, or abortion. All the great moral theories are too complicated for that, and so are the practical issues to which they are "applied".

Although there are dangers and temptations that the practitioner of applied ethics must seek to avoid, this is true in all areas of philosophy. Applied ethics can be done badly, but so can epistemology or metaphysics. These considerations concerning method do not show that applied ethics isn't worth doing.

6. APPLIED ETHICS AND THE REAL WORLD

Most of the work that has been done in applied ethics has focused on individual rather than societal responses to ethical problems. The main concern has usually been to say what individuals should do about various problems like world hunger and abortion. Questions about what social policies we should adopt or what individuals should do as members of a democratic society hardly ever get addressed. This is especially striking in the literature on professional ethics. Philosophers have written voluminously on various aspects of the physician/patient relationship while virtually ignoring questions about the role of medical institutions in the life of society. Although philosophers have written quite a lot about the difficulties faced by individual doctors and hospitals in the distribution of resources, they have said little about the larger problems concerning the proportion of our total resources that go to the medical sector or about the problems of justly distributing those resources across the entire population. Similarly, the literature on engineering ethics exemplifies a single-minded devotion to the problems of the whistle-blower while saying very little about the role of engineering in society.

One reason why philosophers tend to avoid the social dimensions of ethical issues is their reluctance to appear politically and socially committed. Applied ethics is welcomed into the halls of government and business because it seems to be another specialization. An employer might say: we have someone who does economic analysis, someone who does policy analysis, and someone who does systems analysis; why not hire someone who does ethical analysis? It is very easy for philosophers to adopt the role of the technocrat, since much of our recent history has conceived of the philosopher as the disinterested analyst, sorting out conceptual muddles. Some people are civil engineers, others are electrical engineers. We are conceptual engineers. After all, what is letting the fly out of the fly-bottle but a low-level engineering job? I am not sure to what extent this model was ever a viable description of what anyone did in any area of philosophy. I do know, however, that it is not a viable model for someone in applied ethics. The positions we take in our work have political and social consequences, and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise.

A better reason why philosophers have focused on the individual dimensions of moral problems while neglecting the social is that philosophers are primarily college professors. They speak to students rather than to presidents or legislators. They write mainly for other professors. Even those who wear white coats and beakers typically address medical students and individual physicians. Given the institutional location of most philosophers, writing about individual responses to ethical problems makes good sense. We might succeed in changing the behaviour of a few students and colleagues, but, if our goal is to change the world, our prospects are bleak. As philosophers fan out into policy-making contexts they will begin to write for different audiences, and the character of their work will change. Already this is occurring.

But this response will take us only so far. Even if we take into account the institutional background in which philosophy is embedded, it still seems to many people that philosophical writing on most contemporary issues usually misses the heart of the matter and, for that reason, is less effective than it might otherwise be.
Thomas Nagel (1979, p. xiii) seems largely to agree with this, but he doubts that it could be otherwise. He writes:

I am pessimistic about ethical theory as a form of public service. The conditions under which moral argument can have an influence on what is done are very special, and are not very well understood by me.

It certainly is not enough that the injustice of a practice or the wrongness of a policy should be made glaringly evident. People have to be ready to listen, and that is not determined by argument. I see this only to emphasize that philosophical writing on even the most current public issues remains theoretical, and cannot be measured by its practical effects. It is likely to be ineffective, and if it is theoretically less deep than work that is irrelevant to the problems of society, it cannot claim superior importance merely by virtue of the publicity of its concerns. I do not know if it is more important to change the world or to understand it, but philosophy is best judged by its contribution to understanding.

It is certainly true that most of us would not know how to make our words change the world even if that were what we wanted. The gap between individual morality and public policy is awesome, as Nagel suggests. It is not even easy to grasp what makes a society lurch in one direction rather than another. Nagel is also right in saying that philosophical work should not be judged by its influence on public life. To suppose otherwise threatens to collapse the distinction between philosophy and advocacy journalism. Still, I am disquieted by Nagel’s words. He does not seem disappointed that “philosophical writing on even the most current public issues remains theoretical”; but this, perhaps more than anything else, is what has disturbed the critics of applied ethics, and it deserves a sympathetic response.

Consider first the words of Mark Lilla:

We have always been a moralistic nation, but seldom before have we conducted our political arguments in full academic regalia ... [this sort of moral discourse is] now so persuasive that even the moral obligations of government officials ... are now discussed as the obscure and formal analytic language of the contemporary theoretical philosopher. ... While angels dance on pins, these thinkers ponder such questions as: if a group of people are hopelessly trapped in a tunnel by a fat man stuck in the opening ... is it right to blow the man to bits to save the group? (1983: 10–11)

Cheryl Noble has written that recent work in applied ethics is “cruel to interest in other traditions of social and cultural criticism—historical, social, scientific, literary, or psychological.” Because of this, she believes that its “conception of the kind of knowledge and insight needed to shed light on moral issues is unavoidably inadequate” (1982: 8). To a very great extent the remarks of Noble and Lilla are unfair, and based on serious misunderstandings. As I suggested at the outset, theoretical and applied ethics are complementary; good work in one requires the other. And it is not surprising that the methods and approaches of theoretical ethics strike many non-philosophers as “formal” and “obscure.” Still, there is something important that Lilla and Noble are on to.

Much recent work in applied ethics is not really about the problems it seems to address. Some philosophers write about animal rights because they are concerned with the nature and scope of rights in general. Other philosophers address the physician/patient relationship because of their interest in arguments for and against paternalism and coercion. Problems of world hunger provide a convenient backstop to discussions of action theory and its relation to moral responsibility: The fist could go on. I do not mean to suggest that everyone working in applied ethics has a hidden agenda, only that much of the work that seems to be about “real issues” is not. All too often we have tried to have it both ways. We have wanted the public support and attention that comes from addressing issues of real public concern; at the same time we have been more interested in impressing our peers than in making a difference in the world. To put the point in another way some of the critics of applied ethics have noticed, perhaps obliquely, that most work in Philosophy and Public Affairs, for example, is really about philosophy rather than public affairs.

To some degree this can be explained by the defensive position of applied ethics within professional philosophy. Although most philosophy departments have created courses in applied ethics within the last ten years and many have hired specialists in this area, often this has been a grudging concession to student demand or administration pressure to increase enrollments. Running hundreds of students through courses in contemporary moral problems has become a popular strategy for trying to save “real” philosophy courses—logic, philosophy of science, philosophy of language—in an era of shrinking budgets. Although applied ethics has become institutionalized in philosophy departments, to a great extent the relationship is very much like the result of a shotgun wedding. Given the widespread skepticism about applied ethics within the profession, it is not surprising that practitioners of applied ethics have been anxious to demonstrate their philosophical bona fides; and this can be done only by writing articles directed towards philosophers and relying on philosophical sources published in philosophical journals. Two results of this have become apparent.

First, while practitioners of applied ethics have been concerned to show that they are real philosophers rather than half-breeds, their colleagues in
philosophy of science have been busily studying physics, biology, psychology, and cognitive science. It is ironic that, although most philosophers are willing to admit that a logician has more in common with some mathematicians than he has with many of his fellow philosophers, they resist the view that in order to do applied ethics well it might be necessary to spend more time talking to economists, sociologists, activists, and street people, than to other philosophers.

Secondly, it is becoming increasingly clear that much work in applied ethics exemplifies the worst of both worlds. Writing traditional philosophical articles under the guise of doing applied ethics will never satisfy traditionally minded philosophers. For they understand that, for the most part, the deepest and most interesting philosophical work will be done by people who honestly and directly take on the fundamental problems. Nor, as we have seen, does this hybrid work satisfy those who are concerned with the real issues. For they rightly see that much of this work consists in a dance between philosophers rather than a conscientious attempt to address the issues.

Philosophers are moving in the direction of the real world, but they have not yet landed. For reasons I will discuss in the next section, I believe that philosophers can do important work on issues of great public moment. Ultimately, however, this belief will stand or fall on the basis of our attempts. So far we have barely tried. We have isolated ourselves by ignoring the social dimensions of ethical problems. As to our ultimate effectiveness, the jury is still out.

7. WHY PHILOSOPHERS SHOULD DO APPLIED ETHICS

Thus far my project has been mainly negative. I have resisted the view that applied ethics is by its very nature so deeply flawed that it is not worth doing. I would like to conclude by briefly saying why philosophers should do applied ethics. My claim is really very simple: philosophers have advantages that most people do not have which make philosophers natural candidates for the role of moral expert.

First, philosophers are trained in logic. They can detect fallacies and separate good arguments from bad. They can identify premises and point to those which require additional support. Anyone who reads the newspaper knows how ubiquitous logical mistakes are in the discussion of public issues. Often it is an important contribution just to identify the logic of the arguments that people employ.

Secondly, philosophers are trained in thinking about moral concepts. We know, for example, the difficulties involved in negotiating the supposed chasm between "facts" and "values": it can be a great service to point out those premises that people employ which spring from deep value commitments, since their adherence to those premises is unlikely to be sensitive to new factual information. Consider an example. Many people are in favour of capital punishment because they believe that murderers deserve to die. Any rational discussion of their views must engage this value commitment. No number of studies about the inefficacy of capital punishment as a deterrent will move them. Although analytically this point is very simple, it is often obscured by the rhetorical fluff that surrounds real arguments. Philosophers also know that the relationship between the good and the right is really very complicated. Ordinary people often think it is quite simple: if something is good then it is right to bring it about. Sensitivity to the full range of possible relationships makes philosophers specially qualified trail guides on the road from the good to the right.

Thirdly, philosophers have knowledge of moral theories. Although, as I have suggested, these theories cannot be treated out and "applied" to real problems, they do provide a storehouse of sophisticated thinking about how particular judgements may be unified into a larger framework. This is important because people often make moral decisions on a piecemeal basis. (For example, it is sometimes said that, for a policy-maker, the time horizon is the next five minutes.) The result is that people often hold obviously inconsistent views about what ought to be done. The knowledge of moral theories which philosophers have can influence people to recognize the necessity of thinking about the fundamental principles that underlie their particular judgements.

Fourthly, philosophers have the leisure to think about real moral problems, whereas many other people do not. The thinking of ordinary people usually remains at the intuitive level because the press of circumstance does not allow the time for the hard work that critical thinking requires. Most people rightly believe that it is better to rely on one's intuitions than to do a poor job of working out all the complications involved in a difficult issue. Philosophers are moral experts, in part, for the same reason that physicians are experts in medicine: both moral philosophers and physicians devote themselves full-time to their areas of expertise.

Finally, philosophers are sufficiently insulated from the pressures of ordinary life that they can think about moral issues in a relatively impartial way. Very few people in any society can follow their thinking about practical issues
wherever it might lead, without fear of reprisals. Many people avoid moral crisis by avoiding moral thinking. Since moral philosophers are paid to think through moral questions, they are less likely to be threatened if they come up with the "wrong" answers. We should not be too sanguine about this, however. There is a history of political interference in American universities. Moreover, as philosophers increasingly work outside universities and as support for universities becomes more politicized, this advantage will erode.

These, then, are the advantages that philosophers have in thinking about real issues. It adds up to a kind of moral expertise. Applied ethics is worth doing for philosophers because philosophers are moral experts. This does not imply, however, that philosophers should be the only ones to do applied ethics, that people should always defer to philosophers, or that philosophers always do applied ethics well. Nor does it imply an excessively optimistic view about the place of reason in ethics. When all is said and done, people will continue to make difficult decisions about real moral issues. They will consult policy analysts, theologians, astrologers, physicians, politicians, and bartenders. Philosophers may not be ideally suited for the role of moral adviser, but they are better suited than their rivals. For this reason applied ethics is more than worth doing. Philosophers have a duty to bring their expertise to bear on the problems of real life.

Questions about the nature and limits of the community of equals are controversial in both theory and practice. As I write these words, a bloody war between Serbs and Croats is continuing in the former Yugoslavia. Many fear that this is a preview of what may happen in what was once the Soviet Union. Tensions between Czechs and Slovaks are running high, and "the troubles" continue in the northern part of Ireland. Here in New York, where I am writing this essay, relations between Hasidic Jews and African-Americans in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn have deteriorated to the point where a cycle of reprisal killings may have begun. Relations between blacks and Koreans are generally very bad, and all over America there are incidents of white racism against blacks and Asians.

Most people would express regret about all of these cases, and say that in the highly interconnected world in which we live different groups are going to have to learn to get along with each other. They don't have to like each other, but they must respect each other as equals. Whether Croat or Serb, black or Hispanic, all humans are members of the community of equals and have the right to live in peace and tranquility, without threats to their lives and liberty.

The cases of inter-ethnic struggle that I have mentioned pose practical problems of community: how can we bring it about that people will act on the basis of what they believe to be true and recognize the equality of others? At the level of theory the battle mostly has been won. Not many people would

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