

Applied Ethics: An Overview

Ganesh Prasad Das

Formerly, Professor of Philosophy,
Utkal University

Abstract

Plato in ancient times described moral philosophy as that which enquires 'how we ought to live'. Raphael says moral philosophy makes you more rational, more responsible, more of a human being. Wittgenstein makes three apparently different statements regarding the theory and practice of ethics. (1) Ethics is a condition of the world, (2) Ethics is transcendental and (3) Ethics does dictate do's and do not's and guide actions. Peter Singer thinks that practical ethics is neglected. Knowledge of moral practice must not be conceived as purely theoretical knowledge of moral phenomena, but as practical knowledge about how we ought to live. The goal is not simply to know what goodness is, but to become good. The philosopher is called upon to give a blueprint of becoming good in different stations of life. This is called 'Applied Ethics'. In the commercial turn of current global concern, every academic discipline has come out with their applied facet and philosophy has it in two ways: Applied Ethics in the narrow outreach and Applied Philosophy as the wider outreach. A philosophical view is not sought for in media debates, policy decisions and law court disputes. In this topsy-turvy world, the philosopher is required to come out of his space of meditation to the space of action and place on the table what he has to offer by way of resolution of a given problematic.

The *Upanisads* and the *Bhagavadgita*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavata Mahapurana* are the primers of applied ethics. They do not belong to any religion or community. These texts are the paradigms of secularity and are meant for the welfare of the whole of humanity and rest of the created beings. I conclude by saying that applied ethics in one sense is over undertaken and in another sense not at all over undertaken.

Keywords: Applied ethics, Plato, Raphael, Singer, Wittgenstein, Secularity, Social welfare, The Mahabharat, The Isopanisad, The Bhagavadgita

The gaps in space have been bridged to a great extent with communication satellites, jet planes, sky bridges, bridges over sea and rivers, bridges over ridges, tunnels under the sea, rivers and mountains, etc. But gaps in time have been created to a great extent in its stead. There is a gap between mind and body, between intellect and emotion, between listening/ reading and understanding, between information and knowledge, between the last century and this century, between parent's time and children's time, between last decade and this decade, between yesterday and today, between the head and the limbs of the department, between the teachers and the taught and like these so many. We learnt this subject – half a century back - as Mental and Moral Philosophy and we teach it as Philosophy only, but find, to our surprise and sorrow, new-fangled educational bosses putting the subject in the 'School of Social Sciences'.

Mental philosophy, that is, psychology, is no more a branch of philosophy. But moral philosophy or ethics remains as a branch of philosophy. The other branches are metaphysics and epistemology. Metaphysics, epistemology and ethics have undergone sea changes during these years. It was being said,

*krsi vanijya sevadau kavya tarkadikesu ca/
viksipyate pravrttyadhih taih tattvasmrti asambhavat//ⁱ*

(When one is engaged in agriculture, commerce, other services, study of unspiritual literature, dialectics and other branches of learning, there is no dwelling of the mind on the Truth.)

Metaphysics (ontology), epistemology and axiology (ethics and aesthetics), in their traditional presentations, are seen to be outmoded/ disrepute – sometimes consigned to flames, sometimes scolded as nonsense, regarded as mental sallies, sometimes put under psychotherapy, and sometimes reminded of natural manners. This is due to the *zeitgeist* – climate of thought - of the techno-tronic age. It creates the pressure to rethink your axioms and redefine your goals, reset your beliefs and reorganise your life. Philosophy, which is the pursuit of thinking about thinking, and concerned intimately with believing and living, has to rethink about its subject matter, method, undertaking and output. It seizes the current cliché 'applied' and begins to talk in this idiom. With many leading philosopher moral philosophy or ethics becomes its core area, with metaphysics and epistemology pushed to the periphery.

Cambridge University earmarks philosophy as a non-expertise subject. No particular subjects at A level are required as qualifying for the higher level philosophy course. (Here, we prefer Logic, Honours or Pass course in Philosophy as an advantage.) They have blacklisted some subjects. Such subjects provide less effective preparation for their higher level courses. They are categorised as 'soft' subjects. If you have too many of them at the A level, you may be rejected by the university. They are:

- Critical Thinking
- English Language
- Business Studies
- Media Studies
- Communication Studies (ICT)
- General Studies
- Accounting & Finance
- Arts & Design
- Design & Technology
- Health & Social Care
- Leisure & Recreation
- Travel & Tourism
- Performing Arts (Dance & Drama)
- Physical Education

When our policy-makers go abroad and come to know about this, they come back and act with a bang – to regulate or to abolish certain subjects without taking stock of things there and here in the right perspective. Here the ‘soft’ subjects are labeled as ‘hard core’ subjects and philosophy the least preferred subject. Let us now look behind to see the sea-change from ethics to metaethics to applied ethics.

Plato in ancient times described moral philosophy as that which enquires ‘how we ought to live’. D.D. Raphael in the modern time puts the purpose of the enterprise of moral philosophy as follows:

So do not expect moral philosophy to solve the practical problems of life or to be a crutch on which you can lean. A study of philosophy makes it more necessary, not less, to stand on your own feet, to be self-critical, and to be obliged to choose for yourself. It makes you more rational, more responsible, more of a human being.ⁱⁱ

Ludwig Wittgenstein, the main architect of the revolution in philosophy in the twentieth century, makes three apparently different statements regarding the theory and practice of ethics. The first one is: “Ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic.”ⁱⁱⁱ Life is co-eval with the world, according to him. As such, ethics must be a condition of life. His other statement is that Ethics (and Aesthetics), that is, all values, are transcendental.^{iv} In this respect, it is also ‘like’

logic, because, he says that Logic is transcendental. To say that ethics is transcendental is to say that it *is not a part of the world* as Physics, Physiology and Psychology depict it. But then *it is not apart from the world*. This means that those, which are the transcendental conditions, must be applicable to the states of affairs of the world. If a person does not speak within the bounds of logic, then what he says would not beget public acceptance and objective approval. Similarly, if he does not act within the bounds of ethics, then his actions would not beget public acceptance and objective approval. Thus, ethics applies to the world as a whole, not in sectors and segments. Expert knowledge is needed to see how it does apply to the world holistically, but expert knowledge is not needed to see how it applies to particular and specific life situations. It is for whosoever leads a life in the public world to see and make decisions when called for. Wittgenstein, therefore, remarks in a different context, of course, “what is or is not a cow is for the public to decide.” A.J. Ayer and C.D. Broad too seek to say, in this vein, that a philosopher is not a guide and guardian of the moral being of people. Ayer says,

It is silly, as well as presumptuous, for any one type of philosopher to pose as the champion of virtue. And it is also one reason why many people find moral philosophy an unsatisfactory subject. For they mistakenly look to the moral philosopher for guidance.^v

Broad goes a step ahead to say,

It is no part of the professional business of moral philosophers to tell people what they ought or ought not to do...Moral philosophers, as such, have no special information not available to the general public about what is right and what is wrong; nor have they any call to undertake those hortatory functions which are so adequately performed by clergymen, politicians, leader-writers...^{vi}

Peter Singer, however, contends that philosophers right from Plato down to Russell have always involved themselves by using the techniques of philosophy for the solution of practical problems. The neglect, if any, by some philosophers is an exception rather than the rule. “Against the long history of philosophical involvement in practical ethical issues,” he says, “it is the neglect of applied ethics in the earlier years of this century which should be regarded as surprising.”^{vii} Elsewhere, Singer discusses precisely what ethics is and what ethics is not.^{viii} For him, ethics is not an ideal system that is noble in theory but no good in practice, for the whole point of ethical judgments is to guide practice. William K. Frankena even maintains that ethics is primarily concerned with providing the general outlines of a normative theory to help us in answering the problems about what is right or what ought to be done.^{ix} We would like to point out here that Wittgenstein has written a whole book entitled *Culture and Value* where he is very critical of the western values and the resultant culture.^x A.J. Ayer, on his part, has published a number of articles on socio-ethical issues. But

Wittgenstein and Ayer would say in clarification of their stand that as enlightened civilians, they felt the need of responding to certain situations in the society, but it is not their business as philosophers to do this.

However, treating various normative theories in depth is no longer in fashion. It appears that philosophy has exhausted its resources on this account. It is not worthless, however, on any consideration and it could be done and philosophers are doing it. It has rather become drudgery for the takers. It appears to be matter of more concern to provide answers to various moral issues, to various moral conflicts of the world in which we live and to take stock of and be familiar with the ground-level issues, rather than raising thought-provoking questions and battling with the same. Moral philosophy has a practical purpose. Knowledge of moral practice must not be conceived as purely theoretical knowledge of moral phenomena, but as practical knowledge about how we ought to live. The goal is not simply to know what goodness is, but to become good. The philosopher is called upon to give a blueprint of becoming good in different stations of life. This is called 'Applied Ethics'. Applied Ethics seeks to find out how to live a good life and come to grips with the situations that hinders it. 'Pure Ethics' or 'Theoretical Ethics' discusses the general issues of morality and moral standards.

Philosophers doing applied ethics are in the group of people whose task is to create and raise awareness about life's problems in the society. They take the leadership in forging and polishing revolutionary ideas. After all, they are the most sensitive to the signals of their times. Their ideas percolate into the social psyche imperceptibly, gradually and surely, but sadly, without acknowledgement by the society that gets enlightened. The ideas such as inclusive growth, communitarian planning, diminishing discriminations and disparities, dispensation of rights, justice, equality to and empowerment of people are the offshoots of philosophical reflection and deliberation. The philosopher is satisfied if the activist, the adjudicator, the policy-maker, the politician and, above all, the commoner speak in terms of ideas forged by him. He could come to the market place like Socrates or raise his voice like Russell. That would be his added merit; but it is not less if he does not do this and only makes people aware of the ethical facet of the life world which is not exhausted in the pursuit of money and matter, power and pelf.

It has been made imperative by the funding agency in the wake of liberalisation-privatisation-globalisation scenario to showcase the product of every person, profession and organisation. The rule of the state of nature, 'Survival of the fittest', appears to rule the roost. (Fittest means sometimes the smartest!) So in competitive spirit, they have brought out and showcased the applied visage/profile of their pursuits/ enterprises. Thus we have applied physics, applied technology, applied chemistry, applied psychology, applied anthropology, applied geography, applied history, applied linguistics, etc. Philosophy cannot lag

behind the race at the cost of abolition of his occupation! He has not only applied ethics, but also applied metaphysics and applied epistemology. These three taken together come under Applied Philosophy.

The media does not invite a philosopher to its panel discussion. The policy-making body does not have a philosopher as a member. The judiciary does not consult a philosopher to know what the case (like euthanasia - Aruna Shanbaug case, environment - Polavaram Project case) is and to deliver judgment thereon. They give empirical-statistical explanation or legal interpretation/ justification (as Justice Hansaria in his Apex court judgment on a euthanasia case in 1994). They hardly give conceptual/ logical explanation/ justification for a decision. Very rarely they think it to be necessary. They fail to realise, more often than not, that fallacies, inconsistencies, incoherence and sometimes contradictions involve in their explanation/ justification. [A learned person told a paper presenter: small mistakes occur in small areas and big mistakes in big areas!]

It might be that the judgment that one gives from the tutored philosophical point of view is not different from the judgment that one gives from commonsensical/ enlightened commonsensical point of view (say, on test-tube baby, same sex marriage, live-in relationship, unmarried parenthood, etc. But there is a difference between the two. There would be detailed explanation for the complete satisfaction of the intellect in the philosophical point of view. It would be lacking in the commonsensical point of view. There the bench-mark of justification would be, this is the order of things from time immemorial, such odd affairs are unheard of, there is nothing like this in the scriptures, the mentor has not told/ told like this, myself says this, God has told this in dream.

In a money crazy, knowledge hazy and over-busy global village, people in professions do not have time to cultivate philosophical acumen to delve deep into a problematic situation and perceive all its facets including the ethical aspect in a coherent, consistent and yet in no-nonsense manner. Hence, in such a topsy-turvy world, the philosopher is required to come out of his space of meditation to the space of action and place on the table what he has to offer by way of resolution of a given problematic.

Regarding moral precepts, a distinction might be made as follows:

- **INFORMATION OF MORAL PRECEPTS**
(*carya* alone) – practice alone would bewildered as Kausika Muni was.
- **KNOWLEDGE OF MORAL PRECEPTS [know ought]**
(*carca+carya*) Practice would be like Janaka's, Arjuna's, Vivekananda's, Mahatma Gandhi's.
- **WISDOM OF MORAL PRECEPTS**

(*drasta*) Badarayana, Sandilya, Yajnavalkya, Chandogya, Angirasa, Parasara, Vasista, Confucius were wise.

It may be appreciated that knowledge of moral concepts is better than information of moral concepts. I cite instances from Indian philosophy and culture.

satyam vada dharmam cara

Why?

Because

na satyat vidyate param and because

dharmena vidhrta prajah (The Mahabharata)

ma grdhah kasyasvid dhanam

Why?

Because

isavasyam idam sarvam yat kinca jagatyam jagat (The Isopanisad)

dharmyam samgramam kuru

Why?

If you do not do, then

svadharmam kirtim ca hitva papam avapsyasi (The Bhagavadgita)

Do not kill. Do not steal.

Why?

Because

“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12, New King James Version)

atmanah pratikulani na paresam samacaret / na tat parasya samdadhyat pratikulam yadatmanah (The Mahabharata) duhkha – duhkha samudaya – duhkha nirodha - duhkha nirodha gamini pratipat (Buddha)

The historic Aruna Ramachandra Shanbaug’s euthanasia case was in the Apex Court of India and the judgment came on 7th March 2011 – one day before the International Women’s Day. Let us have a look at the arguments for and against the case.

“Euthanasia is one of the most perplexing issues which the courts and legislatures all over the world are facing today. This court, in this case, is facing the same

issue and we feel like a ship in an unchartered sea, seeking some guidance by the light thrown by the legislations and judicial precedents of foreign countries,” the bench had said in one of its earlier orders, while hearing Virani's plea for Aruna's mercy killing.

Dr. Ravi Bapat, who was the first doctor to attend on Aruna after she was molested, asks: “Why don't you leave her alone?...The million dollar question is whose wish, whose pity, who decides and who puts the person to death? Who is to label anyone terminally ill? Medicine is not a mathematical science where $2+2=4$. How much inner joy we have of saving human life? Don't take it away from us. Hope these proponents do not want death clinics to mushroom.” Others of his ilk ask as to how doctors can reconcile mercy killing with the Hippocratic Oath they take: “I'll give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suffer any such counsel”.

The Judges, in this case, mention two of the cardinal principles of medical ethics, which are **Patient Autonomy** and **Beneficence**. Autonomy means the right to self-determination. Beneficence is acting in what is (or judged to be) in patient's best interest. They have given their verdict on passive euthanasia with adequate safeguards as they are aware that there are low ethical levels prevailing in our society today and the rampant commercialization and corruption: “we cannot rule out the possibility that unscrupulous persons with the help of some unscrupulous doctors may fabricate material to show that it is a terminal case with no chance of recovery.” They have ruled that passive euthanasia should be permitted in our country in certain situations, and ruled out the learned Attorney General's view that it should never be permitted.

What could the philosopher do here? The judges said in a different case, “we should like to observe that what we have sought to do through this judgment may be said to be an attempt to search for the social dynamics of criminal law, the functional theory of sentencing and the therapeutic reach of punitive arts, to catch up with social sciences relevant to criminal justice and to link up prison jurisprudence with constitutional roots.” The philosopher could only say in this context that there is an autonomous and beneficent option in the *Mahabharata* in the form of *prayopavesa*. Bhishma and Pariksit and Vinoba Bhave exercised this option. It is not easy, but one can think it over.

The *Upanisads* and the *Bhagavadgita*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavata Mahapurana* are the primers of applied ethics. They do not belong to any religion or community. These texts are the paradigms of secularity and are meant for the welfare of the whole of humanity and rest of the created beings. So, propagation of the messages contained in them and any work of research done on them would be fruitful works in applied ethics. I conclude by saying that applied ethics in one sense is over undertaken and in another sense not at all over undertaken.

References

1. Vidyaranya Muni, *Pancadasi*, VII-124.
2. Rapheal.D.D. *Moral Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, London, 1982 p-10.
3. Note Book, 77.
4. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Published etc. over required, 6.421.
5. A.J. Ayer, "The Analysis of Moral Judgments," in *Philosophical Essays*, London, 1959, p. 246.
6. C.D. Broad, *Ethics and the History of Philosophy*, London, 1952, p. 244. Both are quoted by Peter Singer in "Moral Experts", *Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Mar., 1972), pp. 115-117.and in the Introduction to his (Ed.) *Applied Ethics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 2.
7. Singer Peter, (ed): *Applied Ethics* Oxford University Press, New York, 1986, p-4.
8. Singer Peter, (ed): *Practical Ethics*, New York, Cambridge University Press, Third Edition, 2011.
9. Frankene K, Willima, *Ethics*, N.J, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, INC, 1973 p-5
10. Ed. G.W, von Wright, UK, Blackwell Publishers, Second Edition, 1980.