



BRILL

## The Varieties of Applied Philosophy: Introduction

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Applied philosophy is experiencing its “golden days,” as Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen says in his insightful introduction to *A Companion to Applied Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> Applied philosophy seems to be distinguished from its opposite, pure philosophy,<sup>2</sup> usually understood as traditional philosophy, which deals with subjects such as free will, consciousness, or knowledge in philosophical subdisciplines like ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology. To embrace applied philosophy could thus mean to advocate for a philosophy that deals with questions “relevant to ‘the important questions of everyday life,’”<sup>3</sup> as Leslie Stevenson puts it, as opposed to questions that arise from within the subdisciplines of pure philosophy. Hence, Lippert-Rasmussen makes an important distinction between applied philosophy, which applies philosophical methods to

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- 1 Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, “The Nature of Applied Philosophy,” in *A Companion to Applied Philosophy*, ed. K. Lippert-Rasmussen, K. Brownlee, and D. Coady (Malden, MA: John Wiley, 2017), 15.
  - 2 *Ibid.*, 3.
  - 3 Leslie Stevenson, “Applied Philosophy,” *Metaphilosophy* 1, no. 3 (1970): 259, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24434827>.

non-philosophical problems, and pure philosophy, which applies philosophical methods to philosophical problems.<sup>4</sup>

However, pure philosophy has also had a tremendous impact on everyday life. Philosophers have, for example, changed the course of history with their theories by changing the way people think about life and themselves. And if this impact qualifies as applied philosophy—as Stevenson’s understanding might indicate—then Nietzsche’s philosophy is applied philosophy because of its tremendous influence on a whole generation of artists and writers. Moreover, Marx’s philosophy truly changed the course of history by being directly employed in politics. This raises the following question: Can there be a clear-cut distinction between applied and pure philosophy? We think that there can; however, being influential is not what is central to this distinction. We do not deny that all sorts of philosophy can have an impact and influence society, people, history, and so on. But the same could be said about art, literature, physics, and making pottery. Instead, we think that a more careful definition of applied philosophy is needed. A definition that aims at a narrower understanding of what is meant by applied philosophy has to answer the following questions: What is it that is applied? How and by whom (trained academics or autodidact writers, artists, etc.) is it applied? To what is it applied? In this introduction, we shall only hint at the direction in which a more thorough discussion of what constitutes applied philosophy would have to go. As so often happens, this discussion also connects to sensitive and often complex meta-philosophical disputes that we do not wish to engage with here.

The UK Society for Applied Philosophy states that applied philosophy is

philosophical study and research that has a direct bearing on areas of practical concern. [The Society] arose from an increasing awareness that many topics of public debate are capable of being illuminated by the critical, analytic approach characteristic of philosophy, and by direct consideration of questions of value. These topics come from a number of different areas of social life—law, politics, economics, science, technology, medicine and education are among the most obvious.<sup>5</sup>

If we accept this description, the difference between pure and applied philosophy lies in applied philosophy’s direct approach to questions of practical concern in different social contexts and its connection with public debate. Furthermore, applied philosophy employs traditional philosophical

<sup>4</sup> Lippert-Rasmussen, “Nature of Applied Philosophy,” 3.

<sup>5</sup> Society for Applied Philosophy, “About Us,” <https://www.appliedphil.org>.

methods, such as critical and analytical thinking, to contribute to the clarification and sometimes even to the solution of problems of public concern. Whether applied philosophy should be concerned solely with clarification or also with the solution of problems is an interesting question that we will not pursue here. However, we can identify both types of applied philosophy in the contemporary philosophical scene.

We want to highlight three characteristics that we think help describe applied philosophy. First, although they do not necessarily relate to each other, many different forms of applied philosophy exist. Hence, applied philosophy is as wide-ranging as pure philosophy. Applied philosophy spans a wide range, from analytic philosophy, Critical Theory, and hermeneutics to phenomenology and psychoanalytically inspired philosophy, to name but a few of the philosophical methods used in applied philosophy. Second, applied philosophy is still in the making, and thus new forms may arise in the future. Robert Frodeman's advice to 'dedisciplinarize' philosophy<sup>6</sup> could be interpreted as a new form of applied philosophy where philosophers work in close cooperation with other disciplines and policymakers, away from the armchairs of philosophy departments. Third, applied philosophies, although having their roots in diverse philosophical traditions, are linked by a shared skepticism concerning the explanatory power of philosophical systems. The German critical theorist Jürgen Habermas called this a skepticism toward "postmetaphysical thinking." Metaphysics is here a general term for "totalizing thinking,"<sup>7</sup> a philosophical standpoint that strives to give an all-encompassing explanation of reality. Post-metaphysical thinking foregoes this systematic ambition by turning the philosopher into an advocate of reason and a facilitator of society's self-understanding. Habermas's diagnosis of post-metaphysical thinking as a major tendency in twentieth-century philosophy offers a possible clarification of why applied philosophy is currently experiencing its so-called 'golden days.' An alternative explanation is that as universities are currently undergoing transformations aimed at increasing the employability of graduates, an important measure of each discipline is the value and relevance that a university program in that field has in and for the many non-academic professions in society. The locution of applied philosophy may serve to disarm prejudices against philosophy as distanced from or disinterested in the problems of society at large. Currently, many pure philosophy programs offer courses and modules that are either

6 Robert Frodeman, *Sustainable Knowledge: A Theory of Interdisciplinarity* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

7 Jürgen Habermas, "Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking," in Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 33.

called ‘applied philosophy’ or incorporate applied philosophy topics into traditional courses. Hypothetically, it might sound like a good idea to educate students to use analytical and critical thinking in jobs in many different areas of society. However, although graduates of the Applied Philosophy program at Aalborg University have a slightly lower rate of unemployment than graduates of other Danish universities offering programs called ‘philosophy’ (which includes some courses in applied philosophy issues), the statistics available in the Danish context do not yet support such a conclusion.<sup>8</sup> Whether employers have yet to discover the value of applied philosophy or universities have failed to promote the abilities of their students is an open question. One might even question whether employability post-graduation is a good measure of the value of a university program.

Returning to the question of a general definition of applied philosophy, we would like to emphasize that applied philosophy is a branch of philosophy that applies traditional philosophical concepts, theories, and methods to problems originating from situations that arise in practices outside academia itself. This, we believe, is a good starting point for thinking about what applied philosophy is and what it might become. The future of applied philosophy might also include developing new philosophical theories and even methods; a case in point would be empirical philosophy.<sup>9</sup> When the Center for Applied Philosophy at Aalborg University organized the Annual Meeting of the Danish Philosophical Association in 2021, they agreed that the subject of the meeting should be applied philosophy in all its varieties. This decision is reflected in the contributions to this issue of *DYP*.

The articles collected in this issue all engage in applied philosophy in its various forms. For example, the article by Søren Harnow Klausen, Regina Christiansen, Jakob Emiliussen, and Søren Engelsen deals with emotions “in complex and uncertain situations.”<sup>10</sup> The aim of the authors here corresponds to the need for applied philosophy to concern itself with problems from many practical and theoretical contexts, as well as allowing philosophical theory to be informed by empirical data (to relate not only to problems from outside academia but also to incorporate empirical research). A key goal of their project

8 “Se listen: Fire ud af ti uddannelser har overledighed blandt deres dimittender,” *Dansk Erhverv*, May 6, 2023, <https://www.danskerhverv.dk/presse-og-nyheder/nyheder/2023/maj/ny-analyse-fire-ud-af-ti-uddannelser-har-overledighed-blandt-deres-dimittender/>.

9 See Søren Harnow Klausen, Regina Christiansen, and Jakob Emiliussen, “Emotions and Values in Practice: The Case of Elderly Care,” *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy* 56, no. 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1163/24689300-bja10020>.

10 *Ibid.*, 115.

was using qualitative data “to test and develop philosophical hypotheses about the nature and conditions of well-being, general methods and strategies for improving or maintaining well-being, and the role of emotions and values in well-being and care practices.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the article is exemplary insofar as it showcases how to apply classical philosophical questions (e.g., concerning ethics or the good life) and theories (e.g., phenomenology or Heideggerian thought) to complex situations using empirical data. The article concludes by suggesting that a strong ethical standpoint in complex and uncertain situations related to care professions might be counterproductive, as the care that an individual requires might call “for a flexible response”<sup>12</sup> to a given ethical dilemma.

Annabelle Lever’s contribution examines whether selection for political office by lottery is more democratic than regular elections. From the perspective of applied philosophy, Lever’s article engages with contemporary political issues related to fair representation by applying insights from political philosophy to real-life examples to gauge the feasibility of random selection, and to evaluate which kind of random selection is most fair: “Unweighted lotteries ... provide no grounds to believe that those people who were selected randomly ... will be a sufficiently diverse bunch.”<sup>13</sup> And “weighted lotteries cannot prevent the very significant gap between those selected and those serving from undermining the egalitarian appeal of sortition assemblies, however much they may look like us.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, both kinds of lottery reveal issues and pitfalls when confronted with the complexities of reality. However, Lever observes that the value of thinking about other ways of doing democracy stems from “what they reveal about the challenges of democratic equality.”<sup>15</sup> In this sense, Lever engages in applied philosophical deliberations by clearly relating abstract political-philosophical debates to actual real-world examples.

Carl E. Kühl’s contribution deals with the notion of *counterfactual reasoning* as a manner in which one may answer questions that ask what might have happened if some fact had been different. The article sets out to examine which steps are needed for such an answer to be “well-formed,”<sup>16</sup> as well as

11 Ibid., 116–117.

12 Ibid., 135.

13 Annabelle Lever, “Democracy: Should We Replace Elections with,” *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy* 56, no. 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1163/24689300-bja10042>, 138.

14 Ibid., 148.

15 Ibid., 152.

16 Carl Erik Kühl, “On Counterfactual Reasoning,” *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy* 56, no. 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1163/24689300-bja10043>, 155.

asking “[w]hat is the point of”<sup>17</sup> counterfactual reasoning. Central to Kühnl’s understanding of counterfactual statements is their function as performative utterances, or what Kühnl describes as “performing an utterance,”<sup>18</sup> rather than being proper sentences. Instead, these facts are performed through being uttered<sup>19</sup> as one engages in attempting to answer or interrogate about possible or could-have-been situations (e.g., what would have happened if I had missed that train?). Kühnl’s later statement that “we have to *fix the context* and assume normal circumstances when we perform ... practical reasoning”<sup>20</sup> suggests the applicability of counterfactual reasoning to problems arising in applied philosophy. Here, Kühnl seems to suggest that there are only a finite number of ‘reasonable’ counterfactuals that may be used to answer a given question, so that “we cannot incorporate more than a small number of all possibly relevant arguments into our reasoning, be it counterfactual or not.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, Kühnl’s contribution has an important impact on practical reasoning insofar as it suggests ways in which counterfactual reasoning may be used ‘reasonably’ to answer questions to which there is no (clear) *factual* answer.

Kurt D. Keller’s article undertakes an examination of *historicity* as it becomes attentive to *corporality*. According to Keller, philosophical questioning is relevant for applied philosophy because through its interpretations, philosophy offers “pertinent ontological and epistemological insights” to social science and the humanities.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the essay’s contribution to applied philosophy stems from the insight that the interpretation of the phenomenology of bodily and historical experiences offers something worthwhile to social theory understood in a broad sense. On the one hand, Keller refers to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the *flesh* and its three kinds of intentionality—“horizontal ... vertical ... and dialectical”<sup>23</sup>—to account for the corporeal aspects of the experience of lived or practical life. On the other hand, our interpretations of life are “historically formed”<sup>24</sup> and thus related to the notion of historicity as it “sets a changing ontological framework for the power with which people are jointly able to handle current challenges in their lifeworld.”<sup>25</sup> Concerning applied philosophy, Keller refers to “Arendt’s discussion of natural, foundational

17 Ibid., 156.

18 Ibid., 158.

19 Ibid., 158.

20 Ibid., 168.

21 Ibid., 178.

22 Kurt Dauer Keller, “The Flesh of Historicity,” *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy* 56, no. 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1163/24689300-20230001>, 186.

23 Ibid., 191.

24 Ibid., 195.

25 Ibid., 199.

conditions for human existence and ... Patočka's emphasis on existence as the realization of significant potentials in human life.... Thus, what they establish is the phenomenological comprehension of historicity as common lifeworld experience,"<sup>26</sup> which functions on many different levels or *plateaus*.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, Keller's article may be read together with Kühn's by those interested in how to use philosophical interpretation in practical or applied endeavors in complex and multifaceted contexts.

Overall, this special issue highlights how applied philosophy is a dynamic and evolving branch of philosophy that, in contrast to pure or traditional philosophy, focuses less on systematic thinking. Applied philosophy applies itself instead to a great variety of domains as it attempts to nuance, improve, and criticize other disciplines and conceptual frameworks, as well as to pinpoint problematic ethical issues and their solution.

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26 Ibid., 202.

27 Ibid., 202.