

# Applied Ethics

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An Impartial Introduction



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# Chapter 1

## General Introduction

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### 1. Introduction to the Introduction

Welcome to your textbook on applied ethics. We, the coauthors, hope you'll enjoy it. Perhaps you have some questions (or want to humor those who do) before we dive in, such as:

1. What exactly is applied ethics?
2. How should I navigate this book?
3. Besides the applied ethics stuff, will I get anything else out of this book?

We've thought about these questions, too, and want to address them right now in this Introduction. So, without further ado, let's address what applied ethics is, how you should navigate the features of this textbook, and the transferable, argumentative skills you're going to learn.

### 2. What Is Applied Ethics?

#### 2.1. *Applied Ethics*

**Ethics** is typically divided into three areas:

1. **Applied ethics** tries to give answers to the practical moral questions we ask in everyday life. For example: Is abortion **wrong**? Is polluting the environment permissible? Do animals have rights?
2. **Normative ethics** is more abstract than applied ethics. Normative ethics tries to construct theories that account for the rightness or wrongness of certain actions, motives, and/or character traits. For example: What makes both murder and stealing wrong? Is there a common ingredient to their wrongness? Can we tell a simple 'story' about why they are both wrong?
3. **Metaethics** is about even more abstract questions than is normative ethics. Metaethics tries to answer fundamental questions about the nature of morality. For example: What are goodness and badness? Are right and wrong real and objective, are they

based on **emotions**, or are they entirely made up? Are we capable of knowing what is good and bad? If so, how?

This book is devoted to *applied ethics*. Applied ethics is also sometimes called *practical ethics* or *contemporary moral problems*. We focus on six popular and controversial topics:

1. **Abortion:** Is abortion wrong? Is it permissible? Do fetuses have a right to life? Do women have a right to choose?
2. **Animals:** What obligations do we have to non-human animals? Does their pain and suffering matter morally? Is it permissible to use them for their labor, body parts, and by-products if they are treated well before they are killed? Or do animals have their own lives, desires, and aims that require our respect?
3. **The environment:** What obligations do we have to preserve the environment? Does the natural world have value independent of its usefulness to us? Or is it valuable solely in virtue of its use to human beings? What obligations do we have to future generations who depend on functioning ecosystems?
4. **Poverty:** Do we have obligations to help the poor? Are we bad people if we don't help those who are less fortunate or is helping the poor just moral "extra credit"? Can giving to charity ever be wrong?
5. **Punishment:** What justifies punishment? Could it turn out that punishment is impermissible? Even if punishment is permissible in theory, could it turn out that the way we punish people is not permissible?
6. **Disability:** What is a disability? Is disability just a different way of being, or does having a disability make someone worse off?

Each chapter is devoted to a famous or influential argument on one of these six topics. The six sections of the book (one for each topic) can be read in any order and independently. Because learning about argumentation builds similarly to learning about math, we recommend that the chapters be read in order; but we'll always flag argumentative points and provide reference back to the initial introduction of those points.

The chapters can be read independently, too, but reading all of the chapters of a section in order is preferable—especially for the sake of balance. The chapters can also be read independently of the original essays covered. For example, Chapters 3 and 4 can be understood without ever looking over the corresponding essays by Marquis and Thomson. But we recommend that you, the student, also read the original essays.



## 2.2. *Connections to Normative Theories*

While the focus of this book is the moral challenges listed above, we also introduce some of the most influential normative moral theories along the way. (So we introduce some of the basics of normative ethics.) A **normative moral theory**, or *moral theory* for short, tries to get at the most basic or fundamental reason certain actions, attitudes, or character traits are good, bad, right, or wrong. Philosophers are kind of like little children who like to play the ‘why game’—except philosophers are more annoying and not as cute.

Here is an example of a philosophical ‘why game’:

Sue:	Lying is wrong!
Philosopher:	Why is lying wrong?
Sue:	Because lying misleads people.
Philosopher:	Why is misleading people wrong?
Sue:	Because you are giving people inaccurate information that may harm them if they act upon it.
Philosopher:	So lying is only wrong when it could harm someone?
Sue:	I guess so.
Philosopher:	What about lying to someone in order to benefit them? Is that wrong?

... and the conversation continues.

While this discussion is incomplete and does not fully settle the question of why lying is wrong, the dialogue displays one way moral theories are formed. Philosophers start with examples of acts most people agree are right or that most agree are wrong. Some actions that are on the “Good List,” ones that are always or usually right, are giving to charity, caring for children, and keeping promises. And on the “Bad List” are actions that are always or usually wrong, such as killing parents, torturing puppies, and telling lies.

We might think that it is a cosmic coincidence that all the actions on the Good List are right, and that all the actions on the Bad List are wrong. We might think that there is nothing more to be said about why these actions are right or wrong. But we might not. We might instead propose that there is some feature common to the actions on the Good List that makes them all right, and that there is some feature common to the actions on the Bad List that makes them all wrong. Normative moral theories are proposals about those features of all right actions that make them right and those features of all wrong actions that make them wrong.

Let's look back at the conversation between Sue and the moral philosopher. Perhaps after a very long conversation they proclaim that all immoral things have one thing in common: an action is morally wrong **if and only if** it harms someone. Our philosopher, with the help of her patient friend, has begun to develop a moral theory—a theory that tells us not only what features make something wrong, but what features make all wrong actions wrong.

Because moral theories explain why certain actions, attitudes, or character traits are right, wrong, good, and bad, we will introduce moral theories alongside our investigation of contemporary moral problems. The moral theories we introduce are

- care ethics,
- contractualism,
- cultural relativism,
- deontology,
- divine command theory,
- ethical pluralism,
- Kantian ethics,
- utilitarianism, and
- virtue ethics.

Applied ethics might be pursued by simply applying moral theories. Take your favorite moral theory, say, **contractualism**. Take your favorite moral problem, say, the question of abortion. See what verdict the theory gives for the action at hand: Does abortion have the features that make an action right or wrong? But, as we'll see, this is not the usual strategy pursued by philosophers. After all, the moral theories are often at least as controversial as the moral problems they might be applied to. And the strategy would also narrow your audience. You won't convince anyone who is not a contractualist of your contractualist verdict about abortion. Arguments in applied ethics, as we'll see, tend to be messier than the simple application of moral theories.

### 2.3. *What Applied Ethics Is Not*

Let's distinguish the questions our book deals with from other questions. This book is about moral questions. For example, we would like to know if abortion is

- **morally obligatory:** something you should do;
- **morally impermissible:** something you should not do; or
- **morally permissible:** something neither obligatory nor wrong (it's okay to do it and okay not to do it).

Here are some less controversial examples: abstaining from murdering your sibling is morally obligatory, murdering your sibling is morally impermissible or wrong, and being best friends with your sibling is morally permissible. Or so it would seem.

Moral questions can be distinguished from **legal questions**. Legal questions are about the laws the government should institute and enforce: Should abortion, pollution, or killing animals for their fur be illegal? Should it be illegal to not give to charity or to make fun of people with disabilities?

Moral and legal questions can be separated. For example, one might argue that while it is immoral to taunt people with disabilities, doing so should not be illegal. On the flip side, recreationally smoking marijuana is illegal in most states, but probably is not morally wrong. Similarly, some people believe that, while immoral, abortion should not be illegal. People who hold positions like these believe that while abortion or taunting the disabled are morally wrong, using law to enforce moral behavior here would violate our rights to privacy or free speech or whatnot.

Yet legal and moral questions might sometimes bear on each other. After all, many immoral actions are also illegal, and many people think that they should be illegal because they are immoral. For instance, assault, theft, and murder are both morally wrong and illegal; and plausibly, they are illegal because they are immoral.

Moral questions are also distinct from **blame questions**. Blame questions are about the attitudes we should take toward others when attributing blame (or praise): Are those who perform or get abortions, pollute our environment, or eat factory-farmed animals blameworthy?

Being blameworthy for something means that it's your fault—we can hold you responsible. While wrongdoing and blame often go together, they can sometimes come apart. You might do something wrong but not be blameworthy. Perhaps you're being tortured and eventually give up information to the enemy that causes the deaths of many people. It was psychologically possible for you to resist giving up the information, but extremely difficult. Nearly anyone in your situation also would have given up the information. It was still wrong for you to give up the information, but in light of the torture, we certainly wouldn't blame you for doing so. The arguments we'll look at concern wrongdoing, not blameworthiness.

While the above questions are certainly interesting and deserving of attention, this book is not about legal or blame questions or how the moral, legal, and blame questions bear on each other.

### 3. Navigating the Textbook

#### 3.1. *Impartiality*

This book is set up to equip you, the reader, with the knowledge and tools to make up your own mind about the controversial topics covered. We have

three chapters on each topic so that the important nuances to the debates surrounding these topics get adequate attention. Each topic section includes the following:

- **Pro and con chapters for each debate:** for example, a chapter on the pro-life side of the abortion debate, followed by a chapter on the pro-choice side.
- **Open-ended chapters:** each includes objections and replies, as well as unanswered objections to provoke further thought.
- **Further reading:** each chapter includes a list of additional readings from both sides of the debate, as well as readings on related debates.

We don't care what your views on the controversial questions are, or whether you have a decided view at all. If you're using this book for a course, your professor shouldn't care either. But we hope that you'll learn more about the diverse views on these topics and come to understand why philosophers do take them. Hopefully, you'll be able to form your own view in light of them—or decide that you don't yet have a settled view at all!

### 3.2. Features

The book contains a number of helpful features:

- **Standard-form arguments:** the reasoning is set out with numbered premises and conclusions. These help the reader follow the reasoning better and identify what part of the reasoning an objection is targeting.
- **Bolded terms:** key terms are highlighted with a bold font. We also use italics liberally to pinpoint important ideas. These help the reader identify central concepts and are useful study aids.
- **Boxed questions:** questions for the reader to answer. These provoke further thought and can help foster classroom discussion.
- **Further reading:** we recommend further readings for each argument, including deeper explorations and references for related topics.
- **Neat bullet points:** like these ones.

This is a boxed question. Are you excited to see more boxed questions in subsequent chapters?

We write in a friendly and untechnical style. The chapters are organized similarly: first setting out the main argument, and then presenting objections and replies.

## 4. Argumentation

In addition to exploring applied ethics, we want to leave you with an additional gift that you can take with you even if you forget everything about applied ethics after reading this book. (But we still really hope you don't forget about applied ethics!) This gift is **argumentation**, or the ability to present and analyze arguments well. We think that argumentation is an especially valuable gift to impart because it is transferable to other fields of study and areas of your everyday life.

In each chapter we give reasons for and against the views we discuss. In philosophy when we present premises (or claims or reasons) for a conclusion in a methodical way, we call this an 'argument.' An argument is a collection of premises and the conclusion the premises support. **Arguments** have two parts: **premises** and a **conclusion**. The premises are supposed to support the conclusion. In a good argument, the premises are (1) plausible and (2) support, or even guarantee, the conclusion.

Philosophers often number premises and preface the numbers with a 'P' to signify that it's a premise. Conclusions are signified with a 'C' and often start with a verbal cue as well, such as "therefore" or "thus." Here's an example of how this might go:

- (P1) All cats are cute.
- (P2) Ponyo, Artemis, and Apollo are cats.
- (C) Thus, Ponyo, Artemis, and Apollo are cute.

Sometimes an argument isn't very good, either because a premise isn't plausible or because the premises don't lead to the conclusion. For instance, you may look at the above argument and doubt (P1) because you find hairless sphynx cats unattractive. A bad argument does not mean that the conclusion is automatically false. It just means that the argument is bad or that it does not provide a good reason to think that the conclusion is true. The conclusion might still be true for some other reason. We assure you that even if (P1) is false, Ponyo, Artemis, and Apollo are in fact cute.



Figure 1. A sphynx cat.

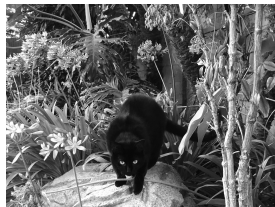


Figure 2. Ponyo.



Figure 3. Apollo (left) and Artemis (right).

Moral arguments often have some premises that are moral claims and some premises that are non-moral claims. In applied ethics, people will often disagree about both types of claims. For example, look at the argument below about the death penalty:

- (P1) If the death penalty prevents future murders, then it is morally justified.
- (P2) The death penalty prevents future murders.
- (C) Therefore, the death penalty is morally justified.

Premise 1 is a **moral claim**, that is, it involves a moral position—it is about whether an action is justified by a future consequence. Premise 2 is a **non-moral claim**—it does not involve a moral position. Often, but not always, non-moral claims also will be **empirical**, meaning they are subject to observations about the world. In this argument, Premise 2 is both a non-moral and an empirical claim.

Suppose two pundits are arguing on television about the moral status of the death penalty. They might both disagree on premise 1, which claims that a future good (preventing murders) morally justifies putting someone (say, a murderer) to death. One of the pundits might think that a good consequence always justifies an action, while the other might hold that there are factors other than good consequences that morally matter. Perhaps intentionally taking life is wrong, regardless of the good consequences it may cause or whether the person deserves to die.

Or, the pundits might disagree on premise 2, with one person believing that the death penalty does prevent future murders and the other believing that it has no effect on future murders or perhaps even makes them more likely. Notice that whether premise 2 is true is an empirical matter. If a matter is empirical, this means that we know about it by making observations about the world. Thus, to figure out if the death penalty is wrong, we might consult social scientists investigating the effects of the death penalty to compare murder rates in societies before and after the abolition of the death penalty.

When doing applied ethics, it is important to pay attention to both moral and non-moral claims. It is also important to be able to tell the difference between them, since we turn to different kinds of experts and evidence when investigating the truth of those claims. For instance, if we want to figure out whether premise 1 is true, we should probably consult people who study ethics. But if we want to know whether premise 2 is true, we should probably ask sociologists who have studied the relevant data. The beauty of applied ethics is that it unites these different fields of specialty to provide us with guidance in everyday decisions.

After we present some influential arguments, we then consider objections to the arguments and replies to the objections.

- **Objections:** objections target the argument at various points. In explaining what arguments are, we earlier pointed out that good arguments have (1) plausible premises that (2) lead to or support the conclusion. Thus, most of the objections we consider target a premise, showing that it is not plausible or ill-supported, or the reasoning, showing that the premises do not really lead to or support the conclusion.
- **Replies:** replies to objections are supposed to show that the objection is mistaken; there may also be a reply to the reply, and so on.

You can imagine these arguments, objections, and replies going similarly to opposing lawyers making their cases in court. We recommend you play the juror, subjecting the arguments on all sides to the most critical scrutiny. You can also leap out of the jury box to present a case of your own. You may think of an argument, an objection, or a reply of your own that we have not included!

As we proceed, we will introduce you to different patterns of argument and teach you how to evaluate such arguments. You'll also get used to analytic thinking as you read through our own presentations and criticisms of arguments. Our hope is that practicing reasoning about the topics in this text will give you the skills to think carefully and clearly about other moral questions—including questions you face in your own life not covered in this textbook.

## 5. Conclusion

Hopefully, you now have a better idea of what you're in for! We look forward to exploring applied ethics with you.

## Further Reading

Each chapter contains a little section on further reading on the argument covered and closely related topics. Other textbooks on applied ethics are Singer (2011) and Oderberg (2000). The reader will discover how often our treatment is indebted to Singer in particular. There are many anthologies on applied ethics. We especially recommend Boonin and Oddie (2009), LaFollette (2014), and Timmons (2019). Timmons (2019) is an introduction to normative ethics, and Chrisman (2017) is an introduction to metaethics. Shafer-Landau (2017) is an introduction to normative ethics, as well as some metaethics. Lyons and Ward (2018) is an introduction to arguments and critical thinking.