SHOULD PHILOSOPHERS 'APPLY ETHICS'?

Gerald Gaus

By 'applying ethics', do philosophers actually succeed in corrupting philosophy?

'Applied ethics' is the growth industry in philosophy. Many philosophy departments, starved for students, have found a new, and apparently lucrative, market in teaching applied ethics. And many philosophers have found welcomed research support in applying ethics. Bioethics, environmental ethics, animal ethics, research ethics, business ethics, medical ethics, professional ethics, land ethics, ranching ethics, public ethics, population ethics and sexual ethics just begin the list of areas of applied ethics; and then there are the 'problems' of applied ethics such as pornography, abortion, drug use, euthanasia, sexual offence, and so on.

The application of ethics would appear both welcomed and inevitable. It seems welcomed since philosophers have expertise in argument and analysis: their contributions clarify public debate in a democracy. And it seems inevitable since ethics is inherently applied. Ethics is about what ought to be done; it is the application of general considerations to more specific situations. So how could one doubt that philosophers must and should apply ethics?

To decide whether philosophers should apply ethics, it might help to reflect more generally on what philosophers should do — what is involved in doing philosophy well? An obvious suggestion is that philosophers should pursue the truth. This certainly gets at one virtue of good philosophy: its goal is to get things right, not to make the philosopher (or others), richer, healthier or happier. However, merely *seeking* truth doesn't make for a good philosopher. More importantly, even *obtaining* the truth is not the mark of a good philosopher. Late nineteenth-century Hegelian philosophers such as Bernard Bosanquet conceived of philosophy as grasping and articulating important truths, but it was never clear why we should

share the belief that their 'insights' were important truths. To have philosophical knowledge we need something akin to true *justified* belief: good philosophy presents good reasons as to why it has got things right.

How good must these reasons be? In the introduction to his 1981 book *Philosophical Explanations* , Robert Nozick made fun of the ambition of philosophy to present powerful or forceful arguments; forcing people to believe things, he chided, is not a nice way treat them. Why, though, has philosophy sought arguments that are so *strong* that they *demand* acceptance; that seek to convince everybody? In science, advancing *plausible conjectures* is enough. The intellectual discipline in science — that which prevents it from being a game in which each side chooses its favourite explanation — comes in testing these conjectures against empirical data. (So those who would reduce science to an intellectual game deny that theories can be tested against empirical reality). In philosophical argument the links to empirical data are, at best, indirect; typically, the data radically underdetermine the choice between philosophical explanations. If philosophy is to possess intellectual discipline — if it is not to be (merely) a playful intellectual activity, then it cannot rest content to propose plausible philosophical explanations. That is why 'A philosophical argument is an attempt to get someone to believe something, whether he wants to believe it or not' (Nozick, p. 4). If what you *want* to believe is relevant, then philosophical positions will, at least in part, reflect different wants. Or, to be less kind, philosophy will be ideological: the persuasiveness of your philosophical explanation will depend on the wants, values, and ends of your audience. Under the guise of philosophy we get ideological advocacy. This, though, is to sacrifice the idea that philosophy is impartial in that its goal is simply to get things right.

Much, indeed I think most, of applied ethics fails to achieve the requisite standard of argument or justification. As David Ross pointed out in *The Right and the Good*, although we may be able to obtain knowledge of abstract principles of right, particular judgments and specific issues involve conflicting principles, and it is exceedingly difficult to provide answers to

these questions that have any claim to being clear and definitive. When we apply ethics — e.g., when we seek to determine how our principles concerning freedom, respect for life, the metaphysics of persons and so on relate to aborting a fetus in the fifth month — there simply is no powerful argument that demands acceptance by all. There are reasoned positions, but with respect to such issues there are reasoned positions endorsing conflicting beliefs. In the words of John Rawls, these issues are truly characterized by reasonable pluralism.

Matters on which reasonable pluralism obtains still may be rationally discussed. For example, whether the United Kingdom will be better off joining the Euro area or keeping the pound is a matter of reasonable disagreement and discussion. People can present reasons for and against, but the power of the reasons will depend to a large extent on the values, ends, and aims of the participants. There can be reasoned ideological discussion. Good journalism, some exceptional political speeches, and some debates over dinner all are instances. So too is most of what goes on in applied ethics. It is not a coincidence that most environmental philosophers are environmentalists or that most work done on animal's rights is by those who value protecting animals.

Providing reasoned defences of these positions *and their opposites* is valuable for democracy. They are not, though, good philosophy. The arguments being advanced are highly contentious and presuppose disputed values and ideological positions, even though the advocates often assert unqualified positions. Randy Cohen, the *New York Times Magazine's* 'Ethicist', regularly tells readers the answers to their ethical dilemmas in a few paragraphs. In one recent column (24th August 2003), a reader from Chicago reports a somewhat complicated tale in which an acquaintance was mugged; a suspect was promptly arrested, having been caught with the property of the acquaintance. At the police station the acquaintance reports to the reader that he (the acquaintance) overheard a police officer say things that, if true, would show that there was an impropriety in the mugger's arrest. The reader asks: should I report what my acquaintance told

me he overheard? The ethicist tells the reader: 'You should indeed come forward…. I can understand your uneasiness. If you speak up, you may free a guilty man. (This is not likely to delight your acquaintance.) But is justice for a single crime more important than maintaining the integrity of the criminal justice system?' That's a good question, especially given the existing degree of integrity of the law in Chicago, that a mugger may go free to harm others, that your acquaintance (how close of an acquaintance?) has just been mugged, and apparently your acquaintance isn't so keen on helping a mugger to get acquitted, and so is not doing the reporting. Despite these complexities, the ethicist proclaims a clear answer.

Now, it will be said, applied philosophers do not do *that.* (Certainly their articles are longer and have footnotes.) Of course it is easy to over-generalize. Some practitioners of applied ethics seek merely to clarify what the arguments and their problems are, having no commitment to any substantive position; we might call this applied critical thinking. And sometimes there may really be a philosophical argument that has direct implications for an applied problem — I am not saying that such cases are impossible. Cohen's column, though, is indeed a distillation of applied ethics *qua* arguments that we should protect the environment rather than increase global trade, that we should raise steers according to ranching principles, that abortion in the third trimester is wrong (or permissible), that stem cell research should (or shouldn't) be restricted to cells less than ten days old, that humans should not be cloned, that we should (or shouldn't) increase foreign aid, that multicultural education should (or shouldn't) be embraced, and so on. All these issues are exceedingly complex, and the reasons point in different directions, and it is hard to see how we should balance them.

So should philosophers apply ethics? As citizens, they have every right to. Philosophers need not leave public policy debates over these matters to theologians and 'professional ethicists'. However, when applying ethics in this way they are not doing philosophy, any more than are good journalists, public officials (including the bureaucracy), policy analysts,

and other citizens when they think clearly about these matters. But philosophers are at risk in ways other citizens are not. For participation in public controversy masked as philosophy corrupts philosophy, and this is the crux of the danger in applying ethics. (Much political philosophy is corrupting for many of the same reasons). A sophisticated, rational, ideological advocacy is conducted as if it were philosophy, giving the impression (both to ourselves and our students) that philosophy is a merely an intellectual game in which you defend what you want to believe.

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