Applied Ethics Notes

Theory without application is sterile and useless, but action without a theoretical perspective is blind" (Pojman & Fieser, 2012, p. 3).

Perhaps it goes without saying that any ethical theory is only as good as its application to concrete moral problems. That is why understanding the connection between ethical theory and moral issues is a crucial step in the journey toward good ethical thinking and practice. Moreover, seeing the relationship between theory and application helps one toward achieving greater ethical awareness and human flourishing (Pojman & Fieser, 2012, p. 3). To this end, Topic 7 begins with focus on "applied" ethics from a "theoretical" perspective, which means considering primarily what applied ethics is and what it entails, and secondarily, what are specific ethical issues toward which ethical theory must be applied. In Topic 8, the focus on application will continue, shifting more directly to case studies involving ethical dilemmas, along with helpful decision-making models and processes.

Studying any major ethical theory naturally brings to mind how that theory might be applicable to a given situation, as we have seen throughout the course. Even so, a more concentrated focus and study of important ethical issues themselves is crucial for helping one to see the breadth and depth of particular dilemmas, after which one works to understand how a particular ethical theory might address the dilemma. This approach is a bit like "starting in reverse" by initially consideration the ethical problem, then working toward a solution by way of an ethical theory or several theories combined. And since in everyday life, people face ethical issues constantly, beginning with particular dilemmas makes good sense. In fact, beginning with the actual ethical problem is how applied ethics typically is carried out, with case studies frequently serving as the catalyst for moral reasoning and decision-making.

Still, it should be remembered that everyone approaches ethical issues from a particular set of worldview assumptions and commitments, as well as preconceptions and precommitments. These factors and beliefs may or may not help in properly deciding right or wrong, or good or evil, about an ethical issue. For instance, a recent experimental study on the relationship between religiosity, including both intrinsic and fundamental beliefs, and moral foundations revealed that "people low in religiosity seem to view morality primarily in terms of care and fairness," whereas people high in religiosity "value care, fairness, loyalty, respect for authority, purity, and reverence/respect for God as important aspects of the moral domain." Moreover, because these groups of people "do not rely on the same moral dimensions, it is not surprising that they also tend to disagree on moral issues" (Krull, 2016, p. 50). Clearly then, not all ethical theories are equal: nor are they equal to the crucial task of deciding ethical truth and goodness.

So what exactly is "applied ethics?" Broadly speaking, it involves the examination of ethical problems, whereas ethical theory involves the examination of ethical systems. More specifically, applied ethics deals with controversial moral issues such as abortion, sexuality and gender, capital punishment, euthanasia, and civil disobedience (Pojman & Fieser, 2012, pp. 2-3). Christian ethicist Dennis Hollinger provides a still more detailed explanation, noting that applied ethics involves the application of moral norms, principles, virtues, and theological views to issues faced individually and in community. Applied ethics seeks to understand the issues, competing claims, and various moral responses in trying to connect moral norms and ideals to the issue to provide decision-making and character formation guidance. Ethical problems involve many areas of life, such as war and violence, bioethics, sexuality, family, economic, business, environmental, media, politics, and race/ethnicity (2002, pp. 16-17).

As one might imagine, numerous questions mark the applied ethics landscape. Among the thousands, here are a few particularly relevant to contemporary, primarily Western, culture. Under what condition is abortion morally acceptable? Are there situations in which physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia should be considered a moral good? What kind of sex is moral and what kind is immoral? Is same-sex marriage moral or immoral, whether legal or not? Should polyamorous marriage be viewed as a morally acceptable alternative to monogamous marriage? Is surrogate motherhood an acceptable moral practice? Which reproductive interventions are morally permissible and which are not? Is gender selection an acceptable moral practice for couples seeking to have a child or for family balancing? Should a couple risk having a child if there is a strong chance of the child inheriting a genetic defect/disease? Under what condition is it morally permissible for a family member or physician to withhold or withdraw life support? Should feeding tubes be considered medical treatment that can be removed under acceptable conditions? Is capital punishment immoral? Is war ever acceptable morally? Are there circumstances in which torture would be acceptable, such as those involving national security? Are certain types of government more ethical than others? Is meat-eating immoral? Is downloading of "free" but copyrighted material morally okay? Is it morally acceptable to develop or play video games that include gratuitous violence, prostitution, sexual assault, and murder of law enforcement officers? Is cheating on tests and term papers morally wrong?

These questions represent the countless number that cover the ethical landscape issues of our lives. How one answers these challenging queries will have substantial consequences: not only for individuals, but also for families, communities, and even whole nations. Therefore, it is important to carefully consider the multiple factors, including motivations, that are involved in determining and supporting one's view on ethical issues. For instance, in deciding whether aborting an unborn fetus or child ought to be considered moral or immoral, numerous relevant questions must be answered. What "authorities" ought to determine or contribute to the answer? Does or how does Scripture speak to this issue? Is there something unique to human beings that gives priority to the "sanctity of human life" of the unborn? What or who gives the unborn "meaning" and "value," intrinsically or extrinsically? Is a "human being" the same thing as a "person"? At what point does the fetus have personhood? What factors are relevant to particular potential cases for aborting; for example, health, familial, financial, sexual violence, expedience, or obligation? Is the unborn "part" of the mother's body, or rather a "dependent-yet-separate" body? Does or should the fetus possess rights arising from its acute need and dependency, just as the handicapped, immature, and newborns? Does the unborn have a potential or actual serious genetic disorder? How do specific "rights" enter into the discussion? What are the legalities involved? Is the larger community and society morally responsible in some way?

The sheer number of ethical issues is astounding. A quick glance at top news stories reveals deep human concerns over moral choices, whether good or bad. From humanity's beginning, ethical choices have been faced and decisions have been made. Clearly, the Bible emphasizes ethical issues and moral practices; both Testaments envision these as central to human relationships: relationships with God, with others, with oneself, and with creation. One cannot help seeing the obvious importance of ethical thinking and moral choices, including their impact on human history. From various biblical genres, including narrative, wisdom literature, Gospels, and letters/epistles, one sees instances both of good and of evil, and both of right and of wrong. Frankly, God's story reveals the ongoing reality that people more often fail than succeed in thinking and living rightly: failure being understood as disobedience to God's way of being and doing, resulting in damaging consequences. The story of Adam and Eve and their children demonstrates this all too well (see Genesis 3:1-4:8). Nonetheless, God's amazing grace and forgiveness accompany even the most tragic moral consequences, offering hope and help to disobedient but repentant people. The Lord perfectly understands the flawed and needy condition of humankind, and correspondingly provides what is necessary for their good (see Genesis 3:21; 4:15-16, 25-26; Romans 3:21-26; I Corinthians 15:45-49).

Finally, whether from a Christian or alternative worldview, ethical thinking and moral practice differs on many ethical issues and for a variety of reasons (some noted above). Thus, it is important to understand the various viewpoints and arguments offered in support of, and in opposition to, an ethical problem. Not only will this broaden one's comprehension, but hopefully will form greater charity toward those holding opposing perspective, while also strengthening*,* or perhaps adjusting*,* one's own convictions.

Using case studies, which are specific situations, in attempting to resolve ethical dilemmas is central to applied ethics. This process, known as "casuistry," involves a "method of reasoning for identifying justifiable courses of action in situations involving moral conflict" and may also include "reasoning in which a case, the moral resolution of which is in dispute, is compared to one or more paradigm cases in which the justifiable resolution is relatively clear" (Strong, 2013). Consequently, seeking to resolve ethical dilemmas utilizing a case-study approach means commencing from a "bottom-up" or practical direction rather than from a "top-down" or theoretical sequence.

Exactly howthe reasoning process goes will depend on underlying worldviews, ultimate authorities, motivations, vested interests, and other shaping factors. In any case, casuistry can prove helpful in processing specific situations in which ethical dilemmas arise, and in seeking to elicit an appropriate moral course of action. For many thinkers, this will entail calling on a chosen ethical theory or principle or central basis for determining the moral course. For others, it will mean rejecting this approach altogether, and instead determining the moral course based solely on the particular case and one's or a community's own intuition, experience, and/or other practical considerations. Perhaps a "third way" can be discerned among thinkers, too, which both embraces a particular ethical theory or combination of theories while concurrently considering difficult, extreme, and highly-nuanced cases that can impact or modify one's otherwise normative ethical parameters; for instance, extreme life and death situations.

Often the goal of casuistry includes arriving at a virtual consensus concerning the moral course of action for a particular case or situation. While a lofty goal, it may contain several shortcomings. First, unless deliberation involves only a very specific group wherein individuals adhere to a tightly-shared religious or ideological perspective that strongly shapes the thinking and desired outcomes for the case, the deliberation will fail to account for significant worldview differences, therefore failing to achieve consensus. Second, many questions arising from the case can be answered only by reference to one's underlying basis of obligation; for instance, God, self, family, humanity, creation, professional code of ethics, or nation. In other words, "When we ask who or what creates moral obligation, three alternatives arise . . . self-imposed, imposed by people or imposed by God" (Holmes, 1984, p. 70). Ultimately then, to arrive at what "ought" to be done in any case depends on one's source/sof obligation. Finally, casuistry easily can become polarizing. That is, the tendency will be to move toward one of two extremes: on the one hand, open-ended relativism or situationism, which disallows serious engagement with long-held ethical theories that advocate important virtues, principles, commands, revelation, and/or wisdom, and on the other hand, close-minded legalism or moralism, which disallows serious engagement with difficult and extreme cases that call for love, kindness, and deep-level moral discernment. Avoiding polarization requires sustained, excellent, and irenic thinking that considers a wide range of factors before making the difficult choice regarding an ethical problem.

Dating from antiquity with Aristotle and later Cicero, casuistry has both flourished and waned over the course of history. This can be observed through its frequent high points in the Middle Ages, largely within the Christian faith and particularly among Catholic Jesuit moral reflection, to its diminishing throughout much of the later Enlightenment and Reformation periods,  to its more recent resurgence in the latter half of the 20th century, preeminently in the disciplines/fields of bioethics, law, the environment, business/industry, technology, and related areas. Thanks to the proliferation of new ethical theories, along with calls to replace utilizing any theory with purely practical concerns, plus the renewed interest in casuistry by much of the Church including its Christian liberal arts colleges and universities, it appears that case-study reasoning will continue to experience yet another high point throughout the 21st century.

Relatedly, the challenge in making good ethical decisions has led to the development of "decision-making models." These "templates" normally include a step-by-step procedure intended to serve as a guide for "making sure the right questions are asked in the process of ethical deliberation" (Rae, 2009, p. 105), often with hopes of helping people to determine the appropriate moral course of action. Such a method necessitates asking questions throughout the deliberation process. In *Readings in Christian Ethics* (1994, pp. 279-80)*,* Daniel Maguire sees eight "reality-revealing" questions to be asked before considering how ethical norms and principles might be brought to bear on a situation: What?, Why?, How?, Who?, Where?, When?, What are the foreseeable effects?, and What are the existent viable alternatives? Once these questions are answered, the decision-maker can move ahead with making a moral judgment. Maguire's setting up of "the moral object," the ethically significant act in combination with all the factors and circumstances that give the act moral meaning, provides a useful paradigm for ethical decision-making.

Two other decision-making models have proven particularly helpful: the schemas proposed by S. B. Rae and by H. E. Tödt. Each model will be discussed below in brief. Please see the two linked documents regarding the specific steps for ethical decision-making advocated by Rae and by Tödt.

Rae presents his model for ethical decision-making in Chapter 4 of *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics,* noting the outline has been adapted "from a seven-step model of Dr. William W. May's course Normative Analysis of Issues" (2009, p. 120). Rae claims the following regarding his model (2009, p. 105): it can accommodate a variety of different moral and ethical perspectives, which he views as a good thing, given the "ethnic and religious diversity of our society;" it is not tied to any one particular perspective; it can be used comfortably with a variety of cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds; it is not a distinctly Christian model, although consistent with the Bible and allows for use of biblical principles; it is heavily oriented toward virtues and principles; and consideration of consequences also plays a supporting role. Rae defines an ethical dilemma as "a conflict between two or more value- or virtue-driven interests" (2009, p. 106). Therefore, one must identify the parties involved in the conflict, what their interests are, and what virtues and values underlie those interests. Rae then sets forth his model, which comprises seven elements for ethical decision-making. See the "S. B. Rae's Model for Ethical Decision-Making" document for the specific seven-step process Rae advocates for ethical decision-making.

Another helpful ethical decision-making schema is noted in Clark & Rakestraw from H.E. Tödt's "Six Steps or Material Elements in the Formation of Ethical Judgments" (1994, pp. 292-97). Tödt states up front his concern with "the role played by the moral norms in the concrete process of making ethical judgments" (p. 291). He has utilized this model for decades in two central contexts: "as an aid in the analysis of ethical judgments that are concretely available," especially concerning biblical directives, studies of the problem of violence and writings on commerce and usury; and for "case histories from the field of counseling." Tödt also uses his model with students working "toward a decision regarding some concrete ethical problem," noting that "they often find it useful to have a methodological statement of the kinds of steps that might be required" (p. 292). Finally, Tödt writes that the schema's analytic and orientative functions have been tested and discussed with diverse groups, noting it has both strong and weak points, and claiming it can be useful, while also dangerous. He then sets forth his model, which comprises six elements for ethical decision-making (pp. 292-93). See the "H. E. Todt's Model for Ethical Decision-Making" document for the specific six-step schema Tödt presents for ethical decision-making.

Whatever the decision-making model one chooses to utilize for particular case studies, it should be remembered that an alleged absolute neutrality is neither possible nor desirable. Human beings created as unique persons with intrinsic value are not programmed automatons, but rather subjects: thinking and feeling beings filled with assumptions, beliefs, and questions. Of course, this does not mitigate against objective reality and truth, but rather provides balance and wisdom in approaching ethical issues.

Furthermore, R. A. Clouser sheds substantial light on the whole matter of ethical theory in relation to worldviews, arguing that

theory making is influenced by the moral beliefs of theorists . . . one or another religious belief always functions as a regulative presupposition to any abstract theory . . . this is unavoidable not merely owing to the historical/social presence of such beliefs in our culture but because it arises out of the very process of theory making itself. (2005, p. 3)

Thus, in terms of ethical dilemmas and decision making, this has major implications. For instance, a person holding to a Christian worldview, trusting in the triune God, and seeking to be and to do what accords with biblically and theologically grounded ethics, centered in Jesus Christ and the Scriptures, will be more apt to arrive at ethical decisions that align with the teachings, principles, wisdom, and will of the one true God as revealed definitively in Jesus Christ.