

APPLIED ETHICS

A. What is applied ethics?

1. So far we have been focused either on

normative ethics, which studies what features make something good/bad, an act right/wrong or a trait virtuous or vicious

- or -

metaethics, which studies philosophical questions about the meaning of ethical words, or the nature of ethical facts

2. **Applied ethics** is a distinct category of ethical philosophy

A. What is applied ethics?

3. Deals with difficult moral questions and controversial moral issues that people actually face in their lives

Examples: the moral issues regarding...

abortion

euthanasia

giving to the poor

sex before marriage

the death penalty

gay/lesbian marriage (or other rights)

war tactics

ensorship

so-called "white lies"

etc.

A. What is applied ethics?

4. Given the time we have left in the semester, we're going to focus on only two example issues:

- Whether or not we are morally obligated to help the less fortunate (especially those in other nations)
- Whether or not abortion is morally wrong

5. Why we haven't spent more time on this:

- Often results in gridlocked or endless discussions
- Having some prior knowledge of some normative theories helps give a framework for discussion
- Brings in issues that are not philosophical

E.g., a discussion about whether or not the death penalty is morally OK may require sociological information about its effectiveness, etc.

B. Suggestions for having good discussions

1. Abortion is a very emotional and charged issue

- Students are bound to have strong, conflicting opinions.
- Many students may have been personally affected.

2. To avoid a shouting match, it's best to try to respect everyone's opinion.

3. Focus on the arguments and not the people giving them:

(a) Even if you are pro-life, you may agree that a certain argument against abortion is not sound.

(b) May agree with those on the other side about what the *most compelling* objections to an argument may be.

C. Helping the poor: the Issue

1. Some statistics about poverty and hunger

- a) Over a billion people worldwide live below the international poverty line (earn less than \$1/day)
- b) Over 800 million people are malnourished (i.e., do not intake enough calories or vitamins for proper health)
- c) Over 8,000,000 people die every year of starvation: that's about one every four seconds
- d) Over 10,000,000 children die every year either of starvation or of a preventable or treatable illness or disease
- e) Over 3,000,000 die per year of AIDS: despite the invention of highly effective (but costly) medical treatment

C. Helping the poor: the Issue

2. Our ability to help

- a) You've all heard the commercials: for less than \$1 a day (about \$200 yearly), you could save someone's life
(And that's factoring in overhead, transportation.)
- b) The number of hungry people in the world could be cut in half for approximately \$60 billion. Consider
 - Almost \$20 billion is spent on pet food each year in the US
 - The war in Iraq is estimated to cost US Tax payers about \$350 billion
- c) The cost of your yearly UMass tuition could save dozens, if not hundreds of lives.

D. Arguments for helping the poor

1. From the work of Peter Singer



Peter Singer
(1946 -)

a) Reasons for helping the poor are basically utilitarian

b) Far more good can be done with same amount of money if given to relief agency

c) Argues that not only is it morally right for someone in a rich nation to donate a sizable percent of income, but it is morally **obligatory** (it would be wrong not to)

D. Arguments for helping the poor

2. Suggests the following weaker and stronger principles:

(Strong Humanitarian Principle)

(SHP) If it is possible to prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing something of **comparable** moral importance, we ought to do it.

(Weak Humanitarian Principle)

(WHP) If it is possible to prevent something **very** bad from happening without sacrificing **anything** morally significant, then we ought to do it.

Singer believes both of these principles are true, but thinks that he can make his main point only assuming WHP.

D. Arguments for helping the poor

3. Some remarks on these principles:

a) Drowning child case: might get your clothes muddy, but this is not morally significant

b) The proximity of the bad thing doesn't matter

c) Allowing someone to die in a foreign country just as bad as letting a child drown a few feet away

d) Evaluating them leads to questions about what Singer means by "significant":

(He doesn't seem to mean *being completely irrelevant* with regard to goodness and badness.)

D. Arguments for helping the poor

4. Consider the following argument

(P1) The average American has the opportunity to prevent suffering and death caused by illness and malnutrition by donating a percentage of his/her income to relief agencies.

(P2) If (P1), then the average American is morally obligated to donate a percentage of his/her income to relief agencies.

(C) The average American is morally obligated to donate a percentage of his/her income to relief agencies.

Again, the conclusion is not (just) that donating money is morally right, but that it is **obligatory**:

I.e., it would be morally **wrong** not to donate the money.

D. Arguments for helping the poor

5. Evaluating this argument

a) P1 seems relatively uncontroversial, though it could be called into question

- Relief money often mishandled, or used for wrong purposes, or just goes to overhead

- Many only *delay* the suffering and death, not preventing it (either for the same person later on, or a descendant)

b) P2 presupposes the truth of SHP or WHP

- Especially if we accept WHP, exactly what counts as giving up something morally significant becomes important.

- Perhaps both SHP and WHP are false.

E. Arguments against helping the poor

1. Usually the arguments focused not on showing that giving money to help the poor or starving is **wrong**, but only that it is not **obligatory**

(Or that it is not wrong *not* to give to the poor.)

2. Egoism suggests some obvious arguments against helping the poor

a) If egoism is true, then one is only morally *obligated* to give to the poor if giving makes you better off than not giving.

b) Only people in very unusual circumstances would be required to donate.

c) But open to the objection that egoism is not true.

E. Arguments against helping the poor

3. Other arguments stem from the notion of **rights**: it's *your* money, so you are not *obligated* to give it to anyone else.

(P1) No one is *obligated* to give his/her own property to another unless it is owed to the other for a specific reason.

(P2) If (P1) then the average Americans is not morally obligated to donate a percentage of his/her income to relief agencies.

(C) The average Americans is not morally obligated to donate a percentage of his/her incomes to relief agencies.

4. Possible responses:

(a) Makes the right of property too strong or too absolute

(b) Confuses *moral* obligation with *legal* obligation

E. Arguments against helping the poor

5. A final consideration given against helping the poor alleges that it is not advantageous in the long run.

This argument is suggested by Garrett Hardin and others:

(P1) If in the long run donating to the poor and hungry does no more good than harm, then no one is obligated to donate money to the poor and hungry.

(P2) In the long run donating to the poor and hungry does no more good than harm.

(C) No one is obligated to donate money to the poor and hungry.

a) (P1) seems consistent with many moral theories:

E.g. utilitarianism, Ross's theory, the golden rule.

E. Arguments against helping the poor

b) Here are some considerations given by Hardin for (P2), i.e., for thinking it does no more good than harm:

- allows the population of poorer nations to continue to grow faster than in richer nations
- in the long run, increases the number of poor and the scope of the problem.
- Worsens the lives of those who give; creates a situation in which everyone is in the same bad situation.
- Makes the poor reliant on aid; prevents them from improving the situations for themselves.
- Aid often ends up being used for wrong purposes, or in the wrong hands. Can itself be a source of conflict.

E. Arguments against helping the poor

6. Possible responses to Hardin:

a) Can deny (P1) if you think that fairness and equality is more important than getting the best long-term results

b) Can deny (P2) if you question certain assumptions about the effects of aid.

c) Another response: only shows that *certain kinds* of aid create as much harm as good. If *any kind of* donation leads to more good than harm, (P2) is false.

For example, Singer responds to the worry about overpopulation by suggesting that it only shows that we should give money to population control efforts rather than more traditional forms of aid.

F. Abortion: the Issue

1. Reminder: sensitive issue; we'll focus on arguments

- May be best to avoid labels of “pro-life” and “pro-choice”: often give wrong connotations

2. We're interested in the **moral** issue, not the **legal** issue

a) The issue is whether someone who has an abortion is doing something wrong ...

not whether it should or shouldn't be legal.

b) It's probably morally wrong to insult your mother, or ignore her on her birthday, but that doesn't mean it is or should be *illegal*.

c) Perfectly coherent to think abortion is wrong, but shouldn't be outlawed. We're just going to focus on the morality.

F. Abortion: the Issue

3. Don't have to say that *all* abortions are morally right or that *none* are: room for saying some are, some aren't

- In fact, fairly obvious that not *all* would be morally OK. (Consider a doctor doing it to a patient who doesn't want one.)

4. It's probably best to focus on a paradigm case with as few as possible complicating factors:

- both mother *and* father support the abortion
- health of mother not at risk
- not a rape case
- done in a safe, sterile environment by a trained professional
- done in first trimester (month 2 or month 3)

G. Arguments against the morality of abortion

1. Early in the semester, in our logic unit, we looked at an argument similar to this one:

(P1) All actions that kill a human being are morally wrong.

(P2) All abortions are actions that kill a human being.

(C) All abortions are morally wrong.

2. We said it was uncharitable to suppose the argument is really as simple as this

a) at least need to insert “innocent” before “human beings”

b) even then, premise (1) still seems controversial (cases of war, or Fat Man-like cases, where other lives are at stake)

G. Arguments against the morality of abortion

3. Perhaps the most charitable way to restate it is as follows:

(P1) All actions that kill an innocent person without resulting in saving the life of another person or something of similar moral importance are morally wrong.

(P2) Most abortions are actions that kill an innocent person without resulting in saving the life of another person or something of similar moral importance.

(C) Most abortions are morally wrong.

4. Comments on the above:

a) Notice that in (P2), “all” was changed to “most” -- have to leave out abortions to save mother’s life, and possibly others.

b) (P1) much more plausible now -- even if somewhat vague

G. Arguments against the morality of abortion

c) Most objections would likely focus on (P2), which is:

(P2) Most abortions are actions that kill an innocent person without resulting in saving the life of another person or something of similar moral importance.

d) Possible ways of blocking it:

- claim that most aborted embryos are not “innocent” (not a very promising objection)
- claim that most abortions, even when the mother’s life is not at stake, do save something of similar moral importance (e.g. salvages rights to control own body, own future -- still a hard case to sell)
- claim that most aborted embryos are not “people”

H. Are embryos people?

1. It is because of this last response to the argument that so much writing on abortion focuses on this question.

It is the main theme of both pieces by Noonan and Warren.

2. Not really a matter of the “correct *definition*”.

a) definitions are not really right or wrong -- there is no such thing as the “correct” definition of a person

b) could stipulate that I mean by “person” whatever I want

c) the issue is about what sorts of beings have full moral status -- deserve full moral consideration -- and which don’t

d) that’s what “person” means in (P1), so it’s what it must also mean in (P2) if the argument is valid

H. Are embryos people?

3. Several different accounts of personhood have been given.

4. A simple view: a *person* is a living human being in the biological or genetic sense

a) in other words, a person is a living organism of the species *homo sapiens*

b) problem: seems overly broad; it would also include sperm and egg cells, which are alive, and of the same species

c) surely, it is not murder to perform an action resulting in the death of an “innocent” sperm or egg cell

d) doesn't seem to be a necessary condition either: consider intelligent aliens of a different species.

H. Are embryos people?

5. A slight modified view: a *person* is a living human being in the biological sense having a full set of chromosomes

a) seems to be the position held by post abortion opponents, (where “life begins at conception”) including Noonan

b) difficulty with this view is explaining why a full set of chromosomes is so important: for the most part a newly fertilized zygote is not much different than an egg on its own

c) Noonan points to two differences:

- statistically has a much higher propensity or probability of becoming a human than a sperm or egg
- the full set of chromosomes is the genetic code that gives us our traits, allows us to grow into rational, sentient beings

H. Are embryos people?

6. Warren suggests that we look to those traits by which we would decide whether or not aliens count as “people”.

Her list:

- (a) consciousness (experience) and sentience (feeling)
- (b) the capacity to reason
- (c) the capacity for self-motivated action
- (d) the capacity to communicate
- (e) self-awareness

Thinks a person should be defined in terms of these: suggests that (a)-(c) are the most important.

H. Are embryos people?

7. Warren thinks that embryos do not possess enough of these things to count as “people”: Is she right?

- a) Certainly do not possess them to the same extent as adults
- b) Even newborn babies aren’t fully self-aware, have a very limited ability to reason or communicate.
- c) However, we don’t really know to when and to what extent embryos or fetuses become conscious or sentient.
- d) Electrical activity in the nervous system, and the ability to respond to stimuli start early in pregnancy (2nd month): but is this the same as being sentient or conscious?

8. There are other views--like those based on possessing a “soul”--on which it is hard to tell what counts as a person.

H. Are embryos people?

9. Is being a *potential person* enough?

a) Warren admits that embryos, while not yet people, may become them

b) Isn't it just as bad to prevent something from becoming a person as it is to kill a person?

c) Compare: is it just as bad to prevent someone from earning \$20 as it is to steal \$20 from them?

d) Warren says it is bad, but not *as bad*, so it's more easily outweighed by other considerations.

e) Aliens and space explorer example. (See p. 362.)

But is it compelling?

I. Arguments in favor of the morality of abortion

1. Despite its title, Warren's article doesn't really argue that abortion is (usually) morally right.

2. One famous argument for thinking that abortion is often not morally wrong comes from work of Judith Jarvis Thompson.

a) Thompson makes an analogy between abortion and a case involving a violinist

b) Suppose you wake up one morning and find yourself sewn together with a famous violinist

c) The society for music lovers discovered that you alone have a kidney match with the violinist; without "sharing" your kidney, he will die

d) Here your right to control your own body is conflict with the violinist's right to life. Is it morally wrong to detach yourself?

I. Arguments in favor of the morality of abortion

3. Thompson's argument presupposes that the violinist situation and the situation of most abortions are morally alike:

(P1) The moral considerations involved in the violinist case are exactly alike those involved with many abortions.

(P2) If the moral considerations involved in the violinist case are exactly alike those involved with many abortions, then many abortions are morally wrong if and only if it would be morally wrong to detach from the violinist.

(P3) It would not be morally wrong to detach from the violinist.

(C) Many abortions are not morally wrong.

This argument has a complex form, but it is valid.

I. Arguments in favor of the morality of abortion

4. Possible responses to Thompson's argument:

a) Perhaps the considerations are not entirely same (deny (P1))

- E.g., it wasn't something *you* did that got you attached to the violinist

- Most pregnancies are the result of something you did (of course this would exclude rape cases, etc.)

- Having a violinist attached *for the rest of your life* may be worse than being pregnant and/or having a child

b) Perhaps it *is* morally wrong to detach yourself from the violinist (deny (P3))