

Ante Čović

Poljička 6, HR-10000 Zagreb
ante.covic1@zg.t-com.hr

The Nonsense of “Applied Ethics”*

From Ethical Vacuum to Ethical Absurdity

Abstract

At the starting point of the article, the author considers the current process of fragmenting ethics into numerous special ethics as a process of destroying ethics as a philosophical discipline. He relates this to the historical failure of ethics, which due to categorical limitations could not address the challenges of the advanced scientific-technical civilisation, resulting in an “ethical vacuum” (H. Jonas). In response to the ethical vacuum, a number of ethical initiatives have emerged which the author, according to the effects on the rehabilitation of the role of traditional ethics and on the creation of a new orientational framework, classifies on a destructive and a productive line. On the productive line of overcoming the ethical vacuum, bioethics has emerged which, along with other ethical projects, has created a new orientational atmosphere that the author calls “a new ethical culture”. On the destructive line, along with the inflation of special ethics, a special form of destruction has emerged in terms of implanting “applied ethics”, which the author refers to as a nonsensical concept, into the fabric of traditional ethics. Then, the author presents three main problems of applied ethics. The first is of a substantial nature and consists in the fact that applied ethics does not have and in principle cannot have unquestionable norms as an object of application. The second main problem is of a methodological nature and consists in the inappropriateness and non-acceptance of deductivism as a model of applying ethical norms to practice. The third main problem is of a usage nature and consists in developing the myth of the practicality of applied ethics. The author concludes that applied ethics is neither an ethical concept nor an ethical project but a market brand which on the ethical terrain turns out to be nonsense. In the conclusion of the article, the author argues that applied ethics became an institution of ethical absurdity the moment it, as an empty marketing label, took over the vacancy of the object of application and the role of general ethics for an unrelated and undefined conglomerate of special ethics transformed into its branches.

Keywords

ethics, applied ethics, bioethics, ethical vacuum, ethical absurdity

Qui falso distinguit, falso docet.

Ethics and Its Endemic Problems

Ethics as a philosophical or, more broadly, a scientific discipline faces difficulties in its definition unthinkable for other philosophical or scientific disciplines. Difficulties arise, on the one hand, in relation to its subject matter and, on the other hand, in arbitrary demarcations within the subject matter with repercussions on the discipline. It is hard to imagine, for example, that someone would have difficulty distinguishing between chemistry or sociology and their subject matters. The same is true of philosophical disciplines, so

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it is hard to imagine that anyone would have any doubts about the relationship between metaphysics and its subject matter.

On the other hand, numerous demarcations within its subject matter, which reach absurd proportions, exacerbate the aforementioned difficulty to a level of hopelessness. All of this often makes ethical discourse confusing and incomprehensible, so ethical debates, due to an “excess of concepts” and conceptual overload, as well as unclear and impossible distinctions, often take place at the level of empty ethical verbalism that works grammatically but not logically. In the case of a blurred difference of ethics and its subject matter, they often turn into moralistic discourse of self-righteousness and persuasion for good.

The problem of indistinguishability or difficult distinguishability of ethics as a discipline from its subject matter has its historical and substantial reasons and explanations. Historical reasons originate from Aristotle, who marked the theoretical and practical level of the category of good with the adjective “ethical”, while the substantial reasons are to be found in the thing itself, i.e., in the feature of reflexivity which, although in a different modality, is common to ethics as a discipline and morality as its subject matter.¹

The Infinite Divisibility of Ethics or Objective Genitive Ethics

In the long and diversified history of ethics, we find numerous divisions, some of which have become almost generally accepted and textbook codified, as, for example, the division into normative and descriptive ethics. Then, within normative ethics, the division – based on the supreme criterion of moral judgment – into deontological and consequential ethics, with the addition of theological ethics. The division into general ethics and special ethics, which more closely consider specific issues in certain areas of human activity, has also spread to the level of general acceptance. This division undoubtedly has its basis and tradition, and has become problematic only recently due to the inflationary multiplication of special ethics and due to the weakening or loss of their conceptual connection with general ethics. The term “area ethics” (German: “Bereichsethik”) is often used alternatively for special ethics. Given the above circumstances, the term “area ethics” is much more appropriate than the term “special ethics” because, even at the preliminary linguistic level, it eliminates the possible misunderstanding that in this segmented form of ethics a special criterion of moral judgment is established. It is only a matter of aptly focusing attention on a particular area of action in the perspective of general ethics and the universally valid criterion of moral judgment. To that extent, such basically methodical (technical) focuses of ethical research and ethical discussion should not be given special importance, nor does it make sense to petrify such appropriate limitations of research and discussion, and turn them into independent disciplines. However, in a significant part of special or nominally area ethics, this is exactly what is happening.

Therefore, for the purposes of this text, we will introduce a distinction between special and area ethics. We will name *special ethics* a form of ethics that strives for disciplinary independence, that loses its connection with general ethics and universal ethical norms, and develops special norms with limited validity, which it derives from moral practice in the respective field of activity by the methodology of moral reflection. We will name *area ethics* a form of ethics that methodologically stays within the framework of general

ethics, which means that it considers and examines specific ethical issues in a particular area of human activity by the methodology of ethical reflection, based on the assumptions of generally accepted ethical norms. It follows from the above that area ethics, conceptually speaking, cannot develop the ambition to become independent, a separate ethical discipline. Although the problem is not of a terminological but of a substantial nature, it would be more appropriate to label area ethics with the term “ethics in...” (namely, in a certain area) than with the term “ethics of...”.

There is almost no segment of human activity for which an adequate special ethics has not already been declared: the ethics of fashion, ethics of leisure, ethics of risk, and so on indefinitely, not to mention those forms of ethics that have become self-evident and validated in the massive professional literature, such as the ethics of the environment, ethics of the media and similar. The process of fragmentation of the ethical subject matter and, in return, of the ethical discipline continues, although it has already reached absurd proportions. If the precondition for the creation of a special ethics is determining a limited field of action, then the possibilities of fragmenting the ethical subject matter and ethical discipline are in fact endless. The process of fragmenting ethics into numerous special ethics is actually a process of destroying ethics as a philosophical discipline. What could be established at the end of this process as a substitute for philosophical ethics (general ethics) is an expanding conglomerate of mutually unrelated special ethics. A common feature of all special ethics is that they derive ethical norms by moral reflection from the segment of activity to which they refer, so we can include them in a collective name – objective genitive ethics.

A Historical Defeat of Traditional Ethics

While the problem of difficult distinguishability of ethics and its subject matter is of a constitutional nature and is inherited from the very beginnings of the discipline, the problem of light and excessive distinguishability within the ethical subject matter with repercussions on the discipline is more recent and represents one of the manifestations of the current crisis of traditional ethics, which takes on the proportions of a historical defeat of the discipline. Namely, it turned out that ethics, due to its immanent categorical limitations, is not able to respond to the challenges of the rapidly advancing scientific-technological civilisation, and to the dangers to human survival and life that arise from them. The impotence of traditional ethics is conditioned by the fact that the historical situation of scientific-technological superiority that modern man has achieved over nature and over human nature is fundamentally different from all other states and stages in the history of humankind. It is this historical precedent, which has put traditional ethics out of force, that Hans Jonas will set as the starting thesis of a work that represents the most accurate normative diagnosis of our time:

“The subjugation of nature, intended for human happiness, has led, in excess of its success, which now extends to human nature itself, to the greatest challenge to human existence, which

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Cf. Ante Čović, *Etika i bioetika. Razmišljanja Bioethical Epoch*, Pergamena, Zagreb 2014, pp. 91–92.

has ever grown out of man’s own actions. Everything about it is new, dissimilar to anything from the past, in terms of both kind and magnitude.”²

Therefore – Jonas concludes – “no traditional ethics teaches us about the norms of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ to which the completely new modalities of power and its possible creations are to be subordinated”.³

In the contrast of the supremacy of knowledge about nature and the “collective-cumulative technological practice” which follows from that knowledge, on the one hand, and the impotence, i.e., the absence of ethics, to which Jonas otherwise ascribes the task of “regulating the power”, on the other hand, an “ethical vacuum” was created. Technological practice – which constitutes “a new kind of human action”, because of the “unprecedented nature of some of its objects” and the “sheer magnitude of most of its enterprises”,⁴ and which, due to the foreseeable disastrous effects on the future, cannot remain ethically neutral – “has destroyed the very idea of norm as such”.⁵ However – Jonas continues – it has not destroyed “the feeling for norm”,⁶ or, in other words, the need for the norm has survived. Under conditions of an ethical vacuum, fear for the future arises, and “heuristics of fear” raises awareness of the imperative of creating a new ethics:

“[...] of ethics it is true to say that it must be there. It must be there because men act, and ethics is for the ordering of actions and for regulating the power to act. It must be there all the more, then, the greater the powers of acting that are to be regulated; and as it must fit their size, the ordering principle must also fit their kind. Thus, novel powers to act require novel ethical rules and perhaps even a new ethics.”⁷

For Jonas, this will be a new kind of ethics – the ethics of the future. It is an ethics whose norms should regulate the power of “collective-cumulative-technological practice” in such a way that it does not call into question the future of human survival and life.

Two Lines of Response to the Ethical Vacuum

In response to the historical failure of traditional ethics, in the situation of the ethical vacuum that has arisen from it, numerous initiatives, tendencies, concepts, and substitute ethical projects have developed over the last four decades of the last century. Given their effects on the rehabilitation of the role of traditional ethics, as well as the effects on the state of ethical disorientation, these new ethical attempts can be divided into two lines of response: a line with destructive effects in relation to the both mentioned parameters, and a line with productive effects on the rehabilitation of the role of traditional ethics and on the creation of a new orientational framework in the conditions of the ethical vacuum.

On the productive line of overcoming the ethical vacuum, bioethics has emerged as undoubtedly the most important and leading project on the way to creating a new orientational framework. Numerous other ethical projects have emerged on the same line, which in their combined effect have established a completely new orientational atmosphere and a prevailing critical attitude to the unstoppable scientific-technical progress, which we can inasmuch call – a new ethical culture.⁸ In this presentation, we will not follow or show in more detail the productive line of response to the historical defeat of traditional ethics but only look at the new positioning of traditional ethics. In the new circumstances, traditional ethics, paradoxically, has experienced

historical rehabilitation and has become a *condicio sine qua non* of the new ethical culture. The paradox of this reversal consists in the circumstance that traditional ethics has become unavoidable precisely in correcting one of its crucial shortcomings which, according to Jonas, caused the ethical vacuum. Due to its individualistic character, traditional ethics was not categorically equipped or subject-oriented on “a growing realm of collective action where doer, deed, and effect are no longer the same as they were in the proximate sphere, and which by the enormity of its powers forces upon ethics a new dimension of responsibility never dreamed of before”.⁹ The collective practice and responsibility of the collective moral subject have remained beyond the reach of traditional ethics, even though the survival of man and the preservation of nature were quite obviously fatefully threatened from that sphere. “The uncharted territory of collective practice, that we have entered with high technology, is still a no man’s land for ethical theory”, warns Jonas.¹⁰

Meanwhile, “no man’s land” has been colonized, with the shortcomings and limitations of traditional ethics such as individualism and anthropocentrism¹¹ coming to the forefront of new ethical projects. Bioethics thus arose precisely by the constitution of collective moral practice and collective moral subject, in response to the heated moral dilemmas imposed by the scientific-technological progress in medicine. Collective moral subject, in the form of an ethical body, to which the supernatural authority of the “God Committee” was metaphorically ascribed, addressed the moral issues of applying the latest scientific-technological achievements in the treatment of kidney patients.¹²

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This quote is taken and translated from the “Preface” (“Vorwort”) to the original German edition of Hans Jonas’ *The Imperative of Responsibility* (Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/M 1984, p. 7), because the “Preface” to the English edition (Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, trans. Hans Jonas with collaboration of David Herr, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London 1984) differs substantially from the “Preface” to the German edition. Except for three quotes, we refer to the English edition.

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H. Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, p. 7.

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H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, p. 23.

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Ibid., p. 22.

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Ibid.

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Ibid., p. 23.

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Cf. Ante Čović, Hrvoje Jurić, “Epochal Orientation, New Ethical Culture and Integrative

Bioethics”, *Formosan Journal of Medical Humanities* 19 (2018) 1–2, pp. 20–30.

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H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, p. 6.

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H. Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, p. 7.

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“Ethical significance belonged to the direct dealing of man with man, including the dealing with himself: all traditional ethics is anthropocentric.” – H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, p. 4.

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The Admissions and Policies Committee of the Seattle Artificial Kidney Center at Swedish Hospital, established in 1961, became famous primarily thanks to Shana Alexander’s article “They Decide Who Lives, Who Dies”, published in 1962 in *Life* magazine (Shana Alexander, “They Decide Who Lives, Who Dies”, *Life*, 9 November 1962, pp. 102–104, 106, 108, 110, 115, 117–118, 123–125). Although Alexander does not use the term “God Committee” but “Life or Death Committee” in this article, the invention of the term “God Committee” is attributed to her in various overviews of the history of bioethics.

The first far-reaching implication of this procedure was that science was thus identified as an insufficient instance for deciding on the responsible (moral) use of the results of scientific work. The second far-reaching implication was that the responsible (moral) use of scientific-technical achievements should be determined in the procedures of collective moral practice, which, of course, implies a collective bearer. The third far-reaching implication was that the conduct of collective moral subject should be based on diversified and situation-appropriate knowledge, and insights of moral and ethical reflection, which means that collective moral practice necessarily follows these guidelines.

This is an opportunity to lay down the difference between individual and collective moral practice: the individual moral act takes place directly on the basis of moral consciousness, i.e., moral reflection within the life situation, and it does not presuppose knowledge of the factors that make up the situation in question or education in ethical issues;¹³ collective moral practice takes place in the interaction of several moral subjects in which the mediation of knowledge¹⁴ about the factors that make up a particular situation, the insight into the moral reflection of individual subjects, and the point of view of ethical reflection creates an orientational framework for action in the situation. The paradox of rehabilitating the role of traditional ethics is now clearer: it was completely unnecessary when it was directed to individual moral practice, while as one of the landmarks within collective moral practice, which was outside its field of vision, it became necessary. It was only in the context of collective moral practice that ethics became constitutive for moral action. To that extent, it can be said that bioethics has turned the historical defeat of traditional ethics into its historical triumph. This refers not only to the advanced development phase of integrative bioethics, where, in the methodological pattern of pluriperspectivism, ethical perspectives became inevitable, but also to the previous phase of bioethics development, where ethical pluralism, along with scientific interdisciplinarity, entered the very definition of bioethics.¹⁵

“Applied Ethics” as a Nonsensical Term

In the situation of the historical defeat of ethics and its methodological destruction as a plague of special ethics, a special type of destruction followed in the form of incompatible grafting of “applied ethics” into the fabric of traditional ethics, which we will define here as a Eurocontinental philosophical ethics of predominantly deontological provenance. Implantation was carried out under the influence of factors external to ethics – cultural pliability, conjunctural superficiality, and publishing pressure – which created a marketing atmosphere of trendiness around “applied ethics”, an inevitable trend in which one should get involved at all costs. In the theoretical construction of traditional ethics, there is simply no place for the concept of “applicability” as imported from the Anglo-Saxon ethical conjuncture packed into “applied ethics”, hence the need to import “applied ethics” is certainly not driven by an immanent ethical need but is externally imposed by the influence of these factors. These processes are easiest to follow in terms of German philosophical production, which is decisive for what we call traditional ethics. However, here we can follow this only at the level of illustration, while a systematic reconstruction of this massive and basically absurd influence on traditional ethical discourse remains as a research task.

In the atmosphere of the ethical vacuum, two quite understandable and justified, reactive aspirations were created, which sought to replace the lost orientational relevance of ethics: 1) the aspiration for a concrete approach and 2) the aspiration for an integrative approach. The aspirations are contradictory only at first glance; they are basically complementary and only in conjunction do they provide a complete solution for overcoming the ethical vacuum. Of course, under condition of a harmonious development of both aspirations. The unilateral or bilateral development of these reactive tendencies are just other names for a destructive and a productive line of response to the state of ethical vacuum.

The inflation of special ethics and the conjuncture of applied ethics represent unilateral developments in the tendency to concretize the role of ethics in the conditions of modern scientific-technological civilization. Unilaterality in the case of special ethics ultimately led to a weakening and loss of relation to the starting position of general ethics with regard to which special ethics can be spoken of at all. Some special ethics no longer understand their uniqueness from the relation to general ethics but from the relation to the special field of their practice. In the case of applied ethics, the problem is much more complex because the “applicability” of ethics is in fact a nonsensical concept. The label of nonsensicality covers the theoretical and practical aspect of this problem, which means that, on the one hand, it refers to the meaning/logic of the concept, and, on the other hand, to its use.

A preliminary question inevitably arises as to whether it is presumptuous and excessive to label as nonsensical a thought entity that has recently taken a prestigious place in the institutional framework of an ancient philosophical discipline, which has been confirmed externally by frequent mentioning and occupying numerous covers in philosophical publishing, and which was ultimately “canonized” by its own encyclopaedia in two editions.¹⁶ The success of applied ethics refers not only to the Anglo-Saxon philosophical culture, which produced it, but also to the Eurocontinental philosophical tradition,

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“What is to be done in accordance with the principle of the autonomy of choice is seen quite easily and without hesitation by the most common understanding; what is to be done on the presupposition of heteronomy of choice is difficult to see and requires knowledge of the world [...]” – Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, p. 33. At the level of individual practice, of which Kant speaks exclusively, “knowledge of the world” (knowledge) is not necessary for moral conduct, while it is necessary for interest conduct. However, at the level of collective practice, which Kant does not consider, “knowledge of the world” (knowledge) is necessary for moral conduct as well.

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Jonas emphasizes in particular “the new role of knowledge in morality” in the dimension of responsibility arising from collective action: “Knowledge, under these circumstances, becomes a prime duty beyond anything

claimed for it heretofore, and the knowledge must be commensurate with the causal scale of our action” (H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, p. 7–8). In doing so, Jonas is aware of the fact that “the predictive knowledge falls behind the technical knowledge that nourishes our power to act” (ibid., p. 8), which he then turns into an ethical obligation of acknowledging ignorance and a strong argument for the “evermore necessary self-policing of our oversized might” (ibid.).

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Cf. Warren T. Reich, “Introduction”, in: Warren T. Reich (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, 2nd edition, Simon & Schuster Macmillan, New York 1995, vol. I, p. XXI.

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Ruth Chadwick (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, Academic Press, San Diego, 1998; Ruth Chadwick (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, 2nd edition, Elsevier, Amsterdam 2012.

into which it is unnaturally grafted. If we look at German philosophy, which we take here as the *pars pro toto* of Eurocontinental philosophy, with a panoramic view we will notice the disproportionate number of “introductions to applied ethics”, which in the joint result leave unanswered the introductory questions of what applied ethics would be, what role it plays and – which is a particularly painful question – what the purpose is of grafting this suspicious concept in the Eurocontinental ethical debate. Not to mention a significant number of “introductions” or otherwise occupied book covers with the title of applied ethics in the content of which the title no longer appears at all or is mentioned only incidentally.

The status of the preliminary question can be reinforced by the claim of one of the globally most influential proponents of applied (practical) ethics, Peter Singer, that the “excellent development of applied ethics in the last two decades [statement in 1995 – AN A. Č.] is undoubtedly one of the most important achievements of the philosophy of our century”.¹⁷ Singer’s statement is of great help in deciphering the hard-to-explain expansion and “excellent development” of applied ethics, but only in connection with the sentence that follows:

“The area in which this development has manifested itself most, and where it is most important, is probably bioethics.”¹⁸

Thus, the key to success and the explanation of the invasive prevalence of applied ethics lies in the usurpation of the innovative potential of bioethics. Proponents of applied ethics are happy to and often emphasize that bioethics is a “branch of applied ethics”. This is what Ruth Chadwick, editor-in-chief, claims in the preface to the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*.¹⁹ Heather Widdows follows her example in crediting bioethics for the “dramatic growth in applied ethics” and, in accordance with the merits, confirms its special status:

“Bioethics is a good example of the dramatic growth in applied ethics because it is perhaps the longest established subdiscipline of applied ethics.”²⁰

European epigones also join in, so Julian Nida-Rümelin takes it for granted that “an important part of applied ethics is referred to as ‘bioethics’”.²¹ Nida-Rümelin is referred to by many other authors of introductory German literature, even Ludwig Siep, who otherwise managed to emancipate himself from the illogicality of applied ethics.²² In his *Introduction to Applied Ethics*, Urs Thurnherr calls bioethics “one of the younger branches of applied ethics”.²³

Earl R. Winkler, also in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, describes biomedical ethics – which was a handy name for bioethics in the early stages of development while it was still relying solely on moral reflection – as “the most mature and well-defined of the divisions of applied ethics” and includes it into the “main forces” that contributed to the success of applied ethics:

“When considering the main forces giving rise to this increased interest in applied ethics, one naturally thinks first of biomedical ethics, the most mature and well-defined of the divisions of applied ethics. Although abetted by the ‘liberation’ movements of the 1960s and 1970s, biomedical ethics emerged principally in response to various issues and choices that were created by new medical technologies. The traditional values and ethical principles of the medical profession came to be regarded as inadequate in these new situations, because they often seemed to require decisions that appeared to be clearly wrong.”²⁴

The intellectual usurpation of bioethics also implies the falsification of its history, especially the facts of its origin. Bioethics, unlike applied ethics, has an established genealogy. Despite different interpretations, it is essentially known where, how and when it originated, and how it developed. The history of its name is quite intriguing. What remains unknown is on what basis it came under the jurisdiction of applied ethics and became one of its (favourite) branches. Browsing the *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* in search of comparable “biographical” data on applied ethics is useless. There is simply no such thing. It is a concept without “ideography”. It is interesting how Peter Singer, in glorifying the revival of applied ethics in the twentieth century, in the preface to the collection of papers *Applied Ethics*, vaguely shifts its origin to the obscure depths of the history of philosophy:

“I use the term ‘revival’ because applied ethics is not new to philosophy. The essays in this volume by David Hume and John Stuart Mill fit well alongside modern writings; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these philosophers were doing applied ethics in much the way that it is done today. Indeed, it would have been possible to go further back, and include samples of applied ethics from the medieval scholastics, or from any of a dozen classical writers.”²⁵

For those who know the history of bioethics at least superficially, it is superfluous to note that bioethics cannot be a branch of applied ethics because its origin and development have no connection with applied ethics other than unfounded appropriation. Bioethics did not originate under the auspices of applied ethics, but it also did not arise from any other ethics or any other discipline. That is why it is equally unjustified and unfounded to declare bioethics a branch of philosophical ethics or a philosophical discipline, which also happens often. Like the goddess Aphrodite was born from the sea foam, bioethics arose from the emptiness of the ethical vacuum in a situation where the scientific-technological progress brought medical practice to moral dilemmas for which appropriate solutions had to be found. Bioethics arose in an attempt to resolve these dilemmas in the manner of immediate moral reflection. Only in the later phase of development, within bioethics, a methodological pattern will be developed according to which the pluralism of ethical positions and scientific interdisciplinarity will be included in the consideration of bioethical issues.

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Peter Singer, “O naravi bioetike” [“On the Nature of Bioethics”], *Društvena istraživanja* 5 (1996) 3–4, p. 523.

18

Ibid.

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Ruth Chadwick, “Preface”, in: *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, 2nd edition, vol. I, p. XXV.

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Heather Widdows, “Global Ethics, Overview”, in: R. Chadwick (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, 2nd edition, vol. II, p. 514.

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Julian Nida-Rümelin, “Wert des Lebens”, in: Julian Nida-Rümelin (ed.), *Angewandte Ethik: Die Bereichsethiken und ihre theoretische Fundierung*, Alfred Kröner Verlag, Stuttgart 1996, p. 833.

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Cf. Ludwig Siep, “Bioethik”, in: Annemarie Pieper, Urs Thurnherr (eds.), *Angewandte Ethik. Eine Einführung*, Verlag C. H. Beck, München 1998, p. 16.

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Urs Thurnherr, *Angewandte Ethik zur Einführung*, Junius Verlag, Hamburg 2000, pp. 43–44.

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Earl Raye Winkler, “Applied Ethics, Overview”, in: R. Chadwick (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, 2nd edition, vol. I, p. 175.

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Peter Singer, “Introduction”, in: Peter Singer (ed.), *Applied Ethics*, Oxford University Press, New York 1986, p. 1.

The answer to the preliminary question can already be seen from the above: the nonsense of the project of applied ethics is proportional to its success. Still, the answer will outline itself in full clarity after considering the main problems of applied ethics.

Applied Ethics and Its Main Problems

Applied ethics has three main problems. *The first main problem* is of a *substantial nature* and consists in the fact that applied ethics does not actually have an object of application. The problem is, moreover, unsolvable because applied ethics does not and *cannot* have an object of application at all. For any knowledge or norm to be applicable, they have to be finally established, unambiguous, and unquestionable. Only lists of ultimate truths, i.e., lists of ethical dogmas, could be applied. To that extent, it would not be inconceivable for some confessional ethics, which are based on hard dogmatism, to be called applied ethics. But so far, no confessional ethics has expressed such ambition, most likely not wanting to sacrifice the remaining cramped possibilities for free thinking. Furthermore, the results of exact sciences can be applied, although there are many specifics and limitations in this area of application. Since the *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* does not provide us with information on where the idea of applied ethics came from, we are left free to speculate. It is possible that this idea arose from the undisguised longing of analytical philosophy to become an exact science itself or to get as close as possible to this hard-to-achieve ideal.

The second main problem of applied ethics is of a *methodological nature* and consists in the way in which it arrives at its findings and insights. As the name itself suggests, the methodological starting point of applied ethics is “application” which takes place by the process of deduction from the object of application,²⁶ so we can consider deductivism as a key methodological definition of applied ethics. In a 1996 article, Ruth Chadwick cites the definition of deductivism and indirectly questions it:

“Deductivism is the view that what we have to do in applied ethics is to apply a theory like utilitarianism or Kantianism to a particular problem situation, and the right answer will emerge eventually. In that sense, it is like a problem in engineering or mathematics. There is growing dissatisfaction with this model of applied ethics, partly because of doubts about the founding theories themselves, and partly because of the consequences of the application.”²⁷

It remains unclear what Chadwick means by “doubts about the founding theories themselves”, but it can be assumed that she has not progressed so far in critical considerations to think of a doubt about whether such a founding theory exists, or whether it can exist at all. Applied ethics, as it follows from its stated substantial deficiency, categorically excludes ethical pluralism, so any appreciation and positive evaluation of the pluralism of ethical theories by advocates of applied ethics is illogical and can be understood only as an expression of courtesy and academic decency. We cite one such Chadwick’s gesture. After expressing cautious doubts about the deductivism of applied ethics in the aforementioned 1996 article and analysing some of the alternatives to deductivism, knowing or at least guessing where the main problem of applied ethics lies, she considered it necessary to conclude:

“However, what I would like to suggest is that different ethical approaches do not prove the inapplicability of ethics, but its richness. It is important to think of ethics as a resource for dealing

with moral dilemmas that arise during practice. If we can at least show that there are different ways of thinking about problems, it will be an inconceivable success.”²⁸

In addition to her academic refinement, this gesture also expressed Chadwick’s sincere and unrestrained thinking, which, unfortunately, due to the initial devotion to the project, remains repressed and trapped in the incoherent conceptual framework of applied ethics. She confirmed respectable intellectual honesty when, as the editor-in-chief of the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* (that is, in the situation of potentiated obligations to applied ethics), in the “Preface”, which in this context can be considered a “canonical” document, she repeated her scepticism towards the basic dogma of the applicability of ethics:

“[...] it is still essential, as it was in 1998 [the year of the first edition of the *Encyclopedia*, AN A. Č.], for those engaged in applied ethics to reflect on what, *if anything*, is being ‘applied’ [emphasis by A. Č.]. The *Encyclopedia* therefore includes a number of articles on ethical and philosophical approaches, both historical and contemporary, religious and secular. It is not necessarily the case, however, that in applied ethics what is involved is the application of a theory.”²⁹

The above statement also shows that, beside the editor-in-chief’s shaken belief in the dogma of the applicability of ethics, the same dogma is practically violated by the inclusion of “a number of articles on ethical and philosophical approaches, both historical and contemporary” in the *Encyclopedia*. It is obvious that “a number of articles”, which represent pluralism much broader than ethical, were included in the *Encyclopedia* “just for a case”, i.e., in case that “nothing is being applied”, and would fit better in the *Encyclopedia of Integrative Bioethics* than in the *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*.

It seems that, like Ruth Chadwick, many other original protagonists of the applied ethics project as well as their European epigones are more or less aware of the irreparable structural error in the concept of applied ethics, which they try to mitigate or downplay in various ways. One way is to open a discussion on possible alternatives to deductivism, which Chadwick did in the mentioned article, because, at least while the discussion lasts, the unpleasant realization that applied ethics is basically a failed concept can be pushed into the background and hope for problem solvability can be maintained. Chadwick considers three alternatives to deductivism here – principlism, casuistry, and the ethics of care – but finds serious shortcomings in all of these cases.

In the already quoted article, Earl R. Winkler testifies that, after the applied ethics “has grown into an established field of study and practice, a number of important questions have arisen about the nature of the field and the problems within it”, including “one of the most fundamental of these concerns”, namely, “the usefulness of ethical theory”,³⁰ which the author at first marks as paradoxical. He goes on to explain the paradox by the fact that “many philosophers who ventured into clinics and boardrooms were chagrined to

26 Here we put the previously outlined problem with the object of application in parentheses.

27 Ruth Chadwick, “Bioetika, etička teorija i granice medicine” [Bioethics, Ethical Theory and the Limits of Medicine], *Društvena istraživanja* 5 (1996) 3–4, p. 547.

28 Ibid., p. 549.

29 R. Chadwick, “Preface”, p. XXV.

30 E. R. Winkler, “Applied Ethics, Overview”, p. 175.

discover how little usefulness this deductive approach had in confrontation with genuine moral problems”,³¹ which has led to the following:

“Gradually, [...] many philosophers and others who have worked extensively in applied ethics have moved toward a rejection of the traditional idea of developing and applying general normative theory.”³²

He concludes that “a level of abstraction that makes traditional ethical theory virtually useless in guiding moral decision making about real problems in specific social settings”.³³

The author goes on to engage in the search for an alternative to deductivism and talks about how scepticism in view of the possibility that a normative theory could solve moral problems by some kind of deduction encouraged the emergence of contextualism, according to which “it is unnecessary to strive for a universally valid ethical theory since there are more realistic ways of accounting for moral rationality and justification”.³⁴ However, the author argues that the virtue ethics is more appropriate for applied ethics than contextualism, because it “tends to see right action as indirectly determined by considering what actions would flow from the operation of relevant virtues”.³⁵ This author’s in-depth analysis led to a key conclusion about the internal difficulties of applied ethics, which he expressed cautiously and indirectly, namely that the deductivism of applied ethics does not really understand or poorly understands the nature of practical moral reasoning and norms that guide it:

“One of the consequences of the turn toward contextualism and virtue ethics has been a renewal of efforts to better understand the nature of practical moral reasoning and the norms governing it.”³⁶

The objection of not understanding the “nature of practical moral reasoning” is in fact the most severe objection to the methodological position of applied ethics, referring not only to applied ethics but, much more, to the analytical philosophical tradition from which applied ethics arose. In this tradition, practical moral reasoning is reduced to the cognitive procedure of deduction from the general rule. In contrast, in the Eurocontinental philosophical tradition, which follows Kant’s practical philosophy, practical moral reasoning is understood as a practical-reflexive process of universalizing the maxim according to which one acts.

Another way to mitigate a constructional error is to introduce a replacement name, which perceptually obscures the problem, and the new name also opens up the possibility of a conceptual shift. This means was used by one of the most famous authors in the field of applied ethics, Peter Singer, when he titled his book *Practical Ethics*. However, the mitigating effect of that intervention did not pass from the cover to the contents of the book. Moreover, Singer doubled the mental confusion that accompanies the concept of applied ethics when he defined practical ethics as “the application of ethics or morality [...] to practical issues”, emphasizing that he uses the concepts of ethics and morality interchangeably.³⁷ The very fact that Singer does not want to bother with distinguishing between ethics and morality is a bad sign for the expected level of his ethical contribution, regardless of his global prominence. If morality is shifted to the theoretical side of the problem in order to be applied to practical issues together with ethics, then the consideration of practical issues in the next step should also be shifted to the theoretical side and applied to real practical issues, and so on indefinitely. This means that applied ethics, due to the methodology of deductivism, remains trapped in the theoretical sphere which

it cannot leave to become practical and ennobled actual practice, which is in stark contrast to its emphatic reference to practicality. By character, applied ethics is as much a theory as any other form of ethics, including general, abstract, normative ethics, against which applied ethics seeks to take a competitive position, only with one already proven peculiarity, namely that it is a bad theory. If a theory is bad and clumsy, this is not a proof of its practicality but a proof of its uselessness or even harmfulness for both theory and practice.

The third main problem of applied ethics is of an *applied or usage nature*, and consists in developing the myth of the practicality of applied ethics, which is also the third way to mitigate, perhaps most effectively, the consequences of a misplaced methodological construction of applied ethics (deductivism).

As we have already stated, in a situation of the ethical vacuum, a legitimate and justified tendency has arisen to develop a concrete approach of ethics to real problems, especially those that have emerged as direct consequences of the scientific-technological progress. This tendency, most often in connection with the tendency to develop an integrative approach, has come to the fore and has been realized in numerous ethical initiatives, projects and works. We could say that it entered the “spirit of the time” in a period of the “ethical vacuum”. Without the ambition of a broader coverage of this phenomenon, only as an illustration of the mentioned tendency, we can refer to the book *Concrete Ethics: Foundations of Ethics of Nature and Ethics of Culture* by German ethicist Ludwig Siep, in which he summarized and conceptually rounded off his treatment of specific ethical problems in the final decades of the last century. Siep defines “concrete ethics” as a subject area and as a method. Interestingly, he restricts the subject area by referring to “applied ethics” as if it were a patent right to the occupied field of research, while he resolutely rejects the method of “application”. Concrete ethics

“[...] overlaps with an area that is mostly called ‘applied ethics’, but it is not about applying general ethical principles here. Concrete ethics is, therefore, an alternative approach to the themes of applied (or ‘practical’) ethics.”³⁸

Contrary to the method of applying abstract ethical principles, he defines his methodological approach as “concretizing the criteria of the good”,³⁹ while he defines the concept of the “concrete” in analogy with Hegel’s concept of the “self-concretization of the universal” with the exclusion of the moment of the “self-moving of the concept”.⁴⁰

The only thing that remained undisputed in the project of applied ethics, as confirmed by the above example, is the wide range of specific topics that

31

Ibid.

32

Ibid., p. 176.

33

Ibid.

34

Ibid., p. 177.

35

Ibid.

36

Ibid., p. 178.

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Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics. Second Edition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, p. 1.

38

Ludwig Siep, *Konkrete Ethik. Grundlagen der Natur- und Kulturethik*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/M 2004, p. 20.

39

Ibid., p. 9.

40

Ibid., p. 20.

applied ethics deals with, as well as the declared commitment to deal precisely with specific topics, by which applied ethics fit into the “spirit of the time” and certainly empowered it. However, the subject area alone cannot develop coherence and the status of an ethical concept or project without a developed unified methodology. To that extent, one cannot speak at all of applied ethics as an ethical concept or ethical project, but one can speak of applied ethics as a recognizable production brand in the field of contemporary ethics. It is a matter of a marketing-designed, successful brand that took advantage of the sensibility of the “spirit of the time” and managed to develop a compelling marketing story – the myth of the practicality of applied ethics.

The marketing story works beyond its truthfulness, but as the assumption that applied ethics is an ethical concept and ethical project is an integral part of the brand, we are obliged to re-examine the truthfulness of the myth of the practicality of applied ethics. Moreover, the exceptional practicality of applied ethics is presented as its *differentia specifica*, that is, the feature by which it stands out from other forms of ethics and by which it is so contemporary, so current, so occupied with the benefit of concrete life and thus – in general – so attractive.

The myth of the practicality of applied ethics is based, on the one hand, on the professional incoherence of the idea of applied or practical ethics and, on the other hand, on factual inaccuracies about the uniqueness of applied ethics in view of dealing with specific ethical issues.

We know that ethics is a philosophical discipline which refers to practice in terms of the moral dimension of human action and, in that sense, ethics is a practical discipline, and can be an integral part of a broader field of philosophy, known as practical philosophy. For itself, it is synonymous with moral philosophy. Except in regard to the subject orientation, any form of ethics can be neither more nor less – practical. If, therefore, we add the adjective “practical” to ethics, it can mean either pleonasm (as if we said, for example, “physical physics”) or conceptual incoherence. Those authors who are forced under marketing pressure to take seriously conceptual incoherencies of applied ethics have to make every effort to establish a conceptual order. Sometimes it gets comical. Andreas Vieth, author of one of the many introductions to applied ethics, solved this problem by introducing the category of double practicality or, we might say, “practicality squared”:

“Admittedly, there are only a few protected concepts in philosophy, but the concept of applied ethics, although often used, is used so differently that it strongly opposes an unambiguous definition. This concept is difficult to clarify especially because the notion of applying the ethics is marked by various metaphors. It should be added that the concept of applied ethics is actually meaningless. For if by ‘ethics’ is meant practical philosophy and if ‘applied’ is interpreted as ‘practical’ (as opposed to ‘theoretical’), it means that applied ethics is ‘practical practical philosophy’.”⁴¹

Although the proposed illogical resolution at first seems ironic or a confirmation of the assertion that the concept of applied ethics is in fact nonsensical, this is not the case. Because if, for example, the author had concluded so, he would have had to stop working on the already commissioned *Introduction to Applied Ethics*. Therefore, in the very next paragraph, he signed beforehand the need for a “practical practical philosophy”:

“At this point it can be accepted as given that there is clearly a need for a ‘practical practical philosophy’ in the question of ethics.”⁴²

Here we could cite a number of examples of how writers of introductions to applied ethics comment almost with astonishment that each ethics is in fact “applied” or “practical”, only to, after a certain “but”, calmly continue working on another introduction to such applied ethics.

Furthermore, it is factually incorrect that applied ethics is to such extent prominent in the treatment of specific topics that it can use it as its “trade-mark”. There is even one ethical discipline or phenomenon that, according to the measure of concreteness, cannot be surpassed at all – casuistry. There are many examples in the history of ethics for the concrete approach used by applied ethics, so Peter Singer called the contemporary expansion of applied ethics only a “revival”.⁴³ Here is how Kurt Bayertz, another member of the club of philosophical authors with applied ethics in the title of a book, rounds it off pregnantly:

“Does it make any sense at all to distinguish between ‘applied’ and ‘theoretical ethics’? On the one hand, ‘applied’ ethics is never devoid of theory; what would it otherwise apply if not a theory or parts of such theories? On the other hand, ‘theoretical’ ethics is always applied in a certain sense: it would be difficult to cite some classical text of moral philosophy in which the developed theory would not be referred each time to particular examples and thus applied. Whether we open Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*, or Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, there is always a discussion of practical cases in addition to theoretical considerations. Even Immanuel Kant – perhaps a true representative of ‘theoretical’ ethics – in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (421 ff.) cannot resist the temptation to check the categorical imperative on four different examples; while in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (422 ff.) he discusses a number of further cases for the application of his theory – among them suicide, masturbation and addiction problems, and each time concludes his consideration with a series of ‘casuistic questions’.”⁴⁴

The Nonsense of Applied Ethics and Formative Subversion

We can now expand the answer to the preliminary question that we have already formulated in principle, namely, that the nonsense of the project of applied ethics is proportional to its success. And we have already stated that the success is enormous. However, the success of applied ethics was achieved as a marketing project (brand) and not as an ethical project. Of course, the marketing project of applied ethics on the ethical level turns out to be nonsense. This effect of incoherence cannot be considered neutral but, moreover, extremely harmful, harmful to ethical theory, and we have already said that the most theory can do for practice is to be good. Therefore, we can say that the harmfulness of applied ethics for ethical theory and practice is also proportional to its success.

Of course, we are talking here about applied ethics as a conceptual and project framework, and we are saying that the nonsense of the framework is not necessarily transferred to the results achieved within it. A good project

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Andreas Vieth, *Einführung in die Angewandte Ethik*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 2006, p. 19.

42
Ibid., p. 20.

43
P. Singer, “Introduction”, p. 1.

44
Kurt Bayertz, “Praktische Philosophie als angewandte Ethik”, in: Wolfgang Sander, Christian Igelbrink, Friedhelm Brüggem (eds.), *UrteilsBildung – eine lösbare pädagogische Herausforderung. Theoretische Grundlagen und praktische Hinweise*, Lit Verlag, Berlin 2014, pp. 146–147.

framework typically emphasizes the value of achievements it frames. On the other hand, theoretically valuable contributions that arise in a bad framework cannot serve as a confirmation of its sensibleness. Rather, this will point to the uncriticality and academic opportunism of those who, for their own benefit, are willing to tolerate the incoherencies of their milieu. Many authors have made great efforts to justify illogicality and make sense of the project of applied ethics. In doing so, they would very often accurately list all the weaknesses, shortcomings, and contradictions of applied ethics, only to, at the crucial moment, when a devastating conclusion should follow, still find some reason to eventually justify the whole thing. As if there is some invisible command that applied ethics must exist and that “in the last two decades” it must have achieved an “excellent development” (Singer) or “dramatic growth” (Chadwick) with only those re-examinations allowed which will not call into question the mentioned dogmas of the existence of applied ethics.

In this context, we should certainly mention a phenomenon that has not been described in the history of academic writing, and we could call it “formative subversion”. The phenomenon was explicated primarily in German introductory and handbook literature on the topic of applied ethics, and it arose in the clash of good philosophical formation of authors and the incoherence of work that, for some reason, they had to perform. At the project level, in the light of the explanations given, this could also be interpreted as a result of the clash between a successful marketing brand and an incoherent ethical project. Formative subversion is manifested in a series of authorial actions of an unknown level of consciousness (conscious, unconscious, subconscious), which subtly express a departure from the idea of applied ethics despite the fact that it occupies the cover of the book. The most common forms of formative subversion are incidental ironic remarks, precise formulation of objections and not so passionate refutation of them, and ignoring the name of applied ethics in the content of the book regardless of what is on the cover. More demanding authorial manoeuvres were also recorded. This phenomenon certainly deserves a more detailed research and deeper analysis. We will only illustrate it here with two interesting cases.

Case one: Hans Lenk, *Einführung in die angewandte Ethik. Verantwortlichkeit und Gewissen*, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1997.

First, something about the author, because his profile is not unimportant in this context and his action is most likely not accidental. We single out two contributions from his rich and diverse opus that confirm his commitment to a “concrete approach” in philosophy and ethics: developing “the ethics of concrete humanity” based on Albert Schweitzer’s work⁴⁵ and his commitment to a “practice-oriented philosophy”, based on the category of responsibility.⁴⁶ So, in his *Introduction to Applied Ethics*, the name “applied ethics” does not appear anywhere in the content of the book. The content fully refers to the categories of conscience and responsibility, which are listed in the subtitle of the book. It is particularly intriguing that applied ethics was not mentioned in the introductory chapter “Introduction: An Overview of the Concepts of Ethics”, where the differences in the concept of ethics, as well as other ethical categories, are thoroughly stated.

Case two: Julian Nida-Rümelin (ed.), *Angewandte Ethik. Die Bereichsethiken und ihre theoretische Fundierung*, Alfred Kröner Verlag, Stuttgart 1996.

This handbook methodologically does not deviate significantly from other similar handbooks in the field of applied ethics, which means that it is marked by the usual conceptual confusion. However, it contains an interesting example of formative diversion, in the topic related to the subtitle of the book (“area ethics”), which suggests that the editor cared to keep the conceptual order in the subject of the subtitle and resist the clichés of applied ethics. At the end of an extensive introductory text, entitled “Theoretical and Applied Ethics: Paradigms, Foundations, and Areas”, the author and editor of the handbook discusses area ethics.

First, he opens up the possibility that different normative criteria may be appropriate for different areas of human practice, which cannot be reduced to a single system of moral rules and principles. He then states his position: “Instead of ‘applied ethics with its different focuses’ it would therefore be better, in my opinion, to talk about ‘area ethics’ [*Bereichsethiken*].”⁴⁷ Then he turns to the analysis of those areas of activity that are constituted through social subsystems and in the first place looks at medical ethics to confirm the previously stated basic position: “Instead of understanding medical ethics as part of applied ethics, this discipline should rather be understood as that part of ethics that relates to a specific area of human practice.”⁴⁸ After enumerating and analyzing a number of area ethics and thus saving them from being delivered to an uncertain creation of applied ethics, in the final paragraph of this section he returns to settling the relationship with applied ethics. He first compliments it, although it is not clear on what basis, by claiming that applied ethics is a “project of the Enlightenment”, and then indirectly, in the form of a recommendation, in fact criticizes it: “At the same time, the discourse of applied ethics must not be tempted to rediscover the moral. The starting point of descriptive and normative foundations are always the common elements of our descriptive and normative systems of belief; they can be neither *ab ovo* reconstructed nor criticized from a point of view outside any system of belief.”⁴⁹

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Cf. Hans Lenk, *Konkrete Humanität. Vorlesungen über Verantwortung und Menschlichkeit*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/M 1998; Hans Lenk, *Albert Schweitzer. Ethik als konkrete Humanität*, Lit Verlag, Münster 2000.

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On this line, in 1973 he published a programmatic treatise “Plädoyer für praxisnähere Philosophie”; republished in: Hans Lenk, *Praxisnahes Philosophieren. Eine Einführung*, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1999, pp. 195–201.

47

Julian Nida-Rümelin, “Theoretische und angewandte Ethik: Paradigmen, Begründungen, Bereiche”, in: J. Nida-Rümelin (ur.), *Angewandte Ethik*, p. 63.

48

Ibid., pp. 63–64.

49

Ibid., p. 69.

Applied Ethics as an Institution of Ethical Absurdity

Applied ethics as a marketing project has succeeded – by invasive appearance, enormous production, spreading influence, and especially by grafting into the Eurocontinental ethical discourse – in importing its own conceptual nonsense into the open space of the ethical vacuum and filling it with mental confusion which in some segments turns into theoretical torture⁵⁰ for those stuck to find sense in some conceptual constructions of applied ethics at all costs.

From the very beginning, applied ethics was faced with a substantial shortcoming consisting in the factual non-existence and in principle impossibility of establishing an “object of application”, which means general normative ethics that would serve as a reservoir of norms from which they would be applied to practice by deduction. In this way, applied ethics would prove its “practicality”. Within applied ethics, it was not even possible to initiate a discussion on competing ethical positions in order to single out a particular position that could be declared indisputable because it would turn applied ethics into its opposite – into theoretical ethics. However, another discussion, which effectively maintained the state of mental confusion, was continuously conducted within applied ethics, and it referred to special ethics and their relations to applied ethics. This discussion led to the result that special ethics one after another became branches of applied ethics and that the realm of disciplines and subdisciplines of applied ethics eventually expanded to obscurity, which led some authors of later introductions to applied ethics to the brink of despair:

“There is an endless multitude of *area ethics* and starting points of *applied ethics*. If they were presented, or if only a representative overview of them was given, the framework of this *Introduction* would burst.”⁵¹

Of course, each introduction to applied ethics has its own list of disciplines and subdisciplines of applied ethics, and these lists, in accordance with the stylistic principle of confusion, differ from each other to such an extent that it is almost impossible to find two lists that would match. Here we refer to a list from one introduction to applied ethics that stands out with clarity and that is given in the book in a graphical presentation. In their *Introduction to Applied Ethics*, Annemarie Pieper and Urs Thurnherr divided philosophical ethics into general ethics and applied ethics. While general ethics includes three disciplines (descriptive ethics, normative ethics, and metaethics), applied ethics is branched into as many as eighteen disciplines and subdisciplines in a hierarchical presentation (bioethics, ecological ethics, medical ethics, animal ethics, psychological ethics, social ethics, ethics of law, political ethics, economic ethics, media ethics, pedagogical ethics, feminist ethics, philosophical practice, ethics of science, ethics of technology, and evolutionary ethics).⁵²

Inflation of special ethics, as well as the conjuncture of applied ethics, as it turned out, had a destructive effect, on the one hand, on the normative authority of traditional ethics, while, on the other hand, they emphasized confusion and normative disorientation in facing the dangers of the contemporary scientific-technical civilization. Although these two tendencies occurred on the same line of destruction, they cannot be said to have the same origin. Ultimately, however, by the power of negative synergy, they merged into a single institutional form of ethical absurdity.

The institution of ethical absurdity arose at the moment when applied ethics as a vain marketing label took the vacancy of the “object of application” and

the role of “general ethics”⁵³ for an unrelated and undefined conglomerate of special ethics transformed into its branches.

Ante Čović

Besmisao »primijenjene etike«

Od etičkog vakuuma do etičkog apsurdna

Sažetak

Aktualni proces fragmentiranja etike na brojne posebne etike autor u polazištu članka ocjenjuje kao proces destruiranja etike kao filozofske discipline. To dovodi u vezu s povijesnim neuspjehom etike koja zbog kategorijalnih ograničenja nije bila u stanju odgovoriti na izazove uznapredovale znanstveno-tehničke civilizacije, uslijed čega je nastao »etički vakuum« (H. Jonas). U reakciji na etički vakuum nastale su brojne etičke inicijative koje autor, prema učincima na rehabilitaciju uloge tradicionalne etike i na stvaranje novog orijentacijskog okvira, razvrstava na destruktivnu i produktivnu liniju. Na produktivnoj crti prevladavanja etičkog vakuuma nastala je bioetika koja je, zajedno s drugim etičkim projektima, stvorila novo orijentacijsko ozračje koje autor naziva »novom etičkom kulturom«. Na destruktivnoj liniji, uz inflaciju posebnih etika, pojavio se i poseban oblik destrukcije u vidu implantiranja »primijenjene etike«, koju autor označava kao besmislen pojam, u tkivo tradicionalne etike. Potom autor izlaže tri glavna problema primijenjene etike. Prvi je glavni problem supstancijalne naravi i sastoji se u tome što ona nema i u načelu ne može imati neupitne norme kao objekt primjene. Drugi je glavni problem metodološke naravi i sastoji se u neprimjerenosti i neprihvaćenosti deduktivizma kao modela primjenjivanja etičkih normi na praksu. Treći je glavni problem uporabne naravi i sastoji se u razvijanju mita o praktičnosti primijenjene etike. Autor izvodi zaključak da primijenjena etika nije ni etički koncept ni etički projekt nego marketinški brend koji se na etičkom planu ispostavlja kao besmisao. U poanti članka autor tvrdi da je primijenjena etika postala institucijom etičkog apsurdna u onom trenutku kada je kao isprazna marketinška etiketa preuzela prazno

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As an encyclopaedic, and perhaps as an anthropological example of theoretical torture, we can take an entry about “global ethics” from the *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*. Here is one “explanation” from the entry in question: “The relationship between global ethics and applied ethics is contested. Global ethics can be regarded as a subset of applied ethics – the branch of applied ethics that is concerned particularly with ‘global’ dilemmas. Conversely, it can be seen as moving beyond the traditional scope of applied ethics and away from the paradigm of applied ethics. The relationship of global ethics to applied ethics provides the context for this article because it offers a useful framework for an overview of global ethics: It brings into sharp relief the similarities and dissimilarities between global ethics and other applied ethics and thus shows what is distinctive about global ethics.” H. Widdows, “Global Ethics, Overview”, p. 514.

51

A. Vieth, *Einführung in die Angewandte Ethik*, p. 19.

52

Annemarie Pieper, Urs Thurnherr, “Einleitung”, in: A. Pieper, U. Thurnherr (eds.), *Angewandte Ethik*, p. 9.

53

The claim that applied ethics assumes the role of general ethics in the ethical universe, which is already largely tuned to its standards, should not be understood as an interpretive exaggeration because such a state of affairs is confirmed by the applied ethics literature. Thus, Christian Schicha, the editor of the *Criteria of a Sustainable Ethics of Economy* collection of papers, in the introductory text “Tasks, Features and Goals of Applied Ethics”, sets up a categorical framework of discussion, in which he fully equates applied ethics with general ethics. Here are his introductory definitions: “The applied ethics or moral philosophy is understood as a discipline that deals with norms, values and basic orientations of people in the understanding of a ‘crisis reflection’ (Riedel 1979) in moral decision-making problems. [...] In the understanding of this volume, ‘ethics’ should have the same meaning as ‘moral philosophy’.” – Christian Schicha, “Aufgaben, Merkmale und Ziele der angewandten Ethik”, in: Christian Schicha (ed.), *Kriterien einer nachhaltigen Wirtschaftsethik. Kommunikation im Spannungsfeld zwischen Ökonomie und Ökologie*, Universität Duisburg-Essen, Duisburg 2000, p. 3.

mjesto objekta primjene i ulogu opće etike za nepovezani i nedefinirani konglomerat posebnih etika koje su pretvorene u njene grane.

Ključne riječi

etika, primijenjena etika, bioetika, etički vakuum, etički apsurd

Ante Čović

Die Sinnlosigkeit der „angewandten Ethik“

Vom ethischen Vakuum zur ethischen Absurdität

Zusammenfassung

Am Ausgangspunkt des Artikels bewertet der Autor den gegenwärtigen Prozess der Fragmentierung der Ethik in zahlreiche Spezialethiken als einen Prozess der Destruierung der Ethik als philosophische Disziplin. Er bringt dies in einen Zusammenhang mit dem historischen Versagen der Ethik, die aufgrund kategorialer Beschränkungen nicht in der Lage war, die Herausforderungen der fortgeschrittenen wissenschaftlich-technischen Zivilisation anzugehen, wodurch sich ein „ethisches Vakuum“ ausgebildet hat (H. Jonas). Als Reaktion auf das ethische Vakuum entstanden reihenweise ethische Initiativen, die der Autor nach den Auswirkungen auf die Rehabilitierung der Rolle der traditionellen Ethik sowie auf die Schaffung eines neuen Orientierungsrahmens in destruktive und produktive Linie einordnet. Auf der produktiven Linie der Überwindung des ethischen Vakuums erwuchs die Bioethik, die zusammen mit anderen ethischen Projekten eine neue Orientierungsatmosphäre schuf, welche der Autor eine „neue ethische Kultur“ nennt. Auf der destruktiven Linie trat neben der Inflation der Spezialethiken gleichfalls eine besondere Form der Destruktion ans Licht, und zwar in Form der Einpflanzung der „angewandten Ethik“, die der Autor als sinnlosen Begriff apostrophiert, in das Gewebe der traditionellen Ethik. Im Anschluss daran legt der Autor drei Hauptprobleme der angewandten Ethik dar. Das erste Hauptproblem ist von substanzieller Natur und besteht darin, dass sie keine unbezweifelbaren Normen als Anwendungsobjekt hat und grundsätzlich auch nicht haben kann. Das zweite Hauptproblem ist von methodologischer Natur und besteht in der Unangemessenheit und Nichtakzeptanz des Deduktivismus als Modell für die Anwendung ethischer Normen auf die Praxis. Das dritte Hauptproblem ist von gebrauchsbbezogener Natur und besteht darin, den Mythos über die Praktikabilität der angewandten Ethik zur Geltung zu bringen. Der Autor gelangt zu der Schlussfolgerung, dass angewandte Ethik weder ein ethisches Konzept noch ein ethisches Projekt ist, sondern ein Marketing-Brand, der sich auf ethischem Terrain als Unsinn entpuppt. In der Pointe des Artikels vertritt der Autor die Ansicht, dass die angewandte Ethik in dem Moment zu einer Institution ethischer Absurdität wurde, als sie als nichtiges Marketingetikett die freie Stelle des Anwendungsobjektes wie auch die Rolle der allgemeinen Ethik für ein unzusammenhängendes und undefiniertes Konglomerat von Spezialethiken übernahm, die in ihre Zweige umgewandelt wurden.

Schlüsselwörter

Ethik, angewandte Ethik, Bioethik, ethisches Vakuum, ethische Absurdität

Ante Čović

Le non-sens de l’« éthique appliquée »

Du vide éthique à l’absurde éthique

Résumé

Au point de départ du présent article l’auteur examine le processus de fragmentation de l’éthique en de nombreuses éthiques spécialisées et le qualifie de processus de destruction de l’éthique en tant que discipline philosophique. Il associe ce processus à l’échec historique de l’éthique, qui, en raison de ses limitations catégorielles, n’a pas été en mesure de répondre aux défis des civilisations scientifiques et techniques avancées, entraînant un « vide éthique » (H. Jonas). En réponse à ce vide, de nombreuses initiatives éthiques ont fait leur apparition,

que l'auteur, en fonction des effets sur la réhabilitation du rôle traditionnel de l'éthique et sur la création d'un nouveau cadre d'orientation, qualifie de ligne destructrice et productrice. Sur la ligne productrice qui vise à dépasser le vide éthique, est apparue la bioéthique, qui, de concert avec d'autres projets éthiques, a créé une nouvelle orientation et constitue, selon l'auteur, « une nouvelle culture éthique ». Sur la ligne destructrice, ensemble avec l'inflation d'éthiques spécialisées, une forme spéciale de destruction a émergé qui se traduit par l'implantation d'« éthiques appliquées », que l'auteur réfère à un concept insensé au sein de la trame de l'éthique traditionnelle. Par la suite, l'auteur présente trois problèmes majeurs de l'éthique appliquée. Le premier touche à la nature substantielle et réside dans le fait que l'éthique appliquée n'a pas, et en principe ne peut avoir, de normes incontestables en tant qu'objet d'application. Le deuxième problème est de nature méthodologique et se situe dans le caractère inapproprié et la non acceptation du déductivisme en tant que modèle d'application des normes éthiques à la pratique. Le troisième problème est à caractère utilitaire et se rapporte au développement du mythe de l'aspect pratique de l'éthique appliquée. L'auteur en vient à la conclusion que l'éthique appliquée n'est ni un concept éthique ni un projet éthique, mais une marque de marché qui s'avère insensée sur le plan éthique. Il affirme que l'éthique appliquée est devenue une institution de l'absurde éthique au moment où, en tant qu'étiquette vide de marketing, elle a pris la place libre de l'objet d'application et le rôle de l'éthique générale, perçus comme un conglomérat indépendant et indéfini d'éthiques spécialisées dont elle s'est réappropriée les branches.

Mots-clés

éthique, éthique appliquée, bioéthique, vide éthique, absurdité éthique