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# How Applied Should Applied Ethics Be? <sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

How applied *should* applied ethics be? I take up that question not because it belongs to the past of applied ethics (though it does), but because, given the present, it seems likely to be a part of the future of applied ethics as well. Consider, for example, a recent debate in the journal *Bioethics*: One of the four papers was titled, “Why Moral Philosophers Are Not and Should Not Be Moral Experts”; another, “Moral Philosophers Are Moral Experts!” In that debate, a “moral expert” was a philosopher who used his knowledge of philosophy to speak with authority on practical questions. In the course of answering my question, I make a number of distinctions: between ethics-as-practice and ethics-as-theory; between ethics-as-morality, ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy, and ethics-as-special standards; and so on. Having thereby narrowed my question to: *what can ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy properly contribute to moral practice?* I answer that ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy can contribute much to moral practice, but only by maintaining a certain distance from it. For example, experts in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy—or even experts in all of philosophy—should not on that basis alone undertake to advise on questions of ethics-as-morality or ethics-as-special-standards. Practical experience has something to teach that is not philosophy—sensitivity to context, know-how, judgment, or the like.

Key words: moral experts, biomedical ethics, applied ethics, moral expertise, judgment

*The role of the moral philosopher is not the role of the preacher; we are told. But why not?*

—Peter Singer, “Moral Experts”, *Analysis* 32 (1972): 115-117, p. 115

*Long-haired preachers come out every night  
Try to tell you what's wrong and what's right*

—Joe Hill, “The Preacher and the Slave”, 1911

How applied *should* applied ethics be? I address this

question not because it belongs to the past of applied ethics (though that forty-year-old quotation from Peter Singer shows that it does), but because, given the present, it also seems likely to belong to the future of applied ethics, a perennial threat to its moral integrity. Consider, for example, a recent debate in the journal *Bioethics*: One of the four contributions was titled, “Why Moral Philosophers Are Not and Should Not Be Moral Experts”; another, “Moral Philosophers Are Moral Experts!” All four contributions treated moral expertise as (in part) authority to tell people what they should do (“what’s wrong and what’s right”). For all four, the central question was what moral philosophers should (or, at least, can) do with their expertise in applied ethics.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Previous versions of this paper were presented at the Humanities Colloquium, Illinois Institute of Technology, on October 7, 2016, and at the 10th International Conference on Applied Ethics, Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Japan, October 28, 2016. I should like to thank those present, as well as Geoff Holtzman and one reviewer for this journal, for their comments.

<sup>2</sup> Bernward Gesang, “Are Moral Philosophers Moral Experts?” *Bioethics* 24 (2010): 153–159; David Archard, “Why Moral Philosophers Are Not and Should Not Be

“Applied ethics” may be used for one of several entities or activities depending on how “ethics” and “applied” are understood—and philosophers, ethicists, and others who claim to “apply ethics” are far from agreeing on how those terms should be understood.<sup>3</sup> So, before I address directly the question posed in this paper’s title, I should say how I understand those terms and why understanding them as I do is likely to be a good way, though perhaps not the only good way, to approach that question.

## Ethics

I usually distinguish three senses of “ethics” before entering a discussion in which that term has a significant part: ethics-as-ordinary-morality; ethics-as-special-standards-of-conduct; and ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy. I do that to avoid the confusion that commonly follows when a writer uses one sense while readers understand another. So, let us consider what “applied” might mean if prefixed to each of these senses.

If morality consists of universal standards of conduct (rules, principles, ideals, precedents, and the like governing all reasonable persons), then applied ethics-as-morality would be the use of those standards in specific situations, in order to guide practice, for example: “Since it is always morally wrong to kill the innocent, and this person is innocent, killing this person is morally

wrong.”<sup>4</sup> Here a moral standard (“it is always morally wrong to kill the innocent”) is “applied”, that is, provides the major premise, in an argument in which a certain fact (this person being innocent) is the minor premise. The conclusion concerns practice (what it would be morally wrong to do). Though this example of applying ethics-as-morality is deductive, it need not have been. An application can rely on a looser relation between premises and conclusion than deduction, for example, probability, analogy, or inference to the best explanation.

Using “ethics” as a synonym for “morality” seems to be a reasonable way to use the “ethics” in “applied ethics”—even if that use should make us wonder why the field is not instead called “applied morality”. In fact, some fields of applied ethics, such as biomedical ethics or environmental ethics, seem to be predominantly applied morality in this sense. They typically appeal to ordinary moral standards, such as justice or beneficence, to resolve (or, at least, help resolve) practical problems.<sup>5</sup> The word “ethics” adds little—or nothing.

If, however, we understand morality as the *practice* in which moral standards have a central part, morality itself would be so applied that the “applied” in “applied ethics” would be redundant. Morality-as-practice must always be applied. The implied contrast with “unapplied morality” (however understood) is lost.

Much the same is true of ethics-as-special-standards, that is, those morally binding standards of conduct that apply to members of a group (a group not including all moral agents) simply because they are members of that group: accounting ethics, engineering ethics, research ethics, and so on. If “ethics” in this sense is understood as the standards themselves, then applied ethics-as-special-standards would be the application to particular situations of those standards (standards contained in, for example, the code of ethics of a profession, research community, or other group). “Ethics” in this sense adds information that “morality” does not, the relevance of special standards. If, however, we understand ethics-as-special-standards as the practices in which such standards are central (such as the practice of the legal profession), then “ethics-as-special-standards” would—like “ethics-

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Moral Experts”, *Bioethics* 25 (2011): 119–127; Christopher Crowley, “Expertise, Wisdom and Moral Philosophers: A Response to Gesang,” *Bioethics* 26 (2012): 337–342; John-Stewart Gordon, “Moral Philosophers Are Moral Experts! A Reply to David Archard”, *Bioethics* 28 (2014): 203–206; and references they cite. There is a similar debate about political experts. See, for example, Steven Wall, “Public Reason and Moral Authoritarianism”, *Philosophical Quarterly* 63 (January 2013): 160–169; or Daniel Viehoff, “Authority and Expertise”, *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 24 (December 2016): 406–426, and references cited there. And about experts in general. See, for example, Alvin I. Goldman, “Which Ones Should You Trust?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63 (July, 2001): 85–110.

3 For some sense of the varied ways in which “applied ethics” is used, compare: Seumas Miller, “Research in Applied Ethics: Problems and Perspectives”, *Philosophia* 37 (2009): 185–201; Fritz Allhoff, “What Are Applied Ethics?” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 17 (2011): 1–19; Torbjörn Tännsjö, “Applied Ethics: A Defence”, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 14 (2011): 397–406; Onora O’Neill, “Applied Ethics: Naturalism, Normativity and Public Policy”, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26 (2009): 219–230; and Bonnie Steinbock, “How Has Philosophical Applied Ethics Progressed In the Past Fifty Years?” *Metaphilosophy* 44 (January 2013): 58–62.

4 Of course, if one is a moral relativist, the standards in question would be universal only with respect to the society in question, not with respect to all rational persons. But there would still remain a distinction between that sort of standard and the special standards I shall soon distinguish. It is also worth pointing out that “morality” here is not merely what people happen to think is morally right or wrong (an empirical fact) but those standards they would endorse when they are at their reasonable (an idealized version of the standards people routinely cite).

5 Compare Tom L. Beauchamp, “History and Theory in ‘Applied Ethics’”, *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 17 (March 2007): 55–64.

as-morality” in the corresponding sense—already be so applied that the prefix “applied” would be redundant.

Applied ethics in either of the non-redundant senses just identified is not without difficult questions. For example, what are we to do when more than one standard applies, when a standard applies without giving a clear resolution, when an applicable standard is disputed, or when we lack enough information to know whether or not a particular standard applies? Such questions may, however, be dealt with using casuistry, hermeneutics, reflective equilibrium, or the like interpretive strategy. Such questions are the friction of ordinary practice. They need not have much to do with our question: *how applied should applied ethics be?* The third sense of “applied ethics”—ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy—plainly does.

Ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy is (more or less) the attempt to understand morality, including ethics-as-special-standards, as a reasonable practice. Ethics in this sense, whether understood as an intellectual pursuit or a community of pursuers, is not morality but *about* morality, an exercise in theory or (what Kant called) “speculative reason”, not “practical reason”. It is “pure” rather than “applied”. The philosophy ends when the desired understanding is achieved. Hence, the very idea of *applied* ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy must seem (and perhaps be) deeply problematic. The problem is both old and general to philosophy, not limited to ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy. Plato’s Cave remains the classic statement of that problem: What *can* we do with the understanding achieved in the bright sun of pure reason (theory) when we return to the dim, many-shadowed cave of ordinary life (practice)?

Of course, Plato’s problem is more philosophical than practical. In practice, we teach “theory” (that is, ways of understanding) to future practitioners and, all things considered, they seem better practitioners as a result. That improvement in practice is one reason, probably the chief reason, that most countries spend large sums to maintain universities and fill them with students who, upon graduation, work in accounting, computer science, medicine, or another useful endeavor, where they seem to translate theory into practice, not only philosophical theory but also accounting theory, programming theory, medical theory, or the like. The interesting philosophical question Plato raised is how that is possible.

Though Plato’s question remains open, it is not our question. Our question might now be restated as this more modest (and practical) one: *what can ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy properly contribute to moral practice?* My answer is that ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy can contribute much to moral practice, but only by maintaining a certain distance from it. For example, experts in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy—or even experts in all of philosophy—should not on that basis alone undertake to advise on questions of ethics-

as-morality or ethics-as-special-standards. The Cave has something to teach that is not philosophy—know-how, sensitivity to context, judgment, or the like.<sup>6</sup> We must turn now to the second ambiguous term in “applied ethics”—“applied”. What is it to apply ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy?

## Applied

We may distinguish at least seven ways in which ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy might be said to be applied: 1) clarification of terms affecting moral practice; 2) analysis of arguments affecting moral practice; 3) systemization of arguments affecting moral practice; 4) invention of arguments relevant to moral practice; 5) big ideas about moral practice; 6) use of the products of the forgoing by non-philosophers in moral practice; and 7) use of the foregoing by philosophers in moral practice. Let us briefly consider these in order.

1. **Clarification.** Much that goes by the name “applied ethics” has been undertaken to clarify the language of public debates concerning moral practice.<sup>7</sup> Observing a public debate concerning moral practice that seems confused because participants use a significant term loosely or in several unacknowledged ways, a philosopher might offer a definition or a distinction (a set of related definitions), hoping to clear up what the debate is about and thereby help those participating in the debate to identify what, if anything, actually divides them. Among terms that have recently received such philosophical treatment are: “coercion”, “conflict of interest”, “informed consent”, “person”, “race”, “terrorism”, and “war”. Philosophers have, of course, also discussed the merits of this or that definition and proposed alternatives. In one respect, clarification of such terms is an application of ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy, that is, philosophers use knowledge, skill, or judgment sharpened in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy to achieve a clarity others did not. They seek to understand the terms of public debate as they clarify them. In another respect, however, this activity is not an application of *ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy*. In general, the clarifications do not exist in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy waiting to be applied. They are created for a practical purpose,

6 For more on judgment and related concepts, see Michael Davis, “A Plea for Judgment”, *Science and Engineering Ethics* 18 (December 2012): 789-808.

7 Of the remainder, some of what is called “applied ethics” seeks to help with the problems of individuals (as in, for example, philosophical counseling or medical consultation) and some with questions that might become matters of public debate but have not yet (such as the morality of plural marriage or designing humans to be immortal).

the clarification of a public debate. That is one reason that many philosophers prefer to describe what they do as “practical ethics” rather than “applied ethics”. While they may be applying philosophical knowledge, skill, or judgment, they are not applying ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy. They are, instead, adding to that field, applying methods common to philosophy as a whole or, less often, results from another field of philosophy, such as metaphysics or philosophy of law.

2. **Analysis of arguments.** Much the same is true of the analysis of arguments. The arguments philosophers typically analyze when they do applied ethics are not arguments belonging to philosophy but arguments belonging to a public debate concerning moral practice, for example, the argument against abortion relying on the premise that the fetus is a person from the moment of conception. What philosophers do is try to state the argument as fairly as possible, clarify crucial terms, fill in tacit premises, identify the argument’s strengths and weaknesses, and so on. While doing that, a philosopher may contribute to ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy, for example, to understanding the concept of person as a moral category. But there is no *application* of ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy as such to the analysis of the argument in question. What is applied is primarily philosophy’s general methods of analyzing arguments, though occasionally it is a method drawn from another field of philosophy.

3. **Systemization.** A moral theory is (in large part at least) the systemization of certain moral arguments, including related definitions, into an enlightening whole. *Moral theory*, that is, the field containing all moral theories, including their criticism and defense, seems to be the core of ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy. There are many criteria of adequacy for moral theories: internal consistency, coherence with what we know of the natural world, and so on. One of these criteria of adequacy is that the theory be (relatively) determinate, that is, that it give answers to most, if not all, significant questions put to it concerning how we should act. Another criterion is that the answers the theory gives should (in general at least) be plausible. It is in the context of showing that a theory does, or does not, satisfy the criterion of determinacy or plausibility that the philosophical discussion of theory may seem to join a public debate: a philosopher will apply the theory to a public debate, for example, use the theory as the major premise in an argument about when abortion is morally permissible. While this is applied ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy in some sense, it is, strictly speaking, not applied ethics as commonly understood. The philosopher is merely showing that her preferred theory is determinate or plausible in the exemplary case. The application is a mere byproduct of the philosophy, not an attempt to contribute to a particular public debate. An example from

another public debate might have served just as well.

4. **Invention of arguments.** The line between analyzing old arguments and inventing new ones is fuzzy. Sufficiently analyzed, what began as an old argument may not only seem new to those participating in the debate where it has long been used but actually be used in startlingly new ways or with startlingly new force. Though old (in some respects), the argument will also be new, at least in consequences drawn. Nonetheless, in addition to this sort of invention by analysis, philosophers may now and then actually add to the stock of arguments. Consider, for example, Sally Markowitz’s argument that women have a moral right to abortion until they have the moral equality that the current sexist society denies them.<sup>8</sup> Whatever its merit, Markowitz’s argument certainly seems more than an improved version of an old one.

Inventing arguments about moral practice is part of ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy—or, rather, it is if the invented arguments are designed at least in part to convince other philosophers. But, being new, such arguments cannot be mere *applications* of ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy. Indeed, they cannot be mere applications of philosophy of any sort, however much they rely on pre-existing methods, analogies with old arguments, or the like. Invention always adds to what exists. Still, newly invented arguments are examples of applied ethics in a straightforward sense, that is, they both concern moral practice and augment ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy.

5. **Big ideas.** For an analytic philosopher like me, much that passes for the history of philosophy is an embarrassment, consisting (as it does) of “big ideas” beside which the definitions, arguments, and systemizations just described seem no more than unimportant details.<sup>9</sup> Big ideas, such as Plato’s Cave, have an appeal independent of any particular definition, argument, or theory. They seem to be much of what attracts students to philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

What is true of philosophy in general is certainly true of ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy. Among the big ideas of ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy are: care, the categorical imperative, practical wisdom, the social contract, and utility. While such ideas seem to

8 Sally Markowitz, “A Feminist Defense of Abortion”, *Social Theory and Practice* 16 (Spring 1990): 1-17.

9 Compare Richard Rorty, “Universalist Grandeur and Analytic Philosophy”, *The Hedgehog Review* 18 (Summer 2016): 63-75.

10 Think, for example, of Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (The Pocket Library, 1954), with its “lives and opinions of the world’s greatest philosophers from Plato to John Dewey”, one of several books that together attracted me to philosophy.

help philosophers shape their particular definitions, arguments, or theories in ways they might not have shaped them otherwise, the big ideas have only a modest place in philosophy itself. They are primarily part of the scaffolding of thought, something to be taken down by the time a definition, argument, or systemization is completed. Big ideas are seldom, if ever, what ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy offers practice. What philosophy as such, including ethics-as-a-field-philosophy, ordinarily offers practice are definitions, arguments, and systemizations.

6. **Use by non-philosophers.** Philosophers typically have students, both the official students who sit in their classes and the unofficial students who read what philosophers write or hear from the philosopher's official students. Typically, neither type of student will have a deep understanding of a philosopher's work. Indeed, even other philosophers may not. That is one reason why, for example, more than a century after publication, central features of Kant's or Mill's moral theory are still controversial among philosophers. What students typically take from philosophy, if they take anything, are the big ideas, a philosopher's special way of seeing the world. From Kant, for example, they may learn to try to do what is morally right whatever the actual or probable consequences; from Mill, to do what gives the best consequences whatever ordinary morality may say; and so on. "The great philosophers" seem to be those whose big ideas catch on with non-philosophers, leaving behind all the fine distinctions and delicate arguments with which the philosopher originally hedged them. What Bismarck said about making sausage and statutes may also be true of much of the application by non-philosophers of ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy, for example, in a hospital ethics committee or corporate ethics office: for philosophers at least, it is better not to see.<sup>11</sup> Application by non-philosophers, though common and often beneficial, is only the application of ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy in an analogical or degenerate sense. Philosophy's special contribution to understanding is missing. What is applied is more like a poetic image or pedagogue's heuristic than philosophy.

7. **Use by philosophers.** Philosophers can enter a public debate concerning moral practice either as philosophers or as ordinary participants. I will soon consider participation as philosophers, that is, as recognized experts of a certain sort. Right now I want to consider philosophers as ordinary participants, that is, as participants with no special status. They enter the

debate as philosophers only insofar they use whatever they have learned from philosophy, for example, how to formulate their arguments more clearly than they would have were they in some other discipline. This, it seems to me, is an unproblematic kind of participation. But, because it does not rely on the authority of philosophy, it is the participation that a non-philosopher might also be capable of, having sharpened her skills in a philosophy class. The public can take it for what it seems to be worth—independent of its undisclosed origin in philosophy. It does not seem to be applied ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy in a sense relevant to our question.

## Experts

So far, I have treated applied ethics primarily as a *field* of philosophy, that is, as a set of questions, methods, and proposed answers. We can also treat applied ethics as a *community*, that is, as all the individuals working in that field, a group sharing certain interests and practices. If an expert is someone recognized as able to do certain things for others that not everyone can, for example, provide specialized information or replace a defective heart, then members of the philosophical community are typically experts in some part or all of philosophy.<sup>12</sup> Experts in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy might contribute to a moral practice, such as public debate concerning social policy, for example, by writing popular articles, serving on a government commission, or acting as a corporation's ethics officer. They would act as experts insofar they have special (epistemic) authority because they are supposed to draw (and typically do draw) on ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy when they contribute (or at least try to contribute) to moral practice.<sup>13</sup> Such experts might contribute to moral practice in at least one of four ways (other than as ordinary participants). They might contribute as resource, counselor, adviser, or decision-maker.

1. **Resource.** For our purposes, a resource is an individual called upon as needed to provide information or tools. A philosopher is a resource in applied ethics if she has knowledge or skill in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy (beyond what most people have) so that she can, for example, authoritatively answer a question

11 What Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), a famous German politician, said (or, at least, is commonly believed to have said) is, "Laws are like sausages, it is better not to see them being made." [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Otto\\_von\\_Bismarck](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Otto_von_Bismarck) (accessed May 8, 2017).

12 For a fuller definition of "expertise", see Michael Davis, "On the Possibility of Ethical Expertise", *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 29 (Spring 2015): 71-84.

13 Thinking of applied ethics as a community (as well as a field) also makes the question of expertise in morality political (as well as epistemic). For more on this point, see Joan C. Tronto, "Who is Authorized to Do Applied Ethics? Inherently Political Dimensions of Applied Ethics", *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 14 (2011): 407-417.

about a moral theory (“What does Augustine’s theory of virtue say about this?”), tell what ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy has to say about a certain concept or argument, or even use skill developed in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy to provide a new definition, argument, or systemization. Serving as such a resource in deliberation concerning moral practice should, it seems, count as applying ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy, even though it is not telling anyone what to do (or what it is right or wrong to do). It is “applied ethics” in the relatively uncontroversial sense of bringing the content of ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy to moral practice.<sup>14</sup> Serving as a resource in this way is also, I think, close to what philosophers often do when they teach. It is, then, something philosophers certainly can do.

Of course, other disciplines can also provide moral practice with resources. A social scientist can provide information about such empirical matters as what people believe is or is not moral; a physician can provide information about the likely medical consequences of a certain social policy; and so on.<sup>15</sup> Philosophers are definitely not the only resource likely to be helpful when someone is trying to choose a course of action. Philosophers are also not the only resource that can be ignored. It is therefore worth noting that *a resource brings information or tools to practice, that is, to the threshold of practice*. Whether what is brought to practice ever *affects* practice, that is, actually gets applied in practice, is generally beyond the resource’s control.

2. **Counselor.** While a counselor may serve as a resource, what distinguishes a counselor from a mere resource is that she is supposed to ask helpful questions, not just provide information or tools.<sup>16</sup> A counselor seeks to guide deliberation in ways that those counseled should find useful or at least enlightening. What counselors do is, in this respect at least, close to what philosophers do when they teach in the Socratic style. They help the people counseled structure their thinking about conduct, leaving it to the counseled to answer the practical questions (for example, “What should we do?”). So, like serving as a resource, counseling seems a

relatively unproblematic form of applied ethics, a natural extension to (non-philosophical) practice of ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy. Counseling is certainly something philosophers can do.

3. **Adviser.** For our purposes, advisers differ from counselors in at least one important way: advisers may—and typically do—explicitly recommend, condemn, rank, or otherwise judge courses of action.<sup>17</sup> The practical judgment of an adviser, though typically carrying weight with the person advised, leaves him free to do what he thinks best. Advisers do not command those they counsel or even act for them. What they do may nonetheless seem problematic for philosophers as such. Advisers typically go beyond what philosophers do when they teach. Advice seems to presuppose *practical* knowledge, skill, or judgment for which philosophy as such cannot vouch. What can? The obvious answer is that the philosopher in question must have regularly given good advice in the past (“good” here meaning satisfying whatever interest the advisee sought to serve when she sought advice or, at least, whatever interest she should have sought to serve). But there is a problem with this obvious answer. It presupposes that the philosopher has given advice before success could vouch for it. What could vouch for an adviser’s expertise before the success of past advice could do that? We must, it seems, look for less obvious ways to evaluate the advice, for example, by the adviser’s success in analogous parts of his own life, by the number of alternatives he considered, by the sophistication of the reasons he gave in support of what he recommended, or by the self-evident good sense of the advice itself.<sup>18</sup>

That philosophers can give practical advice seems obvious. It is one of the things they seem to do when, for example, they serve on a government commission. That the advice of philosophers is *often* good may also seem obvious. But that is not the question. The question now is whether mere status as a philosopher or expert in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy entitles one to any special authority as adviser. I think not. We seem to lack

14 Compare Bruce D. Weinstein, “The Possibility of Ethical Expertise”, *Theoretical Medicine* 15 (1994): 61-75.

15 Ruth Chatham, “What is ‘Applied’ in Applied Ethics?” *Journal of Applied Ethics and Philosophy* 1 (2009): 1-7.

16 Shunzo Majima reminded me that there are also people called “counselors” who merely listen. I ignore such counselors here for at least three reasons: 1) because they are more accurately described as “listeners”, “sounding boards”, or the like, since they do not offer counsel; 2) because what they do is *not* what philosophers typically do; and 3) because, if just listening were what philosophers sometimes did, such “counseling” would be even less problematic than the Socratic questioning I have in mind, since (almost) anybody can listen.

17 From Joe Hill’s perspective (that of a non-believer), a preacher is a kind of adviser, typically one whose advice is unsought—and unwelcome (a possibility Peter Singer seems to have missed); but, from the perspective of someone belonging to the same religious tradition, a preacher can be a resource, reporting what the tradition, properly interpreted, would have to say on a practical question under discussion.

18 The self-evidence I have in mind is, I think, unobjectionable. For two examples (the commode and the air conditioner), see Arthur L. Caplan, *If I were a rich man could I buy a pancreas? And other essays on the ethics of health care* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992), p. 4 (though these are, I think, both technically examples of counseling rather than advising, their self-evident good sense is plain enough).

evidence that experts in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy in particular, much less experts in philosophy in general, are, as such, good advisers on questions of moral practice. Philosophy as such trains for understanding, not for advising.<sup>19</sup>

**4. Decision-maker.** Decision-makers answer the practical question before them with an action, not just with information, counsel, or even advice. The decision-makers we are interested in here have power over others; they can command others, as military officers do, or at least act for others, as a surgeon does during an operation. Insofar as decision-makers are also philosophers, they are the equivalent (more or less) of Plato's philosopher-kings. Among recent notable examples of philosopher-kings is Kiyokazu Washida who, after many years in clinical philosophy and ethics, served as President of Osaka University, 2007-2011.<sup>20</sup> I do not know what part philosophy-derived knowledge, skill, or judgment had in his success as a decision-maker. What I do know is that no country in the world draws many decision-makers from the ranks of philosophers, not even from the ranks of experts in ethics-as-a-field-philosophy. What is true now seems to have been true for all of recorded history. I now want to consider why that should be.

## Should

Having worked out what the relation of applied ethics to practice *can* be, we may now return to our original question, that is, what the relation of applied ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy to practice *should* be. Unfortunately, "should" is as ambiguous as the two other terms of that question. There are at least four senses relevant here: the "should" of expectation ("That scratch should hurt"); the "should" of skill ("Here's how you should show an argument to be valid"); the "should" of prudence ("If you want happiness, you should aim for it"); and the "should" of morality ("You should save that drowning child").<sup>21</sup> Let us consider these four ways of interpreting our original question—in that order.

Aristotle is supposed to have written a work, now mostly lost, *On Kingship*, in which he criticized Plato for advocating philosopher-kings:

it [is] not merely unnecessary for a king to be a philosopher, but even a distinct disadvantage. What a king should do [is] listen to and take the advice of true philosophers. In doing so he would enrich his reign with good deeds and not merely with fine words.<sup>22</sup>

Aristotle seems to have thought that philosophers—or, at least, "true philosophers"—should be mere academics, limited to "fine words". They should not, as such, expect to perform "good deeds" (beyond the good deeds we call "fine words"). They certainly should not rule. A number of other philosophers since have said much the same.<sup>23</sup>

19 Insofar as "ethicists" are taught to advise, not just understand, they are being trained in a discipline other than philosophy. We may then expect the future of applied ethics to include the separation of ethicists from philosophers, much as the past century or so saw the separation of psychologists and linguists from philosophers.

20 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiyokazu\\_Washida](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiyokazu_Washida) (accessed June 11, 2016). I owe this example to Shunzo Majima who also informed me of another Japanese "philosopher-king": Hisatake Kato, a Hegelian and Professor of Ethics at Kyoto University, who introduced applied ethics in Japan, before becoming President of Tottori University of the Environment. There are a few living examples in America as well, though none quite so good. The best is Amy Gutmann who, along with many respected publications in ethics-as-a-field-philosophy, has successfully served as President of the University of Pennsylvania since 2004. Though my best example, she is not a particularly good one. All her degrees are in political science, not philosophy, as are all her academic appointments. If she is a philosopher (rather than a political theorist), she is one only because philosophers have adopted her. Miles Brand, President of Indiana University, 1994-2002, would, for our purposes, be a better example of a recent philosopher-king—except that his work was in metaphysics and epistemology, not ethics.

21 Among other senses of "should", two deserve at least a mention here: the "should" of law (what, according to law, one should do) and the "should" of sociability (what, according to society, one should do). I shall say no more of these two senses of "should" here because our question does not seem to concern either what the law requires of us or what society asks of us. I would like to thank Ryo Chonabayashi for reminding me of these senses.

22 Anton-Hermann Chroust, "Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's 'Philosopher King'", *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 111 (1968): 16-22.

23 Marx may seem an exception because his *Theses on Feuerbach* includes the famous XI: "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it". I am, however, skeptical about the claim that Marx is an exception. After all, Marx did not say that changing the world is the point *for philosophers*. Perhaps it is only the point for people in general. Marx might also have added that philosophers, as such, can change the world by helping others to see it in new ways, for example, by helping them see how changing the world for the better is possible. That was in fact something Marx attempted.

Here, for example, is Kant on that subject:

That kings should philosophize or philosophers become kings is not to be expected. Nor is it to be wished, since the possession of power inevitably corrupts the untrammelled judgment of reason. But kings... should not suffer the class of philosophers to disappear or to be silent, but should let them speak openly. This is indispensable to the enlightenment of the business of government...<sup>24</sup>

The argument justifying the separation of philosophy and kingship seems clear enough: The philosopher as such offers the “untrammelled judgment of reason”, a product of the attempt to understand a practical question uncorrupted by the possession of power. Such understanding can enlighten the business of government. In contrast, the king (that is, anyone tasked with making decisions for others) must exercise practical wisdom, a judgment “the possession of power” necessarily influences—and, in a sense, “corrupts”, that is, mixes with impurities, the accidents of practice. What distinguishes philosopher from king is, then, not a mere difference but a fundamental opposition. The philosopher should keep a certain distance from practice, enough to keep his reason “untrammelled”.<sup>25</sup> Because the king must be fully involved in practice, taking all relevant considerations into account when he acts, he must give up philosophic distance, the clarity of theory, for the useful compromises of practice. The king who is his own philosopher has a fool for a sovereign.<sup>26</sup>

This is, it seems, a plausible claim, though empirical and itself deserving a paper. But, if we assume its truth, we have an answer to the question, “How applied should applied ethics be?”—where the “should” is the “should” of expectation. We should expect experts in applied ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy, being philosophers, to serve as resources or counselors on moral questions because philosophy, including teaching philosophy, prepares them for that. We should also expect them to serve as advisers now and then, that is, when—owing

24 Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, Second Supplement, “Secret Article for Perpetual Peace” (The Library of Liberal Arts, 1957), p. 34.

25 Compare Mike W. Martin, “Professional Distance”, *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 11 (1997): 39-50. Note that the “distance” I emphasize is not (primarily) psychological but organizational, the avoidance of certain situations rather than a “hardening of the heart” that Martin emphasizes.

26 This is, of course, an adaptation of the old legal saying, “The lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client.” The saying makes the equivalent point about “professional distance” in law that I am making about the distance a philosopher needs to give good advice.

to other experience—they can successfully combine philosophical understanding with practical judgment of the appropriate sort. What we should not expect is that philosophers *as such* should be decision-makers for others (that is, command or otherwise act for them). We should not expect even those who are good at giving advice (“true philosophers”) to be the same people as those who are good at choosing which advice to act on (“kings”).

We also have an answer to our original question where the “should” is the “should” of skill or prudence. An adviser who is a philosopher should be careful to keep his distance from decision, for example, preferring to advise in secret or as part of a committee rather than in public or as an individual. As much as possible, a skilled philosopher-adviser will avoid having “his own skin in the game”. A decision-maker should equally keep her distance from the process out of which advice emerges. A prudent decision-maker will, for example, avoid “incentivizing” a philosopher-adviser in a certain direction. Since it is prudent for those who seek advice to seek it from those most likely to give the best advice, the prudent decision-maker will, all else equal, seek among philosophers those advisers who keep a reasonable distance from the consequences of their advice. So, for example, the prudent decision-maker will not, all else equal, take advice from an philosopher who would benefit personally from recommending one course of action rather than another. It therefore seems prudent for philosophers to avoid becoming “kings”—or, at least, to find others to advise them when they do. Even the wisest decision-maker needs advisers whose judgment is independent of the biases that responsibility for decision imposes or at least risks.<sup>27</sup> There is much to be said for the much-maligned “ivory tower”.

Which brings us to the moral interpretation of our original question. Clearly, it is morally wrong to use the claim of expertise in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy to justify making decisions for others. The very credential supposedly justifying the philosopher-king making such decisions (his status as philosopher) vanishes as soon as he undertakes to make such decisions. To justify making decisions for others by appeal to one’s status as a philosopher is to offer no justification at all. To exercise power over others without a good justification is, all else equal, morally wrong.

27 This concern about independent judgment suggests a close connection between what I have said about why philosophers should keep a certain distance from decisions on which they advise and the more general discussion of why advisers (and decision-makers) should avoid conflicts of interest. For more, see Michael Davis, “Conflict of Interest”, *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, ed. Ruth Chadwick (Academic: San Diego, 1997), 589-595.

Is it also morally wrong to justify *advising* a decision-maker based even in part on a claim of expertise in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy? The answer to that question seems to be: it depends on how close the adviser is to the decision. If the philosopher maintains enough distance from the decision on which she advises, she may be morally justified in citing her expertise in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy as part (but only part) of her credentials for serving as an adviser. If, however, she is too close to the decision on which she is advising, she should not cite (or otherwise rely on) her expertise in ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy. For example, a philosopher who knows in advance that her advice will be taken should not advise—or, at least, should point out that she cannot claim to be acting as a philosopher. She is, in effect, the decision-maker; she is therefore too close to the decision to claim the authority of philosophy. How close is too close is, of course, contingent on circumstances.

## Conclusion

Insofar as we think of ethics as a *field* of philosophy, ethics *cannot* be applied to ordinary practice; philosophy as such is never practical. Within philosophy, applied ethics is merely a field of philosophy close to ordinary practice—an attempt to understand the reasonableness of a certain part of that practice, the application of morality to particular decisions. What brings applied ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy close to practice is its focus on clarification of terms used in moral practice, analysis of arguments used in moral practice, and systemization of those arguments. Ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy can make sense of moral practice without affecting it.

Ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy can affect moral practice only through the medium of experts in the field. A philosopher who is expert in applied ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy may serve as a resource, counselor, or adviser on practical questions.<sup>28</sup> Ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy enters practice only when those seeking resources, counsel, or advice apply to practice what philosophers offer them. What philosophers should *not* do, while claiming the authority of philosophy, is command others, act for them, or advise them in circumstances in which they are reasonably sure that the advice will be taken. A philosopher can, of course, become a successful decision-maker (as Professor Washida did). What philosophers cannot do, while

making those decisions, is rightfully claim the authority of philosophy for those decisions. Ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy should not be applied in that way. Much of the discussion of the role experts in philosophy should have in practice rests on a mistake. Neither philosophy as such nor ethics-as-a-field-of-philosophy gives an expert the moral or epistemic authority to tell people what to do all things considered.<sup>29</sup>

28 Philosophers outside the field of ethics may also serve as advisers on moral practice—but, all else equal, are not going to be as expert. Of course, much depends on personality, experience, chemistry with advisee, and so on, considerations we may ignore here.

29 For example, Gesang, p. 153, argued that because moral philosophers are expert in moral philosophy, “the doctors and the lawyers of the council [should] dispense with their moral judgements because the [philosophers] see it differently and thus reveal them to be mistaken”. Philosophers with that much authority would seem to be too much like decision-makers for their advice to deserve the authority of philosophy. It is a mistake to understand philosophic expertise that way.