



## Review Article

### Review of Robin Attfield, *Applied Ethics: An Introduction* (Polity: Cambridge, UK, 2022, and Hoboken, NJ, 2023)

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**Abstract:** This review provides a chapter-by-chapter outline and critical commentary of Robin Attfield's *Applied Ethics: An Introduction*, published by Polity. Attfield's voice as a highly experienced teacher, as well as an expert in applied ethics, comes through crystal clear in this important and insightful book, guiding students and teachers through the myriad of ethical arguments in central topics in applied ethics, whilst encouraging the depth of thought that students need to become ethicists in their own right. The result of all this is a book that will undoubtedly serve as a vital resource for anyone interested in studying ethics in practice. Indeed, the style of writing that Attfield is well-known for is epitomised in this book, making it a 'go to' text or the first port of call for teachers and students of ethics alike.

**Key Word:** Robin Attfield, philosophy, applied ethics

**Introduction:** In a world of anthropogenic crisis, this book provides clear, and coherent ethical guidance, informed by the key issues at stake. In the light of the obligations of key players, most notably national and international governmental leaders (in relation to, for example, SDGs)<sup>1</sup>, this book will be one that could provide them with the tools of analysis needed for an ethical consideration of urgent issues. Whilst it is impossible to do justice to the detail yet clarity of all the arguments presented in this book, what follows is an overview, commentary, and analysis of

some of the main concepts, arguments, and areas of debate.

**Methodology:** This article provides a critical review of the above-mentioned book, chapters 1-10. While Chapter 1 outlines some of the history of applied ethics, readers could turn firstly to Chapter 2 on the theories of ethics, or to Chapter 3 or one of its following chapters on specific areas of applied ethics. This is because understanding and reflection on ethics need not move from theory to applied issues; understanding can and does often

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travel from reflection on specific fields of ethics to theory itself, as noted in Chapter 10.

**Discussion:** Attfield's approach throughout the book is one of theory always informed by an in-depth understanding of ethics in practice. This points to his version of consequentialism<sup>2</sup>, which is practice-based, allowing for a consideration of consequences in relation to the specifics of the cases in question, but also for rules, adherence to which promote good social practices overall.

Chapter 1, amongst other things, introduces the reader to philosophy as it has been applied to practical issues from the time of Ancient Greece to the present day. That said, as a distinct sub-discipline of philosophical study, applied ethics is a relatively recent branch of study. Of particular interest in this chapter is its discussion of the supposed naturalistic fallacy as one that was challenged by William Frankena<sup>3</sup>; a challenge that, along with the writings of other philosophers, as well as the Vietnam War, a growing consciousness of environmental problems, and a need for professional codes of conduct, led to an increasing recognition of the importance of ethics in many areas of conduct<sup>2</sup>.

The chapters include the following topics: obligations to future humans and other future creatures (Chapter 3), obligations towards nonhumans (Chapter 4), obligations in the field of medicine (Chapter 4), issues of development and population (Chapter 5), the environment and climate change (Chapter 5), punishment and backwards looking obligations (Chapter 8), warfare and peace (Chapter 9), and theory itself (Chapter 10).

While Chapter 10 returns to theory, Chapter 2 introduces it, as well as some of the main concepts of normative ethics, including that of non-derivative value and moral standing, with the latter concept being discussed in relation to theories about the extent of the sphere of morality, as well as how far in space and time our obligations extend – themes that will be reserved for later chapters and which are discussed in more detail in some of Attfield's other books, such as *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics*<sup>4</sup>.

It is worth noting here that the latter also discusses related concepts (such as free will) and, for example, the language of 'ought' and

'should', which fit perfectly with the current book being reviewed. Readers could consult *Ethics: An Overview*<sup>5</sup> for further reading, particularly, on the history of ideas in relation to ethics, and *Value, Obligation, and Meta-Ethics*<sup>4</sup> for further details on the philosophical concepts and arguments at stake.)

The reviewer was pleased to see that the distinction between having value and being valued is discussed (which ties in with Attfield's discussion of the distinction between perspectival anthropocentrism and normative anthropocentrism in *Ethics: An Overview*)<sup>5</sup>, as well as key arguments regarding intrinsic value in relation to reasons for action<sup>2</sup>. Further, the main moral theories are outlined and evaluated (deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, and rights-based and contractual theories), with moral agents being claimed to be responsible not just for the intended consequences of their actions, but also foreseeable ones.

Arguments pertaining to each of the theories are considered, including, but not limited to, those of Onora O'Neill<sup>6</sup> (who holds a type of Kantian stance in relation to poverty and development), the deontological position of W. D. Ross<sup>7</sup> that focuses on intentions, and John Rawls'<sup>8</sup> contractualist theory and its critiques.

In relation to rights-based stances, Attfield well highlights the problems involved in making decisions about moral conduct when rights conflict, explaining that appeals to reasons (as bases for actions beyond rights) is often needed in such cases, indicating that the ground for ethical judgment here lies not in rights per se, but some other starting point. Indeed, consequentialist considerations are often appealed to in the light of such conflicts; that is, appealed to as reasons for upholding one right over another<sup>2</sup>.

Chapter 3, on future-related concerns, presents a clear evaluation of arguments regarding 'discounting' of the interests of future people, a common approach within current economics. Suffice to say here, Attfield's conclusion is that responsibilities are not limited to generations close in time to the present one. The examples of the current climate crisis and of, for example, the storage of radioactive waste, clearly show that what we do in the present can negatively impact not just humans in the distant future, but future

nonhumans too, as well as all life. As such, Attfield argues that our definition of 'future generations' should cover foreseeable impacts; 'all the generations that we can foreseeably affect'<sup>2</sup>, with such impacts extending to other than human life.

The precautionary principle is drawn on here<sup>2</sup> to shed light on the problem arising when people claim that we are only responsible for certain impacts of our actions. Besides, whether or not we know for certain the specific interests of future humans, they will have basic interests comparable to those of present ones, including the need to live in a habitable environment and the need to breathe oxygenated air, as will nonhuman creatures. Thus mitigation of the impacts of climate change is urgently needed, whether or not we can be scientifically certain of our impacts, as Attfield plausibly argues.

Of particular interest in this chapter is the discussion of conflicts between the needs of present creatures and future ones, with such conflicts sometimes being used to suggest that we should focus on the creatures that exist now (for many of their needs are not being met, of course). Attfield well elucidates the mistaken assumption behind such a claim; that assumption being that there is such a conflict. Surely, as Attfield argues, alleviating the future suffering of humans means, for example, taking measures to alleviate suffering in the present – indeed, addressing poverty or the lack of access to clean water in the future means tackling these issues in the here and now. As Attfield claims, there is 'continuity between meeting the interests of the present and those of the future'<sup>2</sup>.

Chapter 4 explores ethical issues arising from our interactions with nonhumans, or inter-species ethics. The main arguments in the animal ethics literature are evaluated, including the utilitarian argument of Peter Singer<sup>9</sup> and the rights-based argument of Tom Regan<sup>10</sup>. The former argues against speciesism via its analogy with racism and sexism, as well as on a utilitarian basis for the applicability of the principle of equal consideration of interests to animals; the latter presents an argument against animal exploitation based on the claim that many nonhuman creatures have inherent value and are subjects of a life. That said, as Attfield notes, Regan restricts moral significance to

those creatures who are self-conscious, most notably mammals over a certain age, excluding birds and invertebrates. Similarly Singer considers self-conscious creatures to have a morally significant interest in continued existence; an interest that he believes non self-conscious, sentient creatures do not have<sup>2</sup>.

While Attfield recognises that 'greater capacities give rise to greater interests', he also claims that 'like interests should be treated alike... whether the being in question is a mammal or not'<sup>2</sup>. As such Attfield advocates Singer's extension of equality to nonhuman creatures, although he would, unlike Singer, extend such a principle to all living things not just sentient ones, and would recognise value beyond that of the preference-utilitarianism of Singer.

Other positions discussed include that of Lori Gruen<sup>21</sup> who plausibly claims that Regan's view makes it difficult to make judgments about conflicts of interests, for beings that have inherent value (on Regan's view) have it equally – none have it more or less than others<sup>2</sup>. Attfield also refers to the work of Midgley<sup>12</sup> who usefully recognises that the capacities of different creatures across species are wide ranging, pointing to a more varied range of interests and preferences than Singer's preference-based utilitarian sentientism allows for<sup>2</sup>. As Attfield claims, these interests relate to capacities beyond the ability to feel pain and pleasure. And if we consider the capacities of not just sentient creatures but all living things, as Attfield does, this range of interests becomes wider still. This is something that sentientist stances fail to account for.

Moral extensionism is also discussed as a critique against the argument from marginal cases<sup>2</sup>, whilst other discussions concern Christine Korsgaard's Kantian approach<sup>13</sup>, Rosalind Hursthouse's virtue ethics<sup>14</sup>, and Martha Nussbaum's capacities-based animal ethics<sup>15</sup>. In relation to the latter, Attfield rightly commends its recognition of the importance of flourishing and interspecies justice, yet notes that it discounts nonhuman interests in flourishing where they clash with human ones<sup>2</sup>. Further, David Clough's pluralistic stance is praised for its 'refreshing inclusiveness'<sup>16</sup>.

There are as a range of other interesting themes discussed, including genetic engineering, desensitisation and compartmentalisation in relation to animal suffering, and the implications of the cognitive capacities of animals.

However, the chapter as a whole would benefit from an in-depth discussion of one of the key issues in the animal ethics debates; the link between factory farming, environmental degradation, and human health. Factory farming not only has negative impacts on the world's fresh water resources<sup>17</sup>, but also requires vast amounts of land to grow crops to feed the huge numbers of animals reared (mainly to meet the high demand for meat in the Western world). Using land and water in this way could be considered unjust, given that a large proportion the world's population is hungry and has an inadequate access to clean water. (These issues could be emphasised in chapter 7, too, in relation to the section on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>2</sup>.

While the ethics of different kinds of farming are presented<sup>2</sup>, it should be noted that even accepting that 'Free-range sheep-farming is a sustainable practice'<sup>2</sup>, free-ranging sheep are subject to similar, if not the same, transportation conditions as non-free-ranging animals and often end up at the same slaughter-houses. Yet current slaughter methods and transport conditions continue to cause all farmed animals much suffering, and as such, there is a need to address the ethics of this as part of the ethics of farming more generally (whether free-range or intensive). Relatedly, a discussion of the ethics of veganism and in-vitro meat production would enhance the chapter.

In addition, whilst the ethics of animal experimentation is discussed in the context of compartmentalisation, the ethics of the practice itself deserves close consideration, with particular recognition of the importance of the principle of the three Rs (replacement, reduction and refinement), as well as the innovative nonhuman methods of testing (such as XCellR8: see Animal Aid) now available and the funding and regulatory issues involved in the slow uptake of such methods<sup>18</sup>.

Chapter 5 presents the key arguments and principles in biomedical ethics. Arguments are applied to examples so that students can

contextualise the debates<sup>2</sup>. As with the other chapters, the introduction to chapter 5 begins with a short section that contextualises the debates within their historical context.

Following this, the arguments of key contributors are presented, with a discussion of the topics of professional ethics, abortion and euthanasia, utilising the work of Judith Jarvis Thompson<sup>19</sup>, Peter Singer<sup>20</sup>, Richard Hare<sup>21</sup>, Donald Marquis<sup>22</sup>, and Tom Beauchamp and James Childress<sup>23</sup> (the latter in association with their principle-based approach). Discussion of these topics involves the problem of conflicting principles, such as those of autonomy and beneficence.

Attfield draws the students' attention to the significance of how principles are interpreted in the light of a consideration of what counts as an autonomous decision and which actions (and inactions) should be judged to be ethical in certain cases: 'decisions need not only be informed and voluntary, but count as autonomous only if the person concerned is competent to make decisions, with their values intact. The upshot is that a more sophisticated 'reflective equilibrium' is reached between judgments about cases and how principles are formulated'<sup>2</sup>. Following this claim, a case that throws it into doubt is then presented and reflected upon, with the practical issues being used (as throughout the book) to inform theory<sup>2</sup>.

Of particular interest in this chapter is its section on Covid-19 with respect to issues of justice<sup>2</sup>. The national and international response to Covid-19 illustrates how easily principles can conflict in relation to individual and community interests. But issues of justice, as Attfield says, were even more pronounced in tropical countries where medical resources were less than adequate. Attfield here, in discussion of issues of justice, stresses the need to provide generic medicines to such countries, noting that the distribution of the Covid-19 vaccine was an issue raised on an international level by the WHO<sup>24</sup>.

Attfield presents such an issue as one of justice, and one that needs an international response. Drawing on the work of Thomas Heyd<sup>24</sup>, Attfield elucidates the links between the climate crisis and biomedical ethics, with the former having huge impacts on health and exacerbating injustices across the globe<sup>2</sup>.

Indeed, as Attfield argues, 'the climate crisis is... affecting both the health and well-being of billions of people and other organisms, and the cumulative nature of the problem gives it prospects of generating catastrophes on an even greater scale than the pandemic'<sup>2</sup>.

The arguments in chapter 5 link well with the subsequent chapter on development and population ethics. Issues discussed in this chapter included those of poverty and systemic injustice (drawing on the work of, for example, Nussbaum<sup>15</sup>, David Crocker<sup>25</sup>, Vandana Shiva<sup>26</sup>, and Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen<sup>27</sup>), relating such issues to those of third world debt, with Attfield highlighting how debt cancellations can alleviate poverty and other evils. Whilst stressing the need for new, institutionalised processes to reassess levels of repayment Attfield recognises 'a serious legacy of problems of international indebtedness, likely to drive poor countries back into renewed poverty, and to block their development'<sup>2</sup>.

Attfield explains why certain notions of development should be criticised and avoided, whilst arguing that development as a process that moves away from certain evils, such as hunger, poverty and lack of clean drinking water, is to be welcomed<sup>2</sup>. It can, as Attfield claims, involve a plurality of values<sup>2</sup> and, like Shiva, he stresses the need for it to be voluntary, 'involving some degree of autonomy and self-help on the part of the society in question, and some enhancement of social justice'<sup>2</sup>.

Other issues discussed in this chapter include policies of energy poverty, with Attfield arguing that these should be integrated ones, and should include those aiming to tackle poverty, inadequate healthcare and education, for example<sup>2</sup>. Indigenous local knowledge is called for to find solutions to energy poverty, with a recognition of a need for the implementation of renewable resources that, at the same time as addressing energy poverty, tackle health problems associated with particular regions. Localised examples are drawn upon to show the importance of such knowledge in finding sustainable solutions, whilst accepting, as Paul Ekins does, that 'international restructuring' is also required<sup>28</sup>, as well as large scale investment.

Population growth is also discussed but, as Attfield claims, population growth, in and of itself, is not what causes ecological problems. Attfield's wealth of knowledge and understanding is evident here, as elsewhere, showing this kind of growth to be the result of poverty, and as such he argues that tackling poverty via integrated policies is what is needed to meet obligations to current and future people.

The importance of the history of colonial rule and those countries impacted by slavery is also of key focus. Attfield stresses that such countries, as well as the current descendants of slavery, are likely (in the present) to still bear the burden of this history, drawing conclusions about moral responsibilities ensuing for colonizing countries, particularly in relation to sustainable development policies<sup>2</sup>.

Sustainable development is a theme of chapter 7 (on environment and climate ethics), too. The foundations of this field of ethics are outlined, as are the central normative stances of environment ethics (anthropocentrism, sentientism, biocentrism and ecocentrism) and the arguments of respective key scholars. One of the sections in this chapter is 'Sustainability and human interests', which evaluates some of the anthropocentric stances in the literature, including those of Bryan Norton<sup>29</sup> and John O'Neill<sup>30</sup>; an evaluation which highlights the limits of anthropocentrism as an environmental ethic. As Attfield well argues, there are things that are of value that are beyond human interests. Interesting thought experiments are utilised to locate such value<sup>2</sup>.

This section is followed by one on climate ethics, the risks of proposals to mitigate global warming, and the precautionary principle. Attfield argues for the 'need for effective international agreement to mitigate climate change'<sup>2</sup>, as well as for adaptation policies and practices. Some of the work of the contributors of *Climate Change Ethics and the Nonhuman World*<sup>31</sup> is discussed; these contributors argue for local and international actions, as well as the need to consider the interests of nonhuman creatures and of future humans and nonhumans. Integrated policies of sustainable development are, again, defended<sup>3</sup>, highlighting the practical changes needed in relation to implementation. As always, at the forefront of Attfield's arguments are the basic needs of vulnerable humans and

nonhumans, and those most affected by climate change, as well as future generations.

A thought-provoking section on biodiversity and preservation is also included in this chapter. As throughout the book, Attfeld is highly knowledgeable about current agreements and policies with regard to environment issues, as well as of promises made at an international level<sup>2</sup>, and the ethical implications of these with regard to issues of international cooperation and current obligations.

In addition, Attfeld clearly shows why those humans fleeing from areas that are no longer habitable should be recognised by the international community as environmental refugees. But, as Attfeld argues, it is not just humans that are suffering from dwindling habitats; other animals too continue to the threatened, despite CITIE's recognition of 'species as an irreplaceable part of vital natural ecosystems'<sup>2</sup>.

Where areas of territory have become severely degraded due to environmental damage and past emissions, there is a strong case for the peoples of those areas to be compensated by those whose historical emissions are responsible for such environmental degradation. The chapter finishes with an interesting assessment of so-called 'debt for nature swaps', conceptions of growth (and degrowth) in relation to their compatibility with sustainable development, and a short discussion of astrobiology.

The final applied ethics chapters are on punishment (including capital punishment) and recompense (chapter 8), and the ethics of war and peace (chapter 9). The former covers theories of punishment, including retributivism and deterrence, evaluating charges against certain supposed consequentialist implications levied at such theories. For example, the deterrence approach has been charged with punishment of the innocent in the name of the wider social good of deterrence, yet Attfeld effectively shows that this, in fact, would be detrimental to social cohesion, and so would not be permitted on consequentialist grounds<sup>2</sup>.

He also effectively argues against other criticisms of consequentialism in relation to deterrence, such as claims that this moral theory, applied to deterrence, could call for disproportionate punishments. As Attfeld

claims, consequentialist theorists need not support theories of deterrence at all, and even when they do, are obliged to hold that forms of deterrence should involve 'the least amount of suffering compatible'<sup>2</sup> with deterrence.

The chapter, overall, focuses on backwards looking responsibilities, discussing the themes of recompense, reparations for slavery, and clashes of obligations, with backwards looking and present standpoints being claimed to be central considerations for any plausible theory of social justice. In respect of reparations for slavery, taking into account the present reference point would recognise that appeals to a lack of direct culpability are not a sufficient reason for supposing a lack of obligations in this regard<sup>2</sup>.

The ethics of capital punishment is also discussed in Chapter 8, including its unusual cruelty as a punishment. A dialogue between Louis P. Pojman and Jeffrey Reiman is presented and evaluated<sup>32</sup>, with the death penalty being recognised by Attfeld as a form of punishment that certain humans are more vulnerable to than others due to inherent biases in legal systems. Attfeld argues that those who support the claim that such a penalty acts as deterrence need to show that it is, in fact, effective in a way that other forms of punishment are not. There is not enough space here to provide an overview of the detail of the arguments presented in this section. Suffice it to say that it concludes that, whether or not one considers capital punishment to be inhumane, it cannot be justified<sup>2</sup>.

The penultimate chapter of the book (Chapter 9) presents a detailed discussion of the ethics of war and peace, including pacifism, semi-pacifism, just war theory, nuclear war, civil and international war, and the environmental impacts of war. In relation to pacifism, Attfeld raises the issue of our negative responsibilities for what we fail to do; omissions that could lead to more violence than war in some circumstances. This suggests that some wars could be justified, even if most are not<sup>2</sup>.

The chapter outlines each of the supposed conditions historically considered to be necessary for war to be justified ('*jus ad bellum*')<sup>2</sup>, and each of the conditions thought necessary for right conduct in war ('*jus in bello*')<sup>2</sup>. Jonathan Parry's analysis of these conditions is presented<sup>33</sup>, and, utilising Charles

Beitz's arguments<sup>34</sup>, extensions to the just war doctrine are considered, such as that of right intention. In addition, Attfield argues for some degree of responsibility to be assigned to combatants, more perhaps than is in fact often allowed in the armed forces. This requirement is plausible given that an appeal to 'following orders' is considered to be an insufficient justification for committing acts of genocide and other atrocities, as post-World War II war-crimes trials have shown<sup>2</sup>.

That said, it remains open to question what could be done to foster greater responsibility, given the culture of the armed-forces and that (in particular) soldiers do a job in which they carry out actions in extremely difficult situations (in which following orders has a significant role to play). It would have been beneficial, then, if this chapter had addressed how the professional ethics of the armed forces could best nurture a balance between 'carrying out orders' and individual responsibility.

Noncombatant immunity is also discussed (as supported by, for example, Thomas Nagel<sup>35</sup>, and George Mavrodes)<sup>36</sup>. Of particular interest is the insightful discussion of the implication of war being an extreme event involving a great deal of stress and chaos. Indeed, such is the nature of war, that, as Henry Shue argues, it calls for general rules that are exceptionless in practice, for such rules are easier to follow under warfare conditions than rules that admit of exceptions and particularities<sup>2</sup>. As Attfield also claims, in the height of war, rules admitting of exemptions are likely to be very confusing when combatants need to make spur of the moment decisions under extreme stress.

Other topics in this chapter include nuclear war and nuclear deterrence. While, as Attfield claims, it should be recognised that 'there are no victors in any bilateral or multilateral nuclear war'<sup>2</sup>, nuclear deterrence has its own set of risks and yet could, as R.E. Hare and Carey Joynt<sup>37</sup> argue, sometimes prevent war. That said, there is an argument against such deterrence that involves an appeal to risks of escalation, as argued by Jeff McMahan<sup>38</sup>. Attfield himself presents a strong argument for gradual disarmament<sup>2</sup>.

The impacts of war on the environment are also considered. Attfield recognises, along with

Nigel Dower<sup>39</sup> and Stuart Parkinson<sup>40</sup>, that human security issues should prioritise issues of justice, such as alleviating poverty and mitigating climate change, 'while minimising the deployment and use of armed force'<sup>2</sup>. At least this much is also endorsed by the Earth Charter, as Attfield points out<sup>2</sup>.

Chapter 10, the final chapter, is well suited to encouraging students to adopt a reflective approach<sup>2</sup>. Students, in this chapter, are encouraged to become their own ethicist<sup>2</sup>, and are provided with practical guidance on how to do just that. Attfield presents key questions that students can ask themselves in relation to theory and practice, encouraging students to develop their own view, informed by the theories and arguments at stake, whilst providing assurance to students that they need not accept one or more of the theories presented; indeed, as Attfield claims, they are free to reject all theories<sup>2</sup>. This final chapter is even more student-focused than the others, with Attfield providing further clarity on how practical ethics 'moulds' our thoughts about theory. Certainly, with this book as a resource of knowledge and understanding, students can indeed each become their own ethicist.

**Conclusion:** In this book, Attfield clearly explains to students that they need not understand the theory as something that provides an immovable structure to which ethical problems are then applied: 'thinking about ethics often moulds our thinking about ethical theory; the direction of influence is not always from theory to applications, and often flows in the opposite direction'<sup>2</sup>. Attfield's arguments in this book present clear examples of this direction of understanding, with his extensive assessment and evaluation of the maze of arguments at stake always informed by real-world examples and cases.

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