

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw
Institute of Philosophy
Center for Ecology and Ecophilosophy

STUDIA ECOLOGIAE ET BIOETHICAE



21/4 (2023)

How to use Ethics. Review of *Applied Ethics. An Introduction*, by Robin Attfield

Jak stosować etykę. Recenzja książki autorstwa Robina Attfielda
pt. *Applied Ethics. An Introduction*

Andrzej Waleszczyński

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0426-3919> • a.waleszczyński@uksw.edu.pl

Received: 04 Oct, 2023; Revised: 02 Nov, 2023; Accepted: 03 Nov, 2023;

Pre-published: 03 Nov, 2023

Robin Attfield's *Applied Ethics* (2023) may of interest for philosophy students who are interested in ethics and look for introductory material on contemporary disputes in the area of morality. However, all those interested in the impact of moral valuation on the evaluation of changes taking place in the world around us should also be satisfied. When reaching for Attfield's latest publication, it is worth situating it in the broader context of the British philosopher's scholarly and educational output. In recent years, Attfield has become known as the author of, among others, *Ethics: An Overview* (2012) and *Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (2018). The latest book appears to expand on the issues raised in one of the chapters of *Ethics: An Overview*. In contrast, the seventh chapter of the reviewed publication represents the essence of *Environmental Ethics*. The positioning of *Applied Ethics* as part of the peculiar publishing cycle proposed by the author is a virtue in itself. On the one hand, the book autonomously presents the history of applied ethics while, on the other, it is inscribed in a longer and

multifaceted history of philosophical and humanistic-social debates. Those wishing to gain an insight into the wider context of ongoing debates have the option of consulting Attfield's other books, which are coherent in narrative, conceptual and problematic terms. Students of ethics who would like to brush up on their knowledge of ethics are encouraged to reach for *Ethics: An Overview* first, followed by *Applied Ethics*. All of these publications are aimed at English-speaking readers, but it is worth considering at least translating them into Polish, as there is a lack of such textbooks on our market.

From the perspective of academic didactics, *Applied Ethics* has several key strengths. Firstly, the author has a feel for the presentation of the topics covered and their scope. Consequently, the book can be qualified as an academic textbook and not just as a scholarly study of a specific topic. However, it is worth highlighting that publication, as it is stated in the subtitle, is an introduction to applied ethics. Secondly, the volume of the book (218 pages), the manner of the narrative and the language itself support the view that the textbook should

be favorably received by students. Thirdly, the problem questions included after each chapter allow for independent or group study of analyzed issues. They provide an interesting incentive to explore the topics in more depth.

The book consists of ten chapters. In the first ten pages of the first chapter, titled "The History and Revival from Applied Ethics", the author shows the importance of ethical thought at the turn of the century. He discusses the nature of the great theories and their impact on the evaluation of human action, as well as the relationship between theoretical and practical issues. He identifies periods in which problems in, for example, metaethics led the way, and presents the contemporary return to applied ethics and the search for specific practical problems.

In the second chapter, "Sketches of Some Ethical Theories", Attfield provides a concise and fair historical introduction paying more attention to modern and contemporary thinkers than to ancient and medieval ones and discusses, among other things, the moral law and the question of intrinsic values. He presents the assumptions of consequentialism, deontological theory, contract theory or virtue ethics. For Polish students, the textbook may lack reference to contemporary continuators of virtue ethics e.g., in the version of Alasdair MacIntyre or Michael Slote. Nor will one find reference to classical and contemporary Thomistic concepts. However, the publication is not aimed at the Polish market. What is puzzling, however, is the omission of the ethics of care derived from the feminist ethics stream. The ethics of care in medical context as regards the relationship between doctors or nurses and patients (Kobyliński 2020), is individually developed as nursing ethics in the field of applied ethics. The ethics of care is also applied in the field of education, where the relationship between teachers and students comes to the fore. The theoretical assumptions of this ethics, which has a very practical dimension, have been developed

for more than 30 years. It is therefore surprising that Attfield's book lacks any mention of it.

One of the chapters deserving attention is chapter three, "Inter-Generational Ethics". It is not just due to the topicality of the issue itself, but also to the way in which it is presented. One could even wish that Attfield would devote his next book exclusively to inter-generational ethics. In the first paragraphs, he presents the changing approaches in ethics to commitments to the future, or more precisely to future generations. Then, he explains the key concepts used in the debate. However, he does not take a clear position on his understanding of the term "future generations". This is probably related to the adopted methodology that he mentions in the last chapter. Nevertheless, it is worth considering who are those future generations that we are supposed to be responsible for. Are they our children, who in 20-30 years will be deciding on our world and who are already alive? Are they also the potential children of our children, but who are not yet here? Attfield points out that when talking about future generations, one is thinking primarily about the preferences of future generations. However, future interests are unpredictable. According to him, it is possible to take responsibility for several future generations. Although it is difficult to determine the extent of this responsibility, our impact on future generations, including those of other species, should not be underestimated. An interesting and timely addition to this thread is Attfield's take on the problem of global population growth. According to him, construction of human sense of security is based on the belief that children will live to adulthood. He therefore concludes that stabilization of the future population must take into account not only family planning, but also long-term security, improved health care and education.

In chapter four, titled "Inter-Species Ethics", the author takes up the issue of animal ethics, which becomes a pretext for confronting the attitude of contemporary

man towards the animal world. As one reads through the chapter, one can see that the topic is close to the author's heart, and he navigates it well. He discusses classical approaches to the topic represented by the views of Peter Singer, as well as the theory of rights of Tom Regan, whose views were disseminated in Poland by Dorota Probuca (Probuca 2015) who also presents a contemporary view of the issue taken up by referring to the views of, among others: Michael S. Fox, Raymond G. Frey, Martha Nussbaum and David Clough. An interesting elaboration of this thread is the subject of linguistic statements about animals. Attfield analyses how animals are currently spoken about. He also shows the problem of anthropomorphisation of animals from different perspectives, including ethical ones. This is an extremely topical subject, raised in Polish literature by, among others, Dominika Dzwonkowska who draws attention to it in her latest book (Dzwonkowska 2022: 36-45). Attfield, additionally, does not overlook the topic of veganism and at the same time, he does not hesitate to ask the question whether some animal killing can be justified. An important thread in this chapter is the attention paid to the role of feelings in the ethical dimension. It must be acknowledged that Attfield examines this strand exclusively from the perspective of animals. However, the mere attention to the role of feelings in ethical valuation is valuable for it shows that moral development and ethical decisions, also require emotional and affective development. Desensitisation to animal suffering leads to the loss of emotional sensitivity to, among other things, the situations and states in which animals find themselves. In a broader perspective, it helps to show the importance of moral sensitivity, which is not built solely on rules and principles. It is also interesting to see how Attfield tackles topical and yet specific issues troubling contemporary societies, among others in the fields of agriculture, fisheries or genetic engineering. An intriguing conclusion to this chapter is the paragraph

contrasting animal ethics with environmental ethics. The problems that arise in both areas do converge, but on the other hand, it is more valuable to see the differences that reveal themselves when they are juxtaposed. These concern the view of the role of suffering in ethics or the attitude towards protection of ecosystems.

In the fifth chapter titled "Biomedical Ethics", the history of the development of biomedical ethics is briefly described at the outset. From a Polish perspective, it may be interesting to refer not only to the Hippocratic Oath, but also to the Nuremberg Code, which is little known in the country on the Vistula. Attfield's use of excerpts from specific codes for his analyses allows him to show the reasons for a renewed interest in philosophical bioethics. The chapter also mentions other bioethical topics, such as abortion, infanticide or euthanasia. He analyses the already classic position of Judith Thompson in this field, but also presents a counterargument formulated by, among others, Donald Marquis or Mark Taylor Brown. One fresh perspective on biomedical issues is to confront them with issues of justice and, in particular, with the consequences of their social impact.

Chapter six, "Development Ethics and Population Ethics", addresses quite topical issues that call for a broader analysis of the changes taking place in the world, starting with reflection on development itself, which entails systemic transformations and requires ethical reflection, through minimizing the costs of development, such as hunger and poverty, among other energy-related issues and finally, by arriving to the idea of sustainable development and its implementation.

What is valuable about Attfield's work is that he goes beyond theoretical considerations repeatedly referring to legal documents implemented or enforced either internationally or in individual countries. In this case, he refers to the Millennium Development Goals, which have been replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals. Some

dissatisfaction may be felt due to the fact that in his analysis Attfield fails to distinguish specific social groups, such as children and women (Wilczek-Karczewska, Pawlus, and Waleszczyński 2020).

Chapter seven moves on to a discussion of environmental ethics and climate ethics. In addition to providing a historical outline and foundations of environmental ethics, the author examines here the issue of sustainability and human interests. It is worth noting that the category of interest is particularly important in discussions about development, climate and recognition of the interests of others (future generations, non-human animals, nature, including inanimate nature). However, the precautionary principle, which Attfield implements in climate debate, may be more practical and useful in such discussions. It is less well known in Poland and consequently sporadically raised, let alone applied in practice. In the following paragraphs, he addresses the loss of biodiversity and presents arguments for its protection and the concept of debt-for-nature swap. In discussing the latter theme, he refers to the example of Costa Rica and the analyses of Nicole Hassoun (Hassoun 2012). Attfield, moreover, does not shy away from unusual considerations, even in the field of astrobiology. For the Polish reader, these may seem rather exotic areas, but they certainly prompt wider ethical reflections. The chapter closes with the issues of migration, compensation and de-growth in the context of environmental ethics.

In the eighth chapter, the author takes us into the area of questions related to punishment, compensation and capital punishment. Attfield begins by analyzing the issues of debt and promises, which he relates to the past and then, provides an interesting introduction to the various positions on the meaning of punishment. He begins by asking whether punishment can at all be justified and then moves on to such questions as retaliation and deterrence. Attfield points here to historical events evincing the fact that justice can sometimes lead to injustice. The guided

narrative forces the reader to recurrently return to the question of the essence of punishment. Consequently, it is also indispensable to face and consider the question of reparations. The author touches on the African theme, especially related to reparations of slavery and murders by colonizers. Eastern Europe and the wrongs inflicted by the German Nazis and post-war reparations also feature in the analyses. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of the history of the death penalty and analyses of the possibilities of moral justification for the death penalty.

Chapter nine is devoted to the ethics of war and peace. As in the previous chapter, Attfield begins with a fundamental question – can war be justified? He presents a broad spectrum of positions, ranging from pacifist views to those allowing for the possibility of nuclear weapons. In presenting the position in which war could be justified, he refers to the views of Jonathan Parry (Parry 2020: 692). He summarizes the two traditional approaches referred to as *jus ad bellum* and *jus ad bello*. The issue of justifying warfare (Cebula and Płotka 2017; Cebula 2020), and above all the extent to which violence is used and scaled, is a very topical one. The conduct of warfare for the sake of humanitarian protection is a special case. Attfield does not, however, shy away from sensitive topics, including military action in Kosovo or Somalia. He also gives food for thought to questions of individual responsibility of those involved in such actions. In separate paragraphs, he analyses the nuclear issue and draws attention to historical uses of nuclear weapons and possible new nuclear conflicts in various areas of the globe. He also accentuates the important contemporary element of nuclear deterrence. The chapter closes with a brief analysis of the impact of military action on the environment.

In the final, tenth chapter, “Applied Ethics and Ethical Theory”, the British philosopher reflects on the relationship between applied ethics and ethical theory. The author

considers the extent of moral responsibility of subjects in action, and how moral norms change over time also looking at ethical theories in the context of their application in practice. The chapter concludes with a reflection on how each of us can become an ethicist for ourselves and make informed moral decisions. It is the final chapter that shows us the author's methodical intention. The reviewed book is not and is not intended to be an exposition of a particular ethical or philosophical perspective. We will not find unequivocal answers to the disputes that plague the modern world. Nor will we find suggestive proposals for the proper resolution of ethical disputes. Instead, it provides an interestingly composed foreshadowing of the story we ourselves will have to tell. Attfield attempts to provide us with tools which can enable us to formulate our own ethical theories (198–199). Does he succeed in doing so? The answer to this question will be complex and multi-threaded.

First of all, it is safe to say that *Applied Ethics* is a valuable position for the promotion of moral issues in the field of environmental ethics in the broadest sense. On the Polish publishing market, it would be difficult to find a book that discusses the undertaken issues so broadly. This is where the first difficulty arises. The discussion of a number of themes is cognitively attractive, especially if we take into account aptly chosen topics, examples and preliminary analyses. These all meet the requirements for a book that is intended to be an introduction to a specific topic. This is what Attfield's work is designed to serve, at least that is what the subtitle would suggest. However, the author has indicated another purpose in the last chapter. He hopes that the reader will begin to formulate his or her own ethical theories independently. For this, in my view, the book fails to prepare the readers. It provides a number of interesting deductions that may become an inspiration for formulating one's own positions in specific disputes (which in itself is valuable from a didactic perspective) or to replicate them

in various discussions. However, it does not provide any methodological tools for constructing one's own coherent ethical system. Nor does it present a comprehensive and unified theory that the author himself could propose or defend.

Marginalization of the category of virtue seems acceptable given the deflation of its importance in recent years, especially in the field of environmental ethics, although in Poland one can rather speak of its flourishing (Dzwonkowska 2021; Piekarski 2020). Attfield brings to the fore the category of responsibility, which has a rich tradition in ethics. However, he fails to provide a reliable basis enabling the reader to develop a method of resolving practical ethical disputes based on the category of responsibility. Parts of the book that refer to historical and theoretical questions give mostly a cross-cutting view of detailed issues. Even the category of responsibility itself seems to have a single shade, and in relation to specific situations we can only argue about its scope. One may ask the author whether his understanding of responsibility coincides with that of, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, whose views are also confronted with ecological issues and the natural world (Edelglass, Hatley, and Diehm 2012). Religious sources of responsibility will also have different meanings (Sadowski 2017). The question is not which way of understanding responsibility the reader will opt for, but how Attfield justifies his position. He seems to forget that, even in the field of applied ethics, besides pointing out specific resolutions, it is important to provide their sound justifications. This note of suggestive and perhaps somewhat biased, but more in-depth insight on Attfield's part into the problems of applied ethics is missing in this book.

Other important categories in the presented disputes are needs and interests. Here, too, the publication lacks precision or some basic distinctions to distinguish or differentiate the concepts used in psychology and economics from those used in ethics. When are we dealing with a sense

of need and when are we dealing with an actual need? If a seagull wants to eat (another) piece of bread, is that its real need? Of course not. So, should I feed it (even with food suitable for it) or leave it alone? These seemingly trivial questions do indeed impinge on practical considerations. It is a different matter whether we have to respond to the real needs of others, if they themselves are able to respond and meet them. Do we then have to take responsibility for them or rather serve them? This applies to nature as well as to various social groups. Do people in the so-called third world countries need interference from developed countries or should they respond more independently to their needs. Do countries and social groups have needs or only interests? Is the possession of nuclear weapons by such countries as Iran or Poland their need serving the purpose of increasing their deterrent capability or is it rather their interest. Can a particular specific interest be replaced by its equivalent? These questions posed in practical situations necessitate not only having a specific vision of the world, but also precisely defined categories and concepts that will allow one to become an ethicist in their own right. It is difficult to develop one's own ethical theories when one does not have precise philosophical tools.

In chapter three, Attfield takes up the topic of inter-generational ethics. He begins by defining what is meant by "future generations" (32–33) using a definition from the *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics*. He defines them as the children and grandchildren of our own families, communities or countries slightly expanding this definition to include other species and more than two or three generations. However, he ignores the fundamental question, namely, whether it is possible to be ethically responsible for something or someone who does not yet exist or exists only as a probability of some event. (This is more abstract than being responsible for a fetus developing in a woman's womb.) Is there any gradation between these future hypothetical others?

What will determine my choice between developing nuclear technology (including military technology) in my country and increasing the potential safety of "my" future generations or increasing the potential danger of radioactive contamination of the land for "my" and other future generations. Will the category of "my" future generations change with a change of residence and a move from Europe to southern Africa? It is difficult to find answers to these questions in Attfield's work. These seemingly trivial issues show how complex and challenging it is to navigate the meanders of applied ethics.

Attfield's book is a good introduction to applied ethics in the field of environmental ethics in its broadest sense. It provides an insight into a multitude of practical contemporary discussions and problems and can thus be recommended to those willing to broaden their cognitive horizons or those seeking research inspiration. The language of the book makes it a pleasant read, even as a popular science text but it fails to provide a basis to build one's own ethical theory or to find precise categories to resolve ethical disputes. This, however, does not seem to be its main purpose.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Attfield, Robin. 2012. *Ethics An Overview*. *Ethics An Overview*. London: Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350934245>.
- Attfield, Robin. 2018. *Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. *Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198797166.001.0001>.
- Attfield, Robin. 2023. *Applied Ethics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cebula, Adam. 2020. "Collective Complicity in War Crimes. Some Remarks on the Principle of Moral

- Equality of Soldiers." *Philosophia* 48 (4): 1313–32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-020-00208-3>.
- Cebula, Adam, and Magdalena Płotka. 2017. "Wprowadzenie: Teoria Wojny Sprawiedliwej – 600 Lat Po Wstąpieniu Pawła Włodkowica Na Soborze w Konstancji [Introduction: The Theory of Just War – 600 Years After Paweł Włodkowic's Accession at the Council of Constance]." *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* 53 (3): 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.21697/2017.53.3.00>.
- Dzwonkowska, Dominika. 2021. "Rola Narracji Filozoficznej w Etyce Cnót Środowiskowych [The Role of Philosophical Narrative in Environmental Virtue Ethics]." *Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae* 19 (2): 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.21697/seb.2021.19.2.01>.
- Dzwonkowska, Dominika. 2022. *Wprowadzenie do etyki środowiskowej [Introduction to environmental ethics]*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UKSW.
- Edelglass, William, James Hatley, and Christian Diehm, eds. 2012. *Facing Nature: Levinas and Environmental Thought*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Hassoun, Nicole. 2012. "The Problem of Debt-for-Nature Swaps from a Human Rights Perspective." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 29 (4): 359–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5930.2012.00573.x>.
- Kobyliński, Andrzej. 2020. "The Problem of the Conscience Clause of Healthcare Professionals in Italy in the Years 2017-2020." *Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae* 18 (3): 37–46. <https://doi.org/10.21697/seb.2020.18.3.05>.
- Parry, Jonathan. 2020. "War and Moral Consistency." In *Ethics in Practice: An Anthology*, edited by Hugh LaFollette, 692–703. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Piekarski, Michał. 2020. "Environmental Virtue Ethics and the Sources of Normativity." *Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae* 18 (3): 29–36. <https://doi.org/10.21697/seb.2020.18.3.04>.
- Probučka, Dorota. 2015. *Prawa Zwierząt [Animal rights]*. 2nd ed. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas.
- Sadowski, Ryszard F. 2017. "Chrześcijańska koncepcja odpowiedzialności za środowisko w świetle encykliki Laudato Si' [The Christian Concept of Responsibility for The Environment in The Light of Encyclical Laudato Si']." *Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae* 15 (1): 69–79. <https://doi.org/10.21697/seb.2017.1.08>.
- Wilczek-Karczewska, Magdalena, Małgorzata Pawlus, and Andrzej Waleszczyński. 2020. "Combating Legal and Cultural Forms of Discrimination against Women from the Point of View of Catholic Social Teaching." In *Sustainable Development Goals and the Catholic Church: Catholic Social Teaching and the UN's Agenda 2030*, edited by Katarzyna Cichos, Jarosław Sobkowiak, Ryszard Sadowski, Beata Zbarachewicz, Radosław Zenderowski, and Stanisław Dziekoński, 72–86. New York, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003053620-6>.