

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Robin Attfield, *Applied Ethics: An Introduction*****(Cambridge, Polity Press, 2023), pp. vi + 218.**Workineh Kelbessa 

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In this reflective and highly readable book, Robin Attfield explores the nature and status of applied ethics. He stresses that of all ethical theories, practice-consequentialism is the theory that best justifies right action and ethical obligations in various spheres of action and concern. He argues that we are morally obligated to care for the planet, and have a moral obligation to care for all living beings, which derives from a moral duty to preserve life (human or otherwise). This in turn seems to require the idea that flourishing life (in whatever form it takes) has intrinsic value. Attfield claims that the ability to flourish and exercise a species' basic capacities makes an organism morally relevant. Accordingly, all living beings have a good of their own that has to do with the fulfilment of their natures. They thus ought to be the object of our moral concern. Agreeing with Kenneth Goodpaster, Attfield maintains that beings with ampler faculties and ampler interests should be prioritized over those with more limited faculties and interests (p. 16). But when the fundamental interests of non-sentient beings are threatened, the trivial interests of sentient creatures can be overridden.

Attfield also suggests the application of “the Precautionary Principle” to address the interests of future generations, the climate change crisis, and other environmentally harmful actions. This is meant to establish that everyone has good reason to try to prevent a preventable natural catastrophe even if not everyone is convinced that a natural catastrophe is likely.

The book is arranged in ten chapters. One of the strengths of this book is that each chapter has several critical questions that encourage the reader to think about the issues discussed. Chapter 1 introduces the history and revival of applied ethics and its themes discussed in the subsequent chapters. Attfield points out that European philosophy had always been applied since ancient times to practical issues such as medicine, conduct in war, and relations between the sexes, as well as fundamental scientific issues. However, applied ethics disappeared from view from 1900 to 1970, as the task of philosophy was considered to focus on the clarification of concepts and the logical relationship between concepts rather than their application to practical issues.

Applied ethics reemerged in the 1970s due to philosophical and non-philosophical factors. Philosophical factors include meta-ethical naturalism and John Rawls' revival of contract theory. Attfield emphasizes that Rawls' theory of justice has sparked relational debates about justice and social institutions in general. Among others, non-philosophical factors include the American civil rights movement during the 1960s, ecological concerns, responses to the Vietnam War, student activism, etc.

In Chapter 2, Attfield discusses the main theories of normative ethics, namely consequentialism, deontology, contract theories, and virtue ethics, along with some key related concepts such as moral standing, intrinsic value, rightness, and obligation. He rejects biocentric egalitarianism, which holds that all living creatures have equal moral significance, and defends biocentric consequentialism. He also defends biocentric inequality, which maintains that creatures with like capacities count alike, creatures with lesser capacities count for less, and creatures with greater capacities count for more. It is their foreseeable consequences that make following beneficial practices right, or, in the absence of such practices, particular actions.

In Chapter 3, Attfield argues that future generations of both humans and non-human species have moral standing, and our current actions will affect their well-being. After considering arguments about the rights of future generations, Attfield agrees with Derek Parfit and others that future people will have moral standing at all times and will be influenced by what the present generation does. After reminding his readers of the important role played by generations in the distant past and ancestors in Judaism and many African religions respectively, Attfield argues that responsibility to those in the past indirectly involves fulfilling obligations to present and future generations (p. 51). He emphasizes that current agents' continuation and completion of the projects of past people can benefit those in the past (p. 188).

In Chapter 4, Attfield stresses the need to consider our impacts on other species and their future generations. Attfield further defends the view that all living creatures, including those on other planets, have moral standing. He also argues that organized human collectives, such as governments, local councils, companies, and charities, have moral standing because they have powers and responsibilities above those of their participants and are capable of being harmed (p. 184). But some people object to the idea that human collectives have moral standing, as they fail to meet certain conditions that actual human beings must meet to be moral agents.

In Chapter 5, Attfield outlines the nature of biomedical ethics and reviews the four principles of biomedical ethics promulgated by T. L. Beauchamp and J. F. Childress in 1979: beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy (pp. 83–86). About the principle of justice, Attfield urges pharmaceutical companies and Western governments to fulfil their responsibilities to correct the imbalance in investment in the research and development of medicines between the poor mostly living in the tropics and the rich mostly living in temperate regions.

In Chapter 6, Attfield discusses ethical principles and issues related to development ethics and population ethics. He shows how development ethicists have responded to world hunger, famine, and poverty. He agrees with David Crocker that taking systemic factors seriously will help humanity prevent famine and malnutrition (p. 101). In particular, international debt is one of the systemic causes of poverty, as it has forced poor countries to pay their debts instead of investing in health, education, and development. To make matters worse, Attfield states, climate change and related climate catastrophes, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc. have exacerbated poverty in these countries. He thus suggests that creditor countries and private lenders should cancel international debt and support the development of debtor countries.

In Chapter 7, Attfield discusses the role of environmental ethics and climate ethics in addressing environmental problems and the climate crisis. He claims that biocentrism is a better fit for addressing climate change than anthropocentrism or sentientism (p. 127). Climate change threatens not only human beings, but also the lives of many individual non-humans. Attfield shows that climate change, deforestation,

acidification of oceans, pollution, and plastic waste are the causes of biodiversity loss. If climate change is to be mitigated, Attfield persuasively proposes replacing coal, oil, and gas as sources of electricity with renewable energy from solar, hydroelectric, tidal, wind-powered, and geothermal sources (pp. 128–129).

On the issue of justice becoming unjust, Attfield rightly reminds his readers that the justice system in many countries treats some people unjustly (p. 143). He also emphasizes the need for group recompense. The relevant principle associated with this group compensation is that wronged groups have a right to compensation from the group that wronged them (p. 144). Thus Attfield points out that instead of compensating former slaves in Haiti, France asked them for “an indemnity payment of 150 million francs” “in exchange for recognition of independence and as compensation to the former slave-owners” (p. 149). Haiti eventually paid off the debt in 1947 (Daut, 2020, cited in Attfield, 2023, p. 149). This forced indemnity has led to the impoverishment of generations of Haitians (p. 149). The action of France infringed the above-mentioned principle.

Attfield also points out that the ethics of war is not a new phenomenon. It “is an ages-old field of applied ethics” (pp. 160–161). Since at least the Middle Ages, ethicists have debated whether wars should be fought, and if so, when it is the right time to do so (p. 160). After discussing different theories about the just war, Attfield exposes the military’s impact on the environment, including greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation and contamination of land, air, and water, unusable agricultural areas due to uncleared minefields, and more.

In the final chapter, “Applied Ethics and Ethical Theory,” Attfield revisits the major arguments of the previous chapters. He states that consequentialism seems to best support the obligation to promote sustainability, which is necessary for a world that provides viable habitats for humans and other species.

Attfield strongly emphasizes that an international agreement can lead to the abolition of energy poverty and the inauguration of sustainable energy generation in all countries. However, he does not explicitly explain how others can persuade certain developed countries unwilling to do so because they put national interests above global justice.

Another weakness of the book is that there is no discussion of non-Western applied ethics. Although it would have been cumbersome and unnecessary to include such information in this book, some degree of detail concerning practical problems in the global South would have been helpful to some readers. The inclusion of African and other non-Western applied ethics in this timely and useful book would have enhanced its value.

These criticisms notwithstanding, I found *Applied Ethics* to be a well-researched, well-written, and concise overview of the field of applied ethics. For an applied ethics course, this book would be useful for advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. I strongly stress that if one wishes to teach a course on applied ethics, or do research that is highly relevant to today’s world, one can do no better than to read and adopt this book.

Overall, Attfield’s book is highly readable and digestible by philosophers, environmental scientists, professionals in different fields, policymakers, students, and the general reader, as it is both thought-provoking and enlightening; its greatest strength is its broad coverage of the various fields of applied ethics although Attfield modestly admits that his book is not comprehensive.