

# The Nature of Applied Philosophy

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## Introduction

Applied philosophy is a form of philosophy, albeit one that differs from non-applied or, as some put it, “pure philosophy.” Presumably, the distinction between applied and pure philosophy is exhaustive and mutually exclusive, though there might be borderline cases. What distinguishes the two?

Here is one way to approach the question: When we apply philosophy, we apply it to something. If I say that I am working on a piece of applied philosophy and if, in response to the question what I apply philosophy to, I say “Oh, nothing. I am just writing a piece in applied philosophy,” I show myself to be conceptually and/or grammatically confused. “To apply” is a verb that takes an object.

On the assumption that applied and non-applied philosophy are mutually exclusive, this suggests that pure philosophy has no object. But, non-grammatically speaking, this is not so. Work in a field of philosophy outside applied philosophy, such as general metaphysics, has an object – for example, the nature of properties. Hence, applied philosophy does not distinguish itself from pure philosophy in that the former is philosophy applied to an object, whereas pure philosophy is not. Pure philosophy being applied philosophy in *this sense* is not marked by the use of the term “applied.” This is because the problems it addresses are ones that are normally considered philosophical problems in a narrow sense. Metaphorically, pure philosophy is philosophy applied to itself – that is, to philosophical problems such as the fundamental nature of reality, knowledge, morality, and so on – whereas applied philosophy is philosophy applied to non-philosophical problems broadly construed.

There are many views on which problems belong to the narrow set of philosophical problems. These differences we can set aside and instead focus on the fact there are also a number of different conceptions of *applied philosophy*. One reason for this multiplicity

is that there are different views regarding what philosophy is. For example, is it a special approach to addressing problems, or is it a set of substantive principles that one can apply outside philosophy itself (or both)? On the former view, at its core applying philosophy is a matter of, say, approaching a particular question through meticulous conceptual analysis, making explicit how one's conclusions follow from one's premises, and so forth. On the latter view, applying philosophy is a matter of applying substantive philosophical principles. Often, doing so will consist in carefully identifying the relevant empirical facts of the matter and then feeding them into the relevant principles. For instance, applied ethicists who discuss capital punishment and believe that deterrence effects may justify punishment will look into whether capital punishment, as a matter of empirical fact, reduces overall crime rates.

Another reason why there are different conceptions of applied philosophy is that there are different views regarding what it is to apply something. For instance, some think that the notion of application differs across different philosophical disciplines; for example, it differs across ethics and aesthetics because the latter embodies "only in a limited manner a tacit imperative toward the kind of hierarchical taxonomy that we find expressed in ethics as traditionally conceived" (see Chapter 34, Applied Aesthetics).

In this chapter, I introduce seven conceptions of applied philosophy and clarify the differences between them. Along the way I will draw on examples from the contributions to this Companion. One core claim in this chapter – one that underpins the entire Companion – is that while applied ethics forms an important part of applied philosophy, applied philosophy is much more than applied ethics. This might seem odd, since applied ethics is a more established, self-conscious applied philosophy discipline than others. However, there are historical reasons why this is so, which are compatible with the fact that any philosophical discipline – for example, epistemology or metaphysics – has an applied sub- or co-discipline. This non-applied ethics-centered conception of applied philosophy is a consequence of all of the seven conceptions of applied philosophy discussed below. The editors of this Companion hope that the Companion in its entirety constitutes an even more effective argument for this broad construal of applied philosophy.

## The Relevance Conception

In an article from 1970, Leslie Stevenson made a plea for applied philosophy. In his view, most of what went on in philosophy departments reflected "legitimately specialized concerns" with little or no "wider relevance" outside the various subdisciplines of "pure philosophy" such as "mathematical and philosophical logic, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, and most of the questions now discussed by professional philosophers about ethics, politics, and aesthetics (e.g., the validity of the fact-value distinction)" (Stevenson 1970: 259). By "applied philosophy" he meant philosophy that is "relevant to 'the important questions of everyday life'" (Stevenson 1970: 258). These are a mix of quite different questions ranging from existential ones such as why death is bad to political questions such as what we should do about global warming. On what I shall refer to as the *relevance conception* of applied philosophy,

- (1) Philosophy is applied if, and only if, it is relevant to important questions of everyday life.

As examples of questions in applied philosophy so construed, Stevenson mentions:

rational discussion of particular controversial moral questions, such as sexual morality, the Catholic ban on contraception, the use of hallucinogenic drugs, abortion, euthanasia, eugenics, the definition of death, and many other medico-ethical-legal problems raised or soon to be raised by the coming "biological revolution"; also certain aspects of various difficult and social political problems, such as educational policy (comprehensive schools? religious education?), the need for public participation in planning (Do people know what they want twenty years from now, and is it identical with what they *need*? How can many and different pressures result in a sensible and just decision?), world economic development (Do the richer countries have a *duty* to help the poorer? Should the Indian peasant be forced to change his agricultural methods?); also the critical examination of various political and religious ideologies in the forms they take now (e.g., Marxism, and the various denominations of Christianity); scientific or supposedly scientific theories (e.g., Freudian psychoanalysis, and various sociological theories). (1970: 259)

Four thoughts spring to mind. First, this list reflects the time at which Stevenson wrote his article as well as the particular audience he addressed (cf. Singer 1993: 1). This is as it should be, if applied philosophy is "relevant to 'the important questions of everyday life,'" and such questions, to some extent at least, vary across time and audience. Indeed, if we attend not just to actual variation but take into account possible variation, the present subdisciplines of pure philosophy would qualify as applied philosophy if, say, people in their everyday lives were pure-philosophically more inclined than almost all of us are, and were pained by unresolved questions about the nature of entailment and reference. This reflects the fact that the relevance-based distinction between pure and applied philosophy has nothing to do with the intrinsic nature of the two fields of philosophy, but turns on which questions are raised in "everyday life." Hence, on the relevance conception there is no reason to expect that applied philosophy is any different in terms of its methods from non-applied philosophy. Or, at least, there is no such reason unless we have some independent grasp of which questions are the important questions of everyday life and have reason to believe that the way in which these can be answered is different from the way in which questions that are not in this way important can be.

One aspect of the audience relativity of the notion of "important questions of everyday life" is worth emphasizing. Many subdisciplines within applied philosophy address "questions of everyday life" for members of particular professions – for example, ethics of war. Here philosophy addresses important questions bearing on the everyday professional life of members of armed forces (see Chapter 24, Collectivism and Reductivism in the Ethics of War). However, as the example shows, some questions that are important questions of everyday professional life are also important questions outside the professions, such as the rights of combatants fighting an unjust war to kill enemy combatants.

Second, while most of the questions Stevenson mentions fall within the scope of applied ethics, construed broadly enough to include applied political philosophy (see Kagan 1998: 3), there are exceptions. For instance, the critical examination that Stevenson had in mind in relation to various "scientific or supposedly scientific theories" is not an ethical one, but, at least in good part, an epistemic one. Also,

a conceptual exploration of the relation between wants and needs does not itself tell us anything about what weight should be given to people's wants regarding their future.

Third, Stevenson ties part of his plea for applied philosophy to the "coming biological revolution" that forces us to rethink a number of moral issues. Some argue that something similar can be said about other disciplines in applied philosophy. For instance, David Coady contends that the "rise of new technologies, such as mobile phones and the Internet, along with the decline of older sources of information, such as newspapers and traditional reference books, have significantly changed the way in which we acquire knowledge and justify our beliefs," and that this motivates a similar wave of applied epistemology (see Chapter 4, Applied Epistemology).

This connects with a fourth point – namely, that applied philosophy is "*relevant to the important questions of everyday life.*" Thus, to qualify as applied philosophy on the relevance conception, philosophy does not have to *answer* "the important questions of everyday life." This is a stronger requirement. By way of illustration, accounts of what makes someone an expert on climate change do not in themselves answer the question that, currently, is an important question of everyday life: what should we do about climate change? But they are relevant to how we should do so – for example, because they are relevant to who can make any claim to climate expertise and, thus, to whose predictions and opinions should be trusted (see Chapter 10, Experts in the Climate Change Debate). Similarly, determining whether freedom of expression promotes truth (or other epistemic desiderata) does not answer the question of the degree to which people should enjoy freedom of expression (see Chapter 11, Freedom of Expression, Diversity, and Truth; Chapter 30, Freedom of Religion and Expression). However, to the extent that we (ought to) care about truth, it is relevant to how we should answer this question. Hence, even on the relevance conception applied ethics is not co-extensive with applied philosophy even though, due to the nature of the important questions of everyday life, it takes up a large part of it.

The relevance conception is a respectable notion of applied philosophy. Nevertheless, it involves two ways of delimiting the topic that, from a certain perspective, appear odd. First, by "important question," Stevenson had in mind questions that were actually on people's minds. But suppose that while a certain question is not on people's minds, it ought to be. Suppose, for instance, that no one bothers to raise questions about discrimination against disabled people – as was the case not so long ago – and yet they ought to do so, because it disadvantages disabled people a lot and people have the facts available to them that are needed to see this as an important question. A philosophical analysis of what makes discrimination against disabled people wrong would not on Stevenson's construal count as work in applied philosophy, though, intuitively, we would classify it as such.

Second, some important questions in everyday life are answered by philosophical accounts that are not normally thought to fall under the scope of applied philosophy. Take, for instance, arguments for the unconditional wrongness of lying (e.g., Kant 1785/2002). These are normally thought to belong to moral philosophy in general. Yet, suppose the President lies to his people in the interest of their nation, or, at least, this is how he sees it, and the public is preoccupied with whether the President did wrong in

lying to them. In that case such arguments are relevant to an important question of everyday life and, thus, in the present sense, one that, somewhat revisionistically, falls under the scope of applied philosophy.

## The Specificity Conception

The relevance conception distinguishes applied from non-applied philosophy on the basis of how its object relates to a particular set of concerns. However, the distinction can also be drawn in terms of how the object of applied philosophy relates to the object of non-applied philosophy. On what I shall call the *specificity conception* (see Stevenson 1970: 259),

(2) Philosophy is applied if, and only if, it addresses a comparatively specific question within the branch of philosophy, e.g., metaphysics, epistemology or moral philosophy, to which it belongs.

On this conception, “What is a speech act?” is a question for pure philosophy of language, whereas “What is a derogatory speech act?” is a question in applied philosophy (see Chapter 17, Freedom of Expression and Derogatory Words), since it is more specific than that of general speech act theory (see Chapter 13, Applied Philosophy of Language). Similarly, the question “When, if ever, is it morally permissible for unjust combatants to kill enemy soldiers?” is a question within applied philosophy, because within the branch of moral philosophy it is a comparatively specific question relative to the more general question “When, if ever, is it morally permissible to kill?” and the even more general “When are actions morally permissible?” The last question is one in pure moral philosophy on the specificity conception. In moral philosophy, it hard to think of a more general question than that one. The previous question perhaps is a borderline case and the definition above does not in itself tell us whether it is a question in applied philosophy.

That there are borderline cases is not surprising. Generality and specificity are matters of degree (Hare 1981: 41) and for that reason, on the specificity conception, one should not expect any sharp and non-arbitrary borders, where one leaves applied philosophy and enters pure philosophy. Indeed, some philosophers have distinguished between ethics (“Which acts are morally permissible?”), applied ethics (“When is it morally permissible to kill in war?”), and applying applied ethics (“Was the bombing of Hiroshima morally permissible?”) (Kamm 2013: 568–576).

It is interesting to compare the relevance and the specificity conceptions. Generally, most of the questions, which are seen as “important questions of everyday life,” are quite specific such that the two conceptions overlap considerably, extensionally speaking. However, the two conceptions are different, and perhaps some very general questions are seen as important questions of everyday life and some very specific questions are not important questions of everyday life. By way of illustration of the latter possibility, consider the following: for Aquinas, as for his medieval contemporaries, whether charging an interest on loans could be justified at all was an important, quite specific moral question, yet for most Westerners it is no longer important, at least not in this general form.

If we adopt the specificity conception, every philosophical discipline that contains general principles, controversial or not, has an applied subdiscipline. For instance, if there are general principles regarding the justification of beliefs these can be applied to concrete evidential situations in the same way that general principles for the moral justification of action can be applied to concrete contexts of action. Hence, recently some non-ethicists have come to see themselves as doing a kind of applied philosophy, for example, social epistemology and social ontology.

The specificity conception is naturally associated with the so-called top-down model of applied philosophy. On this view, we first establish various basic, non-contingent philosophical principles. Once they have been secured, we explore their implications given certain additional and non-philosophical, empirical assumptions. Doing so enables us to say something about concrete and very specific issues.

Few, if any applied philosophers, work in a top-down fashion (Beauchamp 2003: 8; Haldane 2009: 11; Hansson 2008: 480–481), though some think that non-applied philosophy has a certain priority over applied philosophy. For instance, Peter Singer, in his book *Practical Ethics*, writes: “In order to have a useful discussion within ethics, it is necessary to say a little *about* ethics, so that we have a clear understanding of what we are doing when we discuss ethical questions” (Singer 1993: 1). Presumably, Singer would not say that the reverse is the case.

Against such views, many would point to the fact that basic principles are revised, or accepted in part on the basis of their implications given certain additional empirical assumptions. Indeed, more general principles are often under-described, and paying close attention to the complexities of concrete cases is a way of becoming clearer about the general principles, which, on reflection, one is committed to (see Archard 2009: 240). This is as it should be, given that we endorse a coherentist model of justification where to be justified in endorsing more general principles these must cohere with our considered beliefs about specific cases. This may not show that we should reject the specificity conception of applied philosophy – after all, unlike coherentism it is not explicitly formulated as a doctrine about justification – but, in the light of reflective equilibrium, the top-down model looks peculiar (see Chapter 18, Applied Moral Philosophy). To determine which non-specific principles are justified, we must address very specific questions in philosophy also.

## The Practical Conception

The specificity conception is not the only conception of applied philosophy that locates its distinctive features in its object. On what I shall refer to as the *practical conception*,

- (3) Philosophy is applied if, and only if, it justifies an answer to comparatively specific questions within its relevant branch of philosophy about what we ought to do.

The practical questions to be answered must be relatively specific because otherwise applied philosophy becomes indistinguishable from practical philosophy in general and, thus, is to be contrasted with theoretical philosophy – for example, metaphysics and logic – not non-applied philosophy. Even so restricted, the specificity and the practical

conceptions differ, since some specific questions are not questions about what we ought to do. For instance, the question about whether we have any reason to think that Jesus performed the miracle of feeding the multitude with five loaves of bread and two fish is much more specific than the question of whether we have reason to accept the existence of miracles and is not a question about what we ought to do (see Chapter 39, Thinking about Reported Miracles).

The practical conception is also different from the relevance conception because some practical questions in the present sense are relatively unimportant and some non-practical questions – for example, “What is bad about dying?” – are highly relevant, specific questions in everyday life. Also, on the practical conception applied philosophy seeks not just to be relevant to practical questions, but, more ambitiously, to answer them.

The practical conception of applied philosophy is the one that comes closest to making applied philosophy roughly equivalent to applied ethics. Given such overlap, and given skepticism about the truth or justifiability of moral judgments – or normative judgments in general – a skeptical stance toward the rational credentials of applied philosophy follows.

For this reason among others, it is worthwhile pointing out that even on the practical conception there are noticeable differences between applied philosophy and applied ethics. First, some questions in applied ethics are not questions about what we ought to do. For instance, this is true of axiological questions in population ethics. Similarly, many applied ethics issues are resolved on the basis of applying other philosophical disciplines to the concrete issues at hand. For instance, in the applied ethics literature on abortion much of the discussion concerns when human beings or persons begin to exist. To answer such questions, philosophers turn to metaphysics and apply metaphysical principles about division and persistence over time to facts about human procreation – as, for example, when they appeal to the empirical phenomenon of monozygotic twinning to argue that even if you accept the idea that persons have Cartesian souls, we do not start to exist at the time of conception rather than at the onset of consciousness (see McMahan 2003: 18–19). Second, some normative questions are not ethical questions. Questions about which strategies we can adopt to form less biased beliefs in the interest of having more true beliefs and fewer false ones are not questions for applied ethics.

What gave applied philosophy its big boost in the 1970s was an attempt to make philosophy practical in order to answer many of the pressing moral questions of those days (Beauchamp 2003: 1–2; Lafollette 2003: 2) – some of which, for example, global justice, are still with us and, regrettably, no less in need of an answer – and this is probably what partly explains that, despite the two observations just made, some identify applied philosophy with applied ethics.

### The Activist Conception

Many philosophers who work in applied philosophy are not satisfied with simply answering the question of what we ought to do. Rather, they want, through their engagement with philosophy, to causally affect the world in a certain way (see Archard

2009: 238; Gaus 2005: 65; Singer 1975). Nancy Daukas, in her chapter on feminist epistemology (Chapter 5), writes: “The many, diverse areas of feminist philosophy are united by a commitment to use philosophical reflection to improve the conditions of our lives insofar as they are shaped by social power. That is, feminist philosophy is defined by its liberatory goals, and it is primarily for that reason that it may be considered ‘applied philosophy.’” She continues: “The expression ‘feminist epistemology’ refers not to a particular epistemological doctrine or theory, but to *doing epistemology as a feminist*, that is, to pursuing epistemological work in the service of liberatory socio-political objectives.” On what I shall call the *activist conception*,

- (4) Philosophy is applied if, and only if, it is motivated by an ambition of having a certain causal effect on the world.

Here “certain effect” does a lot of work. Presumably, most philosophers – even those working within pure philosophy – want to bring about some causal effect on the world through their work. For instance, they want to change the views of other philosophers’ beliefs about the topic on which they work or, in less admirable cases, to promote their careers. However, these are not the concerns I have in mind. Rather, the motivation is of a kind that characterizes someone who is politically engaged, broadly construed, or who is an educator (Brownlee 2009; Kitcher 2011: 259; Stevenson 1970: 265) and wants to affect the world through his or her philosophical engagement.

While many philosophers who work in non-applied philosophy have an ambition to change the world for the better, the distinction between philosophers who have and philosophers who do not have this ambition does not align well with the distinction between applied and non-applied philosophy. First, there are examples of philosophers who have done work that is thought of by most as pure philosophy and yet might have been motivated by a concern to change the world. For instance, it is reasonable to conjecture that Karl Popper’s work on falsifiability (Popper 1963/2007: 45) and on the impossibility of making large-scale predictions about the course of history (Popper 1957/2002) in part was motivated by a desire to combat totalitarian ideologies in general and Marxism in particular. And, speaking of which, in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Marx – not seen by many as someone doing applied philosophy whether rightly so or not – famously complained that so far philosophers had only interpreted the world, whereas the point was to change it (Marx 1998). Second, some academic work in applied philosophy is done in a bread-and-butter-, 9-to-5 way, reflecting something that comes close to an indifference to what happens in (most of) the world.

There probably is an established use of the term “applied philosophy” where the term is tied to having an activist motivation. However, as we have seen, it misclassifies certain cases as applied and others as non-applied – at least, when these cases are classified by the nature of their topics. Still, this is as it should be and being clear about what we mean by “applied philosophy” steers us clear of any problems.

Should we expect activist applied philosophy to be different from pure philosophy in terms of its methods? Undoubtedly, activism often leads applied philosophers to emphasize different things: for example, as Daukas points out, the fact that feminist epistemology focuses on various mechanisms of social power and oppression means that feminist epistemologies have a “*methodological* commitment to bring multiple

perspectives into critical yet collaborative conversation, to promote pluralism, to develop methods for productive ‘listening across differences’, and to create opportunities for the perspectives of the marginalized to be developed and heard.” Similarly, feminist epistemologists might be more alert to identifying mechanisms of social power that underlies the social production of beliefs than other epistemologists might be. Still others might think that there is no necessity about non-applied philosophy not being open to multiple perspectives, and indeed that such openness, while needed, does not reflect any novel *methodological* stance.

More radically, some caution that when philosophers are concerned, as they should be, “with the policy consequences of what they do” – a concern that will sometimes favor unsound arguments – their primary commitment will no longer be “knowledge and truth” (Brock 1987: 787). Also, philosophy that “is really practical” and has as a goal “to improve behavior or at least to reduce the incidence of very bad behavior” will tend to focus on issues other than those that non-practical philosophy attends to: for example, rather than focusing on intellectually challenging cases, it will explore how, through the inculcation of a critical ethics of belief, we can avoid the subversion of morality through false beliefs (Buchanan 2009).

## The Methodology Conception

On the specificity conception of applied philosophy the distinctive nature of applied philosophy lies in the questions it asks. However, there is a different way of conceiving applied philosophy, which ties it not to particular questions or substantive theories, but to certain methods – for example, the systematic use of thought experiments, making presuppositions explicit, conceptual analysis, and rigorous analysis of argumentation. On what I shall call the *methodology conception*,

- (5) Philosophy is applied if, and only if, it involves the use of specifically philosophical methods to explore issues outside the narrow set of philosophical problems.

Unlike the specificity conception, the methodology conception allows that a piece of applied philosophy addresses a topic that, narrowly construed, does not form a philosophical question. Consider, for instance, the gatecrashers’ paradox (see Enoch, Spectre, and Fisher 2012). There is a baseball match and 10,000 people attend. In the first case, everyone except for 10 spectators gatecrashed. John is charged with gatecrashing. There is no specific evidence that he did so, but since he certainly attended the match there is a very high probability that he gatecrashed. In the second case, John is under the same charge. This time there is no information about how many people gatecrashed, but an eyewitness reports that he saw John gatecrash and the evidence conclusively shows that the eyewitness is very reliable. If he reports that he saw someone gatecrash he will make an error only once every 100 times. The paradox is this: courts are unlikely to convict John on the basis of the statistical evidence in the former case, but likely to do so in the latter, despite the fact that the evidence in the former case is *more* accurate than in the latter and despite the fact that, ultimately, evidence based on eyewitness reports rests on statistics too, to wit, about the reliability of the relevant

eyewitness reports. Hence: is there any good reason for treating statistical and eyewitness reports-based evidence differently? This question is not a typical philosophical question like “Do we have free will?” or “What is an explanation?” Yet, work that tries to answer this question intuitively belongs to applied philosophy, and at least part of the reason this is so is that, methodologically speaking, it is quite similar to work that addresses standard philosophical questions.

The gatecrashers’ paradox also illustrates a difference between the methodology and the relevance conceptions of applied philosophy. For, independently of academic work on the gatecrashers’ paradox, few people think that it is an important question of everyday life, which sort of statistical evidence courts can rely on. However, it might become an important topic as a result of people writing on it in applied philosophy. An illustration of this is Singer’s (1975) work on animal ethics. This book is perhaps an actual example of how a question has become an important question in everyday life partly as a result of work in applied philosophy. As he writes in one of the first lines in the book: “‘Animal liberation’ may sound more like a parody of other liberation movements than a serious objective” (Singer 1975: 1). Not so much anymore!

Note, finally, that, on the methodology conception, what we apply when we apply philosophy is something quite different from what it is naturally taken to be that we apply when, on the specificity conception, we apply philosophy to something outside philosophy. On the latter conception, it is natural to assume that what we apply are substantive principles – for example, general moral principles or principles of rationality – that have been shown to be justified within pure philosophy. However, on the methodology conception what we apply is philosophical methods of analysis. Such application might modestly aim at no more than clarifying concepts and presuppositions behind a certain practice or set of beliefs without aiming to assess these aims or presuppositions or assess them only conditionally, that is, relative to assumptions that are not themselves posited, but might be accepted by the addressee of applied philosophy.

### The Empirical Facts Conception

A sixth conception of applied philosophy comes out in Stevenson’s thought that applied philosophy has an “essentially interdisciplinary nature” (Stevenson 1970: 263; see Chapter 41, *Ancient Applied Philosophy*). On this conception pure philosophy is largely an a priori discipline that uncovers conceptual truths or truths discoverable through pure reason. However, applied philosophy draws on the results of a posteriori empirical sciences as well as empirical evidence in general. On this conception, which I coin the *empirical facts conception*,

- (6) Philosophy is applied if, and only if, it is significantly informed by empirical evidence – in particular, that provided by empirical sciences.

While most philosophy that qualifies as applied on this conception will also do so on the methodological conception (if it did not use the methods of philosophy, how could it qualify as applied *philosophy?*), as the gatecrashers’ paradox indicates it is quite possible

for philosophy to qualify as applied on the methodological conception, but not on the empirical facts conception. In this Companion, the empirical facts conception is illustrated by the contribution on neuroscience and criminal justice, which emphasizes that it is located at the “intersection between neuroscience and law” (see Chapter 26, Neuroethics and Criminal Justice; Chapter 40, Religion and Neuroscience). A more problematic instance of applied philosophy on the present conception is an influential argument for the falsity of moral realism. According to this argument – Mackie’s argument from relativity – the best explanation of empirical variation of moral codes across time and place is that there are no moral facts (Mackie 1977: 36). Unless “informed by empirical evidence” is understood in a narrow sense, this argument is an argument in applied philosophy, though, normally, it is not thought of as such. And if it is narrowly construed to avoid this taxonomical infelicity, to some extent the distinction between pure and applied philosophy becomes a matter of degree that should not be expected to signal any significant difference in method and so on.

Some naturalistically minded philosophers will claim that all philosophy, or at least all worthwhile philosophy, is applied in this sense. For instance, some think that even the deepest questions about, say, the nature of our privileged access to the contents of our own minds, cannot be answered independently of the results of the empirical findings of neuroscience among other things. As Neil Levy (Chapter 19, Neuroethics and Responsibility) puts it: “the sciences of the mind illuminate traditional philosophical questions, concerning, say, the nature of knowledge or the existence of free will.” Similarly, philosophers much attuned to the experimental turn in philosophy insist that good philosophy is applied philosophy in this sense.

The empirical facts conception is likely to be associated with the specificity conception. However, the two are different – not simply because, as just mentioned, some naturalistically minded philosophers think that even the most general questions in philosophy can only be fruitfully explored in empirically informed ways, but also because some (non-naturalistically inclined) philosophers think that some specific questions (“Is capital punishment morally justified?”) can be answered without paying any attention to empirical facts of the matter.

One particular way in which applied philosophy is significantly informed by the results of empirical sciences comes out in the contrast between ideal and non-ideal theory. This distinction applies to normative disciplines and runs as follows: ideal theory explores how agents ought to act under ideal circumstances and what these circumstances are in the first place. Accounts of when circumstances are ideal differ, but only ideal circumstances are such that reasoning agents are not prone to reason badly in ways which normal reasoning agents do – for instance, in their assessment of probabilities ideal reasoning agents do not disregard base rates (e.g., if a certain test for a medical condition has a 10% likelihood of false positives and similarly so for false negatives and the medical condition is very rare, actual agents will overestimate the probability that they have the medical condition if their test is positive, ignoring that the great majority of positive tests are false positives) – and such that acting agents are assumed to be motivated to act as they ought to act and do so successfully. Non-ideal theory notes that, realistically, certain reasoning strategies, given the psychology of actual agents, are intractable and, thus, propose reasoning strategies that will enable them to improve their reasoning, for instance, in the case at hand by reasoning in terms of frequencies

rather than probabilities (Bishop and Trout 2005: 141). Similarly, non-ideal moral theory asks how we should act in light of the deficiencies of agents, which are empirically well established. This is why non-ideal theory (see Chapter 7, Information Markets; Chapter 8, Epistemology for (Real) People; Chapter 9, Are Conspiracy Theorists Epistemically Vicious?; Chapter 20, Non-Ideal Theory; Chapter 29, Benefiting from Wrongdoing) is often seen as applied philosophy.

It is worth noting, however, that non-ideal theory could be discussed in a way that would make it less likely to be seen as applied. If instead of focusing on how we actually fall short of what is ideal, non-ideal theory might focus on how we *could* fall short of what is ideal – for example, non-ideal, moral theory was just as interested in how we ought to act given a tendency to give too little weight to our own interests as in how we ought to act given a tendency to give too much weight to our self-interest – presumably, non-ideal theory would be less applied than is actually the case.

Another way in which philosophy is empirically informed is through its aim to uncover and possibly assess philosophical assumptions made in non-philosophical contexts (see Boghossian 2006; Keeley 1999). To take an example by Richard Corry (Chapter 33, Did Climate Change Cause That?): philosophers might explore the debate on climate change and the causation of particular extreme weather conditions trying to establish “the concept of causation in play here: what concept of causation is being employed? Is the debate being confused by the use of more than one concept of causation? Which concept of causation is appropriate in this discussion?” In doing so, philosophers may not seek to cast light on the philosophical discussion of causation on the basis of empirical sciences (or, more broadly, public and quasi-public debates) but rather to cast light on these debates drawing on insights from pure philosophy. This can be beneficial, for example, by showing that what appears to participants to be a disagreement really amounts to different uses of the term “cause.” To clarify non-philosophical debates by making philosophical assumptions underpinning those debates explicit is to do empirically informed applied philosophy even if the aim is not so much to clarify philosophical questions as to oppose non-philosophical ones. Still, it counts as a useful contribution of applied philosophy.

On most of the conceptions of applied philosophy – the activist conception being a possible exception – that I have so far introduced, there is no reason that applied and non-applied philosophy should differ in terms of their methods. However, on the empirical facts conception applied philosophy is empirically informed and empirical studies bring with them a methodology that is different from the one normally, justifiably or not, applied in pure philosophy, which on the present conception means philosophy that is not significantly informed by the results of the empirical sciences.

## The Audience Conception

A seventh conception of applied philosophy is that what distinguishes it from pure philosophy is that it addresses an audience of non-philosophers. So, on the *audience conception*,

- (7) Philosophy is applied if, and only if, its intended audience is non-philosophers.

Stevenson thought applied philosophy addressed an audience of non-philosophers and, in part, that reflects the fact that, unlike now, in 1970 there were not that many applied philosophers around to address. However, I suspect that this conception, while sometimes used, is not very helpful. If a philosopher writes a book on general issues in philosophical logic for the benefit of an audience of non-philosophers, whom she thinks would like to acquire some acquaintance with the topic, the book would qualify as applied philosophy on the present conception despite the fact that its topic is not usually seen as one that falls within applied philosophy and, in all likelihood, would not qualify as such on any of the other conceptions above. It is better to distinguish between popularized (whether applied or non-applied) philosophy, on the one hand, and non-popularized philosophy, on the other hand.

This being said, the fact that a piece of philosophy is written for non-philosophers might be a reasonably good indicator of its being a piece of applied philosophy – for example, because one motivation for writing for a general audience is the ambition to have a “practical impact,” say, on the way in which animals are treated in agriculture or on the legality of assisted suicide. However, the fact that a piece of philosophy is written for philosophers is not a good indicator of being a piece of pure philosophy (in a pre-theoretical notion of that term), since in these golden days of applied philosophy most of it is written for an audience of philosophers.

## Conclusion

I have specified all of the seven conceptions above in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. This makes the different conceptions incompatible with one another. To avoid this, they could be stated in terms of sufficient conditions only. Or rather than all conditions being conditions of philosophy being applied, they could be stated as conditions for philosophy being a certain sort of applied philosophy. Or the seven conditions could be thought to form a point score system such that the more conditions are satisfied the stronger the case is for classifying the relevance piece of philosophy as being applied. In any case, what I have written is compatible with a contribution in philosophy being applied philosophy in more than one way. Indeed, often this is the case. Many chapters in this Companion qualify as pieces of applied philosophy in several ways. None of the chapters are not applied philosophy in any of the senses that I have identified.

The fact that philosophy can count as “applied” in different senses has some implications for questions about its method, focus topic-wise, and its value, since, as I have hinted, perhaps on some conceptions of applied philosophy it is unlikely to differ in principle in these respects from non-applied philosophy, whereas on other conceptions they are likely to differ.

To round off this discussion, it is worth repeating a core claim in this chapter – one that underpins the Companion as such – namely, that applied philosophy is much broader than applied ethics. Applied ethics might enjoy a more secure and established existence as a philosophical subdiscipline than, say, applied epistemology or applied metaphysics. But there is every reason why some or all other fields of philosophy should have applied parts (but see Chapter 34, Applied Aesthetics). Even on the conception that

comes closest to making applied philosophy co-extensional with applied ethics – the practical conception – there are parts of applied philosophy that are not subdisciplines in ethics – for example, applied epistemology – and ethical questions that are normally conceived as questions in applied ethics and yet are not questions about what we should do – for example, axiology in population ethics. Some might worry that applied philosophy is simply a very broad category that not much interesting can be said about. Still, presumably, it remains narrower than philosophy in general, so people who raise *this* worry should consider whether they have the same worry regarding philosophy as such.

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