

INTEGRATING APPLIED ETHICS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BIO-ETHICAL PROBLEMS

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Introduction: Applied Ethics

Morality is an on-going process in the life of human being from its primitive stage to the present stage. Morality is a matter of the goodness of all living organism concerned. Moral ideas have undergone many changes during this long period. This change is reflected in two more ideas in contemporary moral philosophy – one is abstract – Meta ethics and other is concrete – Applied ethics.

Applied ethics covers a wide area. Applied ethics has come to be recognized as an important discipline. James M. Brown has advanced the following points regarding applied ethics –

- 1) Applied ethics is application of ethical theory.
- 2) There is one body of sound well-grounded ethical theory waiting to be applied to practical problems.
- 3) Non-philosophers supply the problem, and philosophers supply and apply the theory.

These three are called as “the engineering model of applied ethics”¹. The applied ethics has established itself as an academic discipline and has become an integral part of the philosophical curriculum. Along with the revival of applied ethics, the striking development in moral philosophy from the relations between humans and non-humans, animals and environment. Peter Singer said that an ethical issue as relevant if it is one that any thinking person must face². The issues which are confront us in our day to day life are terrorism, Euthanasia, abortion, environment and several others. The moral issues about man-nature relationship has arrived because of serious problems of pollution, deforestation and possibility of exhausting natural resources. The threat of nuclear weapons and fear of extinction of human race and destruction of the planet have given rise to serious ethical

¹ Brown James M “On Applying Ethics Moral” Philosophy & Contemporary Problem pp81-82 Cambridge, Cup 1987

² Singer Peter, Preface, Practical Ethics p.VII

issues. All these issues faced by society have given rise to the extinction of the scope of Applied ethics or practical ethics day by day.

Thus, applied ethics is a discipline of philosophy that attempts to apply ethical theory to real life situation. In recent years applied ethics is experienced in every field and Bio-ethics is one of them. It is said that evolution of the human being is as much of a biological issue as it is an ethical one. The higher you are on the evolutionary ladder, the more important became ethics. In applied ethics, the ethical problems are required to be applied to practical moral problems. It is application of principles to human situations. It provides relative frameworks within which practical moral problems can be solved. Society is facing with crime and corruption and moral controversies and difference among people. There is apparent lack of moral knowledge and sensitivity now-a-days among people. Thus, in this paper an attempt has been made how ethical principles are required to be applied to solve practical moral problems or bio-ethical issues.

Perhaps the most striking development in the study of ethics during the 2nd half of the 20th century has been the growing interest in applied ethics to practical moral problems. Applied ethics has been done by looking at different kinds of human practices in our life. Thus, it provides a framework bringing together the remarkable work that has been done in ethics towards that end.

One particular kind of applied ethics that raises distinct concerns is Bio-ethics. Bio-ethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia etc often involve beings whose moral standing is much more contentious.

Bio-ethics: The word “Bio-ethics” is a combination of “bio” representing biological knowledge or the science of living systems, and “ethics” which refers to knowledge of human value systems. The term Bio-ethics is for the first time used by Van Rensselaer Potter of Winsconsin University in 1970 in his book ‘Bio-ethics a bridge to future’. Although bioethics gained prominence in the late 20th century yet its root is traced in Ancient Greece. Hippocrates, the Greek physician and philosopher as the father of Medicine is considered the first to formally address the ethical issues association with medical practices.

Many of the current issues in Medical ethics are due to the advancement of science and technology. These advancements have helped a lot in treating and preventing diseases no doubt, but also have given rise to many new questions and prominent ethical issues in medical science. The large scale introduction of bio-medical and other technologies in second half of the 20th century has intensified old problems and added new ones such as issue over the definition of death and withdraw of life sustaining medical treatment, abortion etc. Secondly the awareness of bio-ethics and other moral issues has been raised. Today, the ethics of life covers a very wide, field including cloning, surrogacy, abortion, organ transplantation etc. This makes it difficult to examine and to solve easily vital bio-ethical problems and its protection that is, whether moral status is ascribed depending on rationality, harm or any other feature. Thus solving bio-ethical issues is a complex and demanding task.

Beginning of Bio-ethical/Life issues including abortion:

All the beginnings of life issues are contentious. Among the various bio-ethical issues the issue of Abortion is a very appealing one.

Abortion: Abortion is one of the most controversial moral issues in today's society. Abortion is the expulsion of a foetus from the uterus before it has reached the stage of viability. An abortion may occur spontaneously in case it is also called a miscarriage, or it may be brought on purposefully in which case it often called an induced abortion.

Now the question arises - 'Is abortion morally permissible?', or 'Under what conditions is an abortion morally permissible?' In looking at the conditions surrounding a particular abortion, we are able to get a better understanding of all of the possibly morally relevant considerations in determining permissibility and impermissibility. Now, this does not exclude the possibility of a position where all abortions are morally wrong. It's just that we have to start with the conditions and then proceed from there.

It is said that so long as a foetus is a human being, a person, from the moment of conception, it would be morally wrong to abort it. This argument goes like this – Every person has a right to life. So the foetus has a right to life. No doubt the mother has a right to decide what shall happen in or to her body. But surely a person's right to life is stronger and more stringent

than the mother's right to decide what happen in and to her body. So the foetus may not be killed; an abortion may not be performed.

In 1971, Judith Thomson challenged the received wisdom by posing a number of cases that would show, at least as she argued that even with a foetus being a person with all of the rights we would confer to any other person, it would still be permissible to abort under certain conditions. So, for example with her violinist case - One morning a women find herself in a bed with an unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the society of Music lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that the women has the right blood type to help. So they have kidnapped her and last night the violinists circulatory system was plugged into hers, so that her kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as her own. Under this condition it is permissible for a pregnant women to abort a foetus as she was raped, even though the foetus is full-fledged person. Therefore, even in cases of pregnancy due to consensual sex, and with the consideration that the foetus is a person it is morally permissible to abort.

Deontological approach to Abortion:

Deontological ethics says that there are objectives moral rules created by God, including the rule "Do not murder". By implications, the practical considerations must be put aside in favour of the moral duty to protect innocent life. A person coming from deontological standpoint would certainly say that abortions are wrong for two main reasons: it is duty of a parent to care for their child, not abort it and that we should treat everyone as an ends in themselves, not a means to an ends. Thus Kantian ethics holds that the motive of an action is far more important than the action itself and its consequences. Those who accept Kantian ethics will say that action is right if the motive behind the action is good. So the Kant's famous maxim is to be followed – "Act so that you treat humanity whether in your own person or in that of another always as an end and never as a means".³The deontological perspective states that we are to do our duty whatever that duty may be.

³ Kant Immanuel, Foundation of Metaphysics of Morals, p.55

Utilitarian approach to Abortion:

Utilitarianism is the thought that actions are right if they benefit or bring happiness to a majority of the population. A utilitarian would say that if a couple could not raise the child it would be better if they are aborted because it would put less burden in society. Thus when using the utilitarian consequential principle of ethics, we establish a set of general morals and rules in which we can apply to every moral question based upon our utilitarian findings. When this is applied to abortion, we can see that abortion is completely ethical entity that provides “the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest amount of people.” (Jeremy Bentham, 1789)

Many argues that aborting a foetus is wrong on the grounds that explains the wrongness of any killing of people. Respect for life and respect for individual dignity, these two basic points are involved with abortion. Balance between respect for life and respect for individual dignity are necessary to smooth running of the society. So bio-ethics with its universal moral appeal is expected to draw the balance.

Therefore, it is said that to abort is wrong morally under all cases.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it may be concluded that a foetus being a member of the biological species homo-sapiens (i.e. a human being) it is wrong to destroy a human being. Therefore abortion is unethical since it constitutes the deliberate destruction of a human being. Many think that right to life overrides the right to control one’s own body and abortion is wrong.

If we try to use utilitarianism to answer questions about the ethics of abortion we still need to decide whether the greatest good for the greatest number includes the good of foetus.

Again, if we try to use Kantian ethics to resolve the morality of abortion, we first need to decide whether fetuses are individuals who are entitled to be treated as ends in themselves. As a practical matter, this threshold issue begs the question. Our decision on such threshold

issues is likely to determine the outcome of our ethical analysis under each of those theories of ethics.

If we try to use principlism or prima facie moral duties, we have to answer another set of threshold questions. Specifically, whose autonomy, beneficence, non maleficence and justice should we consider? Thus to solve bio-ethical issues there should be a balance among various factors – the interest of the foetus, the interest of the pregnant women and the interests of society. However, that would be an extremely open-ended analysis.

Notes:

1. Brown James M “On Applying Ethics” Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problem pp. 81-82 Cambridge, Cup 1987
2. Singer Peter, Preface, Practical Ethics p.VII
3. Kant Immanuel, Foundation of Metaphysics of Morals, p.55

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6. Sonthoraj J.S., A Critique of Bio-ethics with reference to abortion, Suicide, Euthanasia, 1988
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