

## Introductory recap

I talked about problems that the facts of reasonable pluralism in people's ideals and fundamental values present for doing applied ethics. Let me clarify a few things about this.

First, there is plenty of good philosophy where the arguments being batted back and forth don't force the agreement of any rational person. That's a really high bar, and it isn't just applied ethics that regularly fails to negotiate it. It is the best that philosophy can do, however, and the point was more that arguments in applied ethics tend to do worse on this metric than other areas of philosophy. Arguments in applied ethics also tend to more quickly descend into ideological advocacy than other areas of philosophy. I explained this in terms of the greater prevalence of areas characterized by reasonable pluralism in ethics. Again, there are reasoned positions, but with respect to the hot-button issues, there are multiple equally well-reasoned positions endorsing conflicting claims.

Second, in further consideration of this point that this is particularly a problem in *applied* ethics, I shouldn't give the impression that there isn't a lot of convergence among ethical theories. For example, most moral philosophers will agree that the consequences produced by our actions are morally important; it's just that some think that these consequences are the only things that matter morally. And, most moral philosophers will agree with moral principles that require respect for persons – that, for example, freedom and equality are really important; but moral philosophers will justify these principles in different ways and radically disagree with each other about the practical implications of these principles. And that's really the main problem for applied ethics. So often when considering some practical issue, more than one of these principles and considerations are relevant and point in different directions about what to do, and it's difficult to know how we're supposed to balance them. In these cases, the tools moral philosophers have for addressing practical issues underdetermine the right course of action.

So, just as an example, consider the following claims:

1. Persons are fundamentally equal and deserving of respect.
2. The fact that persons are fundamentally equal and deserving of respect implies that coercing others is wrong (that is, coercion is wrong as far as it goes, even if, in specific cases, there are reasons to think coercing someone is justified by good reasons).
3. Permitting a very poor person to sell one of his or her kidneys for \$5000 is morally wrong.

I'm a lot more sure that 1 (and 2) is correct than I am that 3 is. I mean I see how one could utilize 1 and 2 in the service of an argument for 3, but I can just as easily see how one could argue, based on 1 and 2, that 3 is false.

Much of what we'll be doing this semester is clarifying arguments like these (and, possibly, these arguments if this topic gets enough votes). Also, we can also often reach conclusions about which argument on either side of some issue is *stronger* (even while we might deny that the stronger conclusion rationally requires our assent – perhaps there's an even stronger argument on the other side that escaped our notice). Finally, we can put into practice and demonstrate the idea that reasoned, civil,

public discussion of controversial issues makes ours a better society. **So make that your goal: seek to offer not just opinion, but clarity. Bring the assumptions of different arguments to the foreground, and critique those that seem faulty. Point out logical gaps in moral reasoning. Note when ethical arguments rely on empirical claims (like those in social sciences like economics or political science) that are either false or unsubstantiated. Doing applied ethics well involves working on these sorts of pragmatic issues.**