

# The Future of Practical Philosophy: a Reply to Taylor

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**ABSTRACT:** This response to Taylor's paper, "The Future of Applied Philosophy" (also included in this issue) describes Taylor's understanding of the problems that practical philosophy faces; describes Taylor's responses to these problems, and offers criticisms of his arguments.

## The Problem

Taylor's analyses of the concerns brought against practical philosophy are illuminating and insightful. It is fully up to our best traditions. Although his essay begins by rehearsing the recent attention that applied philosophy merits, the paper's real focus is on several serious objections against practical philosophy. Despite the fact that the problems Taylor brings to our attention are perfectly frank and straightforward, they strike right at the heart of applied philosophy. I will list only the major ones.

The first major concern points to the anxiety, even among philosophers themselves, that applied philosophy is not rigorous and philosophically shallow. Other worries accuse applied philosophy of utilizing philosophical techniques too removed from reality to employ. This second point especially pertains to those unacquainted with such techniques. The final objection is that applied philosophy has failed to make clear the important relevance moral theories have for everyday life. The unhappy consequence is that applied philosophy is charged with making use of theories that are too abstract.

With problems like those just mentioned (and others not mentioned), there is no blinking the fact that applied philosophy faces a host of critics requiring accountability for its methods and techniques. Unfortunately, critics, like facts, are stubborn things. Therefore, it will be very

much to our advantage to address these worries straight ahead before they become too engrained in the minds of our critics.

Taking up the fight is the purpose of Taylor's article. He attacks the following claims:

1. Practical philosophy lacks philosophical rigor and is shallow.
2. Practical philosophy has little to offer persons grappling with concrete ethical problems because its techniques are too removed from the problems.
3. Practical philosophy has little to offer person grappling with concrete ethical problems because ethical theory is too abstract.

In the rest of this reply, I will briefly describe Taylor's objection to each claim. I will also offer, when applicable, criticisms to his objections.

### Taylor's Objections

Taylor's attack of the first claim proceeds in the follow manner. He argues that if practical philosophy is intrinsically shallow or lacking in rigor, then there are no significant works of practical philosophy. However, as Taylor correctly points out, there are significant works of practical philosophy. In fact, as Taylor makes clear, the literature abounds with various examples of works of practical philosophy that exhibit the virtues of rigor and depth. Therefore, it is an unfair to maintain that practical philosophy is intrinsically shallow or lacking in rigor.

Although it must be a very confirmed pessimist who would refuse to see the strength of Taylor's first objection, there are still two issues that need to be discussed before we grant Taylor his victory. The first question is this. What is practical philosophy? Taylor gives us four different examples of practical philosophy, but never tells us what it is. This issue needs to be cleared up. The second question is this: what does it mean to say that a work of philosophy is rigorous and not shallow? For example, although Taylor includes Thomson as an example of

rigorous philosophy, Michael Tooley accuses Thomson of something a kin to the lack of rigor. For example, from her landmark article, Thomson writes: “I am inclined to think also that we shall probably have to agree that the fetus has already become a human person well before birth. Indeed, it comes as a surprise when one first learns how early in its life it begins to acquire human characteristics.<sup>1</sup>” Tooley responds in this way: “But what do such physiological characteristics have to do with the question of whether the organism is a person? Thomson, partly, I think, because of the unfortunate use of terminology, does not even raise this question. As a result, she virtually takes it for granted that there are some cases in which abortion is ‘positively indecent’.”<sup>2</sup> Isn’t this an example that qualifies as a lack of rigor?

Taylor’s second objection may be reproduced in this way. If practical philosophy has little to offer people not trained in philosophy, then the techniques philosophers employ are too removed from the problems to be useful to ordinary persons. However, the techniques philosophers employ are not too removed from the problems to be useful to ordinary persons. Therefore, practical philosophy has a lot to offer people not trained in philosophy.

The problem with Taylor’s second argument is this. Although Taylor makes clear why the examples Thomson uses, e.g., the unconscious violinist, clarifies the abortion issue in a unique way, he does not show why they are not too removed from the problems to be useful to ordinary persons. Here is why I think this is true. First, to truly appreciate Thomson’s point, it requires a great deal of training, training not typically available to non-philosophers or even philosophers not trained in ethics. Second, as Taylor points out, although these examples are

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion,” in *The Problem of Abortion*, ed. Joel Feinberg (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1984), 173.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Tooley, *Abortion and Infanticide* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 60. R. M. Hare also brings forward a similar complaint just mentioned by Tooley. He argues that philosophers contribute nothing to the solution of an ethical problem by merely basing normative arguments on intuitions. See his article “Abortion and the Golden Rule,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 4 (1975): 201-222.

intended to clarify intuitions, one might still ask whose intuitions these examples intend to clarify? Although they may clarify an individual's intuitions that are familiar with techniques like this, my experience has been that such techniques are viewed with suspicion even among individuals who are intelligent. In fact, I have spoken with other philosophers (philosophers whose training is not specifically in ethics) that do not seem to appreciate Thomson's unconscious violinist example. These concerns lead me to think two things. First, the techniques employed by Thomson are too removed for people not trained to understand how they work, and these techniques are not useful to clarify the intuitions of people who do not possess training in practical ethics. Therefore, I conclude that Taylor's second objection is unsound and the second claim stands.

Before I move on to the third argument, there is one more minor concern. Taylor remarks that the far-out, cleverly contrived examples are extremely useful in aiding persons to discover what they really think about concrete moral issues, free from the distractions of peripheral concerns or emotional response. I understand and agree with his point about peripheral concerns. However, I don't understand his point about emotional response. My point is this. Typically, when a concrete example is too difficult to understand, the problem may be aggravated by one's own conflicting emotions. However, it has been my own experience that when a cleverly contrived example clarifies my intuitions, it also clarifies, at the same time, my emotions as well. So, whenever I deal with examples like this, I am never free from my emotional responses.

Taylor's third objection proceeds in this way. If practical philosophy has little to offer persons not trained in philosophy, then ethical theory is too abstract to be useful to ordinary

persons. However, ethical theory is not too abstract to be useful to ordinary persons. Therefore, practical philosophy has a lot to offer persons.

Before I discuss why this third argument is unsound, there are two comments about this argument. First, in his defense of the premises of this argument, Taylor makes two points. The first point is something a kin to what may be called the traceability requirement. The idea is this. There are two different kinds of moral principles: basic and derived. This distinction is attributed to Amartya K. Sen.<sup>3</sup> Consider the statement that adultery is wrong.<sup>4</sup> To say that this statement is a derived statement is to say that a person accepts it because he thinks it follows from some other principle. For example, suppose someone believes it is wrong because, and only because, God forbids adultery. Or perhaps it is wrong because, and only because, he believes adultery causes unhappiness, and what causes unhappiness is wrong. Or still, maybe adultery is wrong because adultery breaks a marriage vow promise, and such violations cannot be consistently maintained. The difference between these moral principles is reflected in Taylor's paper. He argues that principles like autonomy or well-being should be based upon a theoretical foundation that justifies and explains such acceptance. In other words, as I understand Taylor, the truth-value or the acceptance of principles like autonomy and so forth, are derived, and must be traced back to a basic moral theory, e.g., Kantianism or utilitarianism, that justifies them.

Taylor's second point is this. First, as I mentioned earlier, Taylor again points out that ethical theory should be used to determine which concepts are morally important. Second, Taylor adds that once we establish which concepts are morally important, we must analyze these

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<sup>3</sup> Amartya K. Sen, "The Nature and Classes of Prescriptive Judgments," *Philosophical Quarterly* 17, no. 66 (1967): 50-51.

<sup>4</sup> I borrow the adultery example from Michael Tooley who employs Sen's distinction between basic and derived moral claims. See Tooley, *Abortion and Infanticide*, 14.

concepts to determine what constitutes an autonomous act. Finally, once we have, in a sense, analyzed the concept, we return to our ethical theory to make sure if the initial ethical appeal of such concepts remains. If so, then, as Taylor points out, one can determine what one should do in particular concrete cases.

Although there is certain clarity about Taylor's discussion, there are two problems as I have analyzed it. First, if we assume that Taylor's discussion is true, a discussion that I have a great deal of sympathy with, it does nothing to support his argument. Taylor's objection from abstraction is that ethical theory is not too abstract to be useful to ordinary individuals. Unfortunately, his discussion, in a sense, side steps the true focus of his argument. In other words, instead of focusing on why ethical theory is not too abstract to be useful, he focuses on just its usefulness, the usefulness that practical philosophers enjoy. This leads me to my second and final comment.

In the elucidation of a moral theory's usefulness, Taylor undermines his own position. Taylor correctly reminds us of just how complicated it is to use an ethical theory. Not only that, he reminds us of how much is required to learn how to properly use an ethical theory, a requirement not so easily attained by non-philosophers or even philosopher's not trained in ethical theory. Because of these concerns, I conclude that Taylor's third objection is unsound, and, as a result, the third claim he analyzes survives his attack as well.

### Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to discuss Taylor's attack of the unfounded suspicion of the goals and techniques of practical philosophy. Although there are problems with his arguments as I have analyzed them, the virtues of his essay are many. Let me elucidate two. Taylor identifies the major objections brought against practical philosophy. This is important in order to clarify

what practical philosophy is up against. Additionally, Taylor's critique makes significant strides in the unfounded suspicion that practical philosophy is not a legitimate branch of philosophy. I am relieved that he is on our side!

#### References

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