

Applying ethics, placating ethics, or applying ourselves to ethics? A critical view of environmental ethics as applied ethics

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Abstract

There is actually a pervasive tendency to consider environmental ethics and bioethics as specific cases pertaining to a supposed kind of "applied ethics". Application can be understood in two different meanings: a concrete sense, as in technical applications, and a psychological meaning, as when we mentally apply ourselves to a task. Ethics has been always thought as a practical knowledge, in a "praxical" sense and not in a "poietic" one. Ethics has to do with "ends" not with "means"; in this sense ethics is "useless". Since ethics has to do with the ultimate meaning of things, ethical choices give meaning to all practical activities. In that sense ethics instead of being useless must be considered as "over-useful" (Maritain). Nowadays politics tend to instrumentalize ethics in order to political objectives. The consequence has been the reconceptualization of specific ethics as applied ethics. Environmental ethics and bioethics are then submitted to politics following the logic of technical applications. Environmental ethics and bioethics considered as applied ethics are at risk to becoming not only useless, but also meaningless.

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