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**APPLIED ETHICS AS “THE NEW ETHICS”. TOWARD A NEW TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROLE OF MORAL PHILOSOPHER AS A “MORAL EXPERT”**

1. Introduction 2. Parfit’s thesis 3. Bioethics as ‘new ethics’ 4. What kind of applied ethics?  
5. The role of the philosopher today 6. Conclusion

**ABSTRACT: APPLIED ETHICS AS “THE NEW ETHICS”. TOWARD A NEW TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROLE OF MORAL PHILOSOPHER AS A “MORAL EXPERT”**

*This paper argues that applied ethics represents the new ethics. The first part reconstructs the origin of this new way of doing ethics, examining the theses of Parfit and Toulmin. Parfit argues that ethics is a recent discipline, distinct from religion, while Toulmin asserts that concrete problems have prompted philosophers to take up applied ethics. Subsequently, three levels of applied ethics are identified: philosophical, political, and case ethics. However, it is emphasized that applied case ethics has yet to overcome certain prejudices. It is argued that philosophers should participate in case discussions due to their formal expertise. In the secularised and technologically advanced context, philosophy can offer practical solutions to contemporary problems, entering public debates and people’s lives. The philosopher is the ideal interlocutor to discuss contemporary values, adopting a secular and pluralist approach.*

### 1. Introduction

This paper aims to defend the idea that applied ethics is the new ethics, not in the sense of a new substantive morality, but in the formal sense, i.e., a new way of approaching moral problems, the new way of doing moral philosophy.

In the first part of the paper, the intent is reconstructive. I will show how this new way of doing ethics became widespread, and I will do so by highlighting the theses of Parfit and Toulmin. First, I will explain Parfit’s thesis that ethics is a recent discipline, born around 1960, since it was in those years that ethics found its autonomy from religion, and I will also show in what sense this thesis may be true. In the second place, I will



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analyze Toulmin's thesis that concrete problems have stimulated philosophers to deal with applied ethics.

Secondly, I will then isolate three different levels of applied ethics, distinguished according to their aims: philosophical, political, and case based applied ethics. I then discuss the fact that this revolution in ethics still needs to be completed: in fact, applied case ethics still needs to be more studied. Finally, I show how this revolution can be completed. I maintain that the philosopher is the expert who can rightfully enter into the discussion of concrete cases, as she is the expert on moral argumentation. The idea I defend is that, at the very least, the philosopher should be recognized as having formal expertise that makes her best placed to recognize moral arguments and show their strengths and weaknesses and that because of this expertise, she should rightfully enter the teams that discuss moral cases.

The idea that I am defending is that in today's increasingly secularised world, in which changes caused by new technologies are ever more frequent, philosophy has something to offer in the resolution of concrete problems: it is not only a theoretical discipline but also a practical one, which can enter not only into public debates but also into people's concrete lives. The philosopher today is the one who is best placed to discuss the values associated with contemporary problems and who can discuss them from a secular and pluralist point of view.

## **2. Parfit's thesis**

«Non-Religious Ethics has been systematically studied, by many people, only since about 1960. Compared with other sciences, Non-Religious Ethics is the youngest and the least advanced»<sup>1</sup>, Derek Parfit commented at the end of his most important volume. The idea put forward by Parfit is that human beings have always discussed

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<sup>1</sup> D. Parfit, *Reason and Persons*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1984, p. 453.

ethics, what was good, right, or best to do, but they have always done so on a religious basis: and this has deprived ethics of the autonomy of thought, of the urge to search for the reasons that justify our actions and that prompt us to act. Only a few were the “atheist” thinkers, as Parfit calls them, whom we would call “secular”: Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, and a handful of Greeks and Romans.

According to Parfit, in contemporary philosophy, Sidgwick marks a caesura proposing a systematization of normative ethics and a non-religious analysis of the various theories. After Sidgwick, moral philosophy continued to find its autonomy, but mostly in metaethics, not normative ethics. Around 1960, people began to talk about ethics again.

Parfit’s thesis is that morality is something specific that has to do with a set of rational arguments and the evaluation of those arguments: «We are the animals that can both understand and respond to reasons»<sup>2</sup>. Morality is therefore connected with reasons for acting. However, since belief in some deity, in her intervention in the world and her demands on human beings, is very complicated to sustain rationally, as the study of reasons for acting and the justifications they provide, ethics is a recent phenomenon. The belief in divine punishment after death can be an internal reason to act according to rules that are believed to be predetermined by the deity herself, but one can hardly argue rationally about this belief.

Some will say that Parfit’s view is too radical, that there are already seeds of secularism and non-theological rational argumentation in Renaissance or eighteenth-century philosophy<sup>3</sup>. However, from a sociological point of view, Parfit’s thesis is

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<sup>2</sup> D. Parfit, *On what matters*, vol II., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup>For approaches similar to Parfit’s but more gradualist, see V.J. Bourke, *History of Ethics. A comprehensive survey of the history of ethics from the early Greeks to the present time*, Doubleday & Co., Garden City 1968 and P. Donatelli, *Etica. I classici, le teorie e le linee evolutive*, Einaudi, Turin 2015.

confirmed: secularisation is a recent phenomenon: pre-modern societies were mostly religious, and morality conformed to religious norms; from the point of view of the history of philosophy, Parfit's thesis nevertheless finds its significance. Although it is true that since modernity, the place of the divine within philosophical systems has been increasingly reduced, it is only since contemporary times that this long history of progressive secularisation has found fulfillment<sup>4</sup>.

Parfit then adds that, since the end of the Nineteenth century, after Sidgwick, this particular type of non-religious moral reflection has arisen, but that its actual imposition has been since the 1960s. The philosophy of the first half of the Twentieth century is characterized by metaethical reflection: reflection on the semantics and logic of moral words. Indeed, philosophers from Moore onwards said very little about what was "good" or "right", focusing more on the definition of those words. Therefore, in the 1960s, normative ethics came back to life, and thus, Parfit can reasonably conclude that we are only at the beginning of this kind of reflection.

Parfit's thesis is also true according contemporary moral philosophy and its currents. Parfit is an analytic philosopher. Within analytic moral philosophy, three phases can be distinguished<sup>5</sup>. The first phase consists in the primitive delineation of the themes of metaethics, with some themes of normative ethics. A second phase entirely dedicated to metaethics abandons normative themes. Finally, the third phase, in the 1960s, known as the "great expansion" phase, is characterized not only by the proliferation of different areas and themes in metaethics but also by the return of normative ethics and the birth of applied ethics. Moreover, the

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<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the phenomenon of secularization see G. Lingua, *Esiti della secolarizzazione. Figure della religione nella società contemporanea*, ETS, Pisa 2013.

<sup>5</sup> See M. Cresti, *I Livelli dell'etica e l'argomentazione morale*, Vicolo del Pavone, Tortona 2021.

emergence of the need for “applied ethics” marks this turning point. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the resurgence of normative moral discourse coincided with philosophers’ engagement in solving practical problems.

### **3. Bioethics as ‘new ethics**

As Toulmin reminds us with his famous essay: «medicine saved the life of ethics»<sup>6</sup>. The practical problems related to medicine woke philosophers from their “slumber” all about abstract problems of metaethics and forced them to deal with practice. Toulmin himself attributes this turning point to precisely the same historical period as Parfit, the 1960s:

And this was still the general state of affairs [doing metaethics] in Anglo-American moral philosophy in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, when public attention began to turn to questions of medical ethics. By this time, the central concerns of the philosophers had become so abstract and general - above all, so definitional or analytical - that they had, in effect, lost all touch with the concrete and particular issues that arise in actual practice, whether in medicine or elsewhere. Once this demand for intelligent discussion of the ethical problems of medical practice and research obliged them to pay fresh attention to applied ethics, however, philosophers found their subject ‘coming alive again’ under their hands<sup>7</sup>.

Indeed, that is the period in which the birth of bioethics is widely recognized<sup>8</sup>. It is interesting to note this link between Parfit’s thesis and the widely accepted thesis on the birth of bioethics. The thesis I want to defend here is that Toulmin and Parfit discuss the same event. The need to deal with practical problems marks the birth not only of new disciplines (such as applied ethics and bioethics) and of a new way of doing ethics (as a secular reflection) but also of a new conception of “ethics” (understood as a discipline and not as a substantive moral theory)<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> S. Toulmin, *How the medicine saved the life of ethics*, in «Perspectives in Biology and Medicine», XXV, 4, 1982, pp. 736-750.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 749.

<sup>8</sup> See A.R. Jonsen, *The Birth of Bioethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998.

<sup>9</sup> This thesis has been argued in particular by Maurizio Mori, see M. Mori, *Bioetica. La risposta della cultura contemporanea alle questioni morali relative alla vita*, in *Teorie etiche contemporanee*, edited by C.A. Viano, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1990, pp. 186-224.

Let me try to test this hypothesis. Philosophical ethics has marginally dealt with concrete problems in the contemporary age. It was more concerned with defining the general contours of moral actions. If we take Hume's *Treatise*<sup>10</sup>, it is primarily concerned with outlining the structure of morality: the fact that morality is based on emotions and which emotions the moral virtues rest on. At the same time, Kant primarily wants to establish the nature of morality, that is, what formal characteristics a judgment must possess to be truly moral<sup>11</sup>. When philosophers then deal more specifically with what is right or wrong, they do so in contexts that are primarily marginal, such as pamphlets or essays: this is, for instance, the case with Hume's famous essays on suicide or Kant's on the alleged right to lie. This kind of work then provides an opportunity for their authors not only to deal with a specific topic but also to emphasize their conceptual frame.

Interest in concrete action is left mainly to moralists, to religious preachers who guide the masses with their religious morality. Analysing such a broad temporal dimension with precision here is impossible. However, it is reasonable to think that if the moral guidance of ordinary people is delegated to the religious, let be they priests or pastors, philosophy is content either to do metaethics *ante litteram* or to focus on particular points in a circumscribed debate between intellectuals, without the pretense of "changing the world".

In the 1960s, however, the necessary conditions for change were produced. Various phenomena produced this change. The first is secularisation, the roots of which start with the scientific revolution and found fulfillment in those years. Although Western societies are still religious, the first germs of the questioning of traditional common sense can be found. The second phenomenon is

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<sup>10</sup> D. Hume, *Treatise on human nature* (1739), in *The philosophical work*, vol. I, Scientia Verlag Aalen, Darmstadt 1964.

<sup>11</sup> I. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788), trans. eng., *Critique of practical reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996.

scientific and technological progress, which emphasizes the urgency of specific problems previously in the background. Take, for example, one of the first technological interventions, such as the invention of dialysis. Here, the moral problem is establishing a criterion for treatment access. Indeed, this problem was familiar (distribution criteria have always been debated in moral and political philosophy). However, it has gained importance, significance, and intense media attention. As do the technologies concerning the beginning and end of life, which have brought issues that were previously considered marginal to the public's attention. Finally, the social and political context dominated by the Cold War and new media should be noticed.

Now as philosophers begin to deal with concrete problems, they try to apply abstract theories to the problems before them. This is the top-down model of applied ethics, or as Annette Baier called it, the «keystone model»<sup>12</sup>. The name "applied ethics" recalls precisely this approach: an abstract moral theory, a general normative theory, is applied to the concrete problem or case. I am a deontologist, and I have established that killing is always wrong; therefore, active euthanasia will be wrong. Period.

However, philosophers soon realized how unproductive this approach is. Bioethical problems require further reflection on the ethical principles we had previously elaborated on. A thief who kills an old lady to steal her pension and a doctor who carries out treatment that leads to the death of a terminally ill patient who asks to die, are different situations, with a different moral evaluation. Not only because the reasons for ending life are different but because the context is different because one has to reflect on the new conditions that technology has produced, the fact that today's situations of pain can be protracted, and in specific contexts, life loses meaning and dignity. The new technical possibilities

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<sup>12</sup> A. Baier, *What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory?* in A. Baier, *Moral Prejudices*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1994.

imposed (and still impose) a rethinking of our morality. Being born, living, and dying in the era opened by the biomedical revolution have a different meaning than in the 18th century.

This is why bioethics is not just a way to find a place for unemployed philosophers, nor a fashion, nor a way to intercept funding or to be pop<sup>13</sup>, but it reflects on the new way of experiencing the problems and possibilities contemporaneity offers. This is why bioethics and, more generally, applied ethics are new ethics and not just ethics of the applications of medicine and biotechnology.

If we look at the issues that bioethics has dealt with, we see that they almost exhaust the spheres of morality. There is the sphere of sexuality and reproduction, death, killing, and letting die, but also the more traditional ones of justice, truthfulness, autonomy, and care. Bioethical problems are the ethical problems of the contemporary world, which is why we can say that bioethics has become a new ethics because it exhausts (or occupies most of) the moral interests of the contemporary world. To these are added the problems analyzed by other applied ethics, which are increasingly finding their way in recent years.

Someone could say that this is not true: biomedical problems are not the only problems the contemporary world has faced since the 1960s. However, I need more than this objection to defeat my argument. First of all, a first answer is that one can see a trend towards a broadening of bioethics and the topics it deals with, ranging from animal issues to environmental ethics, so much so that today we speak of "global bioethics", in a sort of unification under a single label of all applied ethics. The essence of my thesis is that applied ethics is a new way of doing ethics, which has radically changed the content and methodology of ethics.

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<sup>13</sup> R.M. Hare, *Why Do Applied Ethics?*, in *New Directions in Ethics: The Challenge of Applied Ethics*, edited by J. P. DeMarco and R. M. Fox, Routledge, New York 1986, pp. 225-237.

In addition, one can add a remark from the sociology of the academy: bioethicists and other philosophers who study applied ethics are often trained as such and know very little about the history of moral doctrines, metaethics, and normative ethics. They approach practical problems directly without ever having addressed normative issues conceptually, making the bottom-up approach at least true in practice.

My claim is that applied ethics is the new ethic regarding methodology and themes. The practical problems that have arisen since the late 1960s and the secularisation of the Western world have led philosophers to deal with new problems and to their voice being relevant in the public sphere.

#### **4. *What kind of applied ethics?***

For the first time in this context, philosophy knows a public relevance, which it may not have had for a long time. Toulmin comments:

But, now it was no longer a field for academic, theoretical, even mandarin investigation alone. Instead, it had to be debated in practical, concrete, even political terms, and before long moral philosophers (or, as they barbarously began to be called, 'ethicists') found that they were as liable as the economists to be called on to write 'op ed' pieces for the New York Times, or to testify before congressional committees<sup>14</sup>.

Philosophers deal not only with concrete issues but also with concrete cases. They may be engaged either in the resolution of a case or in the arguments accompanying the drafting of a law. There are thus different levels of applied ethics that, while in continuity with each other, have distinct objectives<sup>15</sup>.

The thesis, therefore, that applied ethics is the new ethics needs further specification.

Three levels of applied ethics can be distinguished according to their different purposes. The first level is *philosophical* applied

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<sup>14</sup> S. Toulmin, *op. cit.*, p. 749.

<sup>15</sup> J. Arras, *Theory and Bioethics*, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. N. Zalta, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/theory-bioethics>.

ethics. It aims to construct a “comprehensive theory” in Rawlsian terms. According to Rawls, a comprehensive theory is an exhaustive theory of ethics and politics that incorporates metaphysical statements and a comprehensive conception of the good life, i.e., religious, philosophical, or cultural values. In this case, a theory of philosophical applied ethics is a theory that seeks to give a comprehensive account of a specific problem. The emblematic case may be abortion: traditionally, one starts by defining what is a “person” and then goes on to determine whether the embryo or fetus can be defined as such and thus argue for or against such a practice. This type of applied ethics aims to provide a theory that shows the deep-seated reasons for supporting or not supporting a specific practice or a solution to a problem. Such a theory will be divisive since it incorporates metaphysical and value-based assumptions that a part of people will not share.

The second level of applied ethics is *political*. Here, the aim is not to provide a comprehensive theory but to issue regulations, guidelines, and policies. For this reason, it is advisable to reach as broad a compromise as possible, which eliminates conflict and does not impose substantive moral positions on any minorities or, in any case, on a section of the public that holds a different moral view. Again taking up Rawlsian theory, the most appropriate argumentative method in this field will be public reasons. According to Rawls, when choosing the principles of justice that govern a society, one must choose those principles that are acceptable to all rational and reasonable individuals. The justifications cannot start from moral or metaphysical assumptions typical of a specific party. The aim here is not the completeness of the explanation and argumentation but rather to find agreement between the parties with shareable arguments.

Finally, the third level is the analysis of *concrete cases*. Applied ethics to case seeks to resolve individual problem situations. Again, the type of arguments involved must be clear: in many

situations, decisions must be made quickly, so the only helpful tool is cost-benefit calculations.

Returning to the question of applied ethics as the new ethics, the question becomes: which level are we talking about? Primarily, the revolution began in the realm of philosophical applied ethics: after all, as I said at the beginning of this paper, it is a revolution in philosophical ethics, which for the first time, finds itself discussing concrete problems in a secular manner. However, as Toulmin points out, it immediately seemed appropriate to take an interest in the political aspect or the resolution of individual concrete cases. This interest in political and concrete practice brings with it two aspects. On the one hand, it leads to the discovery of new methods of investigation i.e., bottom-up approaches such as casuistics overturn the traditional top-down approach of applied ethics. One does not first investigate the general problem (what euthanasia can be like), and then the proposed solutions are dropped into concrete cases (whether or not a particular patient can receive euthanasia treatment); instead, quite the opposite: one starts from the analysis of concrete cases (which patients and in which contexts can receive euthanasia treatment) and from these, a general rule is derived (under what circumstances euthanasia is permitted and why). On the other, it has produced a sociological shift: philosophers have entered the decision-making mechanisms, both at the political level and in the concrete management of problems, and have become part of public life (at least in some contexts).

##### ***5. The role of the philosopher today***

Since the 1960s, a 'new ethics' has been affirmed. This statement has a double value. There is new ethics because, as Parfit said, there is a new way of arguing in ethics, which prescind from theology and religion. This way is the most widespread among the philosophical or intellectual elite and most people living in the

West, for whom religion finds less place and importance in the world.

Secondly, there is new ethics from a methodological point of view: because applied ethics is the new ethics, in the sense that reflection is directly dropped into the dimension of the practical problems (be it abortion or global warming), and if we take a closer look with a variety of methods and objectives: one may want to build a theory on a specific point, or offer arguments for political discussion, or even offer a contribution to the solution of a specific case.

The social and methodological aspects jointly contributed to this new philosophical landscape. The emergence of concrete problems has favored a shift to a different type of practical philosophy, so secularisation has favored a reflection much less tied to metaphysical beliefs and dogmas and much closer to the identification and solution of contemporary problems. The two aspects have also reinforced each other in a tangle that is difficult to unravel. Philosophers have been asked to intervene in public discussions precisely because of widespread secularisation (otherwise, only the churches and their representatives would have been asked)<sup>16</sup>.

Furthermore, it is precisely because non-religious philosophical reflection has become commonplace that we have moved further away from religious thought. Finally, dealing directly with concrete problems allowed philosophers to enter directly into moral dispute, on the one hand, because this was the demand (from funders and civil society), but on the other hand, because it showed the innovativeness of non-religious thought and allowed a watershed with the religious theories of common sense and tradition.

Given, then, that new ethics has come into being from the standpoint of its basic approach, as a secular one, and given that moral

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<sup>16</sup> See A.R. Jonsen, *op. cit.*

philosophy can primarily be described as applied ethics, it will be necessary to see what this change has caused in the various declinations of applied ethics and to discuss what the role of the philosopher and the future of philosophy should be.

Now as far as philosophical applied ethics is concerned, there are not problems. It is in good health and is increasingly becoming the most widely used way to approach moral philosophy. More and more specializations are springing up precisely because moral problems in many areas of practical life are recognized. What is happening with artificial intelligence exemplifies the changes and the mechanism we have tried to outline. A new technology points out new problems, and philosophers begin to reflect on them. This leads to new conceptualizations, for example, in the case of the concept of “responsibility”, which gives a different meaning to general morality (the concept of “responsibility” has changed, and new agents have to be included in morality).

Less clear is the situation at the other levels of applied ethics. As far as political applied ethics is concerned, philosophers assiduously intervene in public debates, both in the media and in more professional and scientific manner. Indeed, few philosophers have a high media impact on the public debates of respective nations. However, on a smaller scale but more effectively, moral philosophers often become the bearers of legislative proposals or are officially heard by politicians when specific laws are discussed.

The situation of applied case ethics could be better. A detailed country-by-country analysis would go beyond the scope of this paper. However, although in some states, such as the USA or the UK, the figure of the clinical bioethicist is fully recognized, elsewhere this figure needs to be improved. Furthermore, in any case, in fields other than clinical ones, the presence of an expert philosopher is rare.

One could discuss the external causes that produce this situation (such as the low esteem of professionals and scientists for philosophical work and expertise), but this is not the aim of this paper. Here I want to discuss the internal causes within the discipline, which means that the revolution outlined by Toulmin and Parfit still needs to be completed and to show how philosophers can be instrumental in solving concrete problems through their particular expertise. Indeed, the revolution caused by dealing with practical problems can only be said to be complete if we not only deal with these problems at the general or political level but also the concrete level.

It must then be recognized that the philosopher has extraordinary expertise. There are various positions on the moral expert and the role of the philosopher<sup>17</sup>. I want to provide several considerations and arguments for a minimal position on which a consensus can be found on the philosopher's place in the discussion of concrete cases. I argue that, at the least, there is formal expertise that should make the philosopher's unique competence in the analysis of concrete cases recognized<sup>18</sup>.

If applied ethics also arose because of society's demand for philosophers to express themselves on contemporary problems, what do they offer? They could offer on one hand a suggestion or an intellectual's opinion, and on the other hand a factual content. Now the "opinion" as columnist does not offer any specifically philosophical content, so more is needed to justify academic

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<sup>17</sup> For example, D. Archard, D. *Why moral philosophers are not and should not be moral experts*, in «Bioethics», XXV, 3, 2011, pp. 119-127; J.S. Gordon, *Moral philosophers are moral experts! A reply to David Archard*, in «Bioethics», XXVIII, 4, 2014, pp. 203-206.

<sup>18</sup> S. Camporesi, G. Cavaliere, *Can bioethics be an honest way of making a living? A reflection on normativity, governance and expertise*, in «Journal of Medical Ethics», XLVII, 2021, pp. 159-163; S. Camporesi, *La bioetica come professione e l'expertise in materia bioetica: riflessioni pedagogiche sullo sviluppo di un curriculum di Master di secondo livello in bioetica e scienze sociali in ambito anglosassone*, in «Future of science and ethics», VI, 1, 2021, pp. 74-82; M. Cresti, *I livelli dell'etica e l'argomentazione morale*, Vicolo del Pavone, Tortona 2021.

research on applied ethics issues or teaching or funding programs. Philosophers are asked not to be opinion leaders but to contribute scientifically to their subject topic. The question, therefore, remains whether the specificity of philosophy is material or formal. By “material content” I mean content that directly concerns moral positions, i.e. taking a stand towards one moral theory or another. Conversely, “formal content” does not concern specific moral positions but their form, i.e., the identification of arguments, logical structures, errors, or strengths.

Picking up on Parfit’s thesis, ethics has formal and material content to offer to the discussion. The fact that religious arguments are expunged from the discussion points toward this hypothesis. The moral philosopher offers arguments of a certain kind. As far as Parfit is concerned, his *Convergence Thesis* goes in precisely this direction: in the end, all moral theories converge on a single position through a climb up the mountain from different sides<sup>19</sup>. So moral philosophers, by expelling fallacious arguments, propose a single solution (or at most a small cluster of similar solutions), so the problem of dissent disappears. There is a moral position, and philosophers can show it and thus also solve concrete moral problems<sup>20</sup>.

Although I am sympathetic to this thesis, I cannot arguing here, so I will limit myself to showing how the moral philosopher can at least offer formal content. When faced with a problem and we have to solve it, we find justifications supporting possible solutions. That is: we look for arguments. Arguments can be of different kinds. We can appeal to engineers who give us arguments about the feasibility of various options. But we can also have arguments about the desirability of the various options. Ultimately, our drive is

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<sup>19</sup> D. Parfit, *op. cit.* vol. I.

<sup>20</sup> A similar claim can also be found in Maurizio Mori, who separates deontological ethics with absolute duties on the one hand and consequentialist and deontological ethics with prima facie duties on the other. See M. Mori, *op. cit.*; and M. Mori, *Manuale di Bioetica. Verso una civiltà biomedica secolarizzata*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2013.

to find an epistemic optimum, that is, to find the most justified options. Now what is the role of the applied ethicist philosopher in this deliberative process? What does she have to offer?

Regardless of whether moral knowledge exists, there is, however, a correct method for argumentation, which is the drive for epistemic optimality. The moral philosopher is the expert in moral argumentation; even assuming she has no material content to offer, she is the one who has matured her competence in recognizing, analyzing, and evaluating arguments. She is the one who is best able to do a cleansing job of other people's thinking, to show strengths and weaknesses, so that she can present valid and clear arguments. The expert in moral philosophy is the one who knows how *to walk the walk* and *talk the talk* in Collins' and Evans' words<sup>21</sup>, i.e., the one who knows how to contribute properly both to the discourse of moral philosophy and how to interpret the thought of others, both in the sense of other people involved in the concrete discourse and, more generally, of other disciplines involved in practical ethics.

This consideration succeeds in answering the criticism of those who deny the existence of any particular moral expertise. For those who argue that there is a fundamental difference between ethics and the rest of the disciplines since while disciplines from physics to hydraulics have content, and thus there is something that experts know better than we do, in ethics, there would be no content, so there would be no possibility of moral knowledge. If someone, therefore, asks for moral advice, it would not be given based on expertise (because it would be impossible to have expertise since

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<sup>21</sup> H. Collins, R. Evans, *Rethinking expertise*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008; the idea is also presented by S. Camporesi, G. Cavaliere, *Can bioethics be an honest way of making a living? A reflection on normativity, governance and expertise*, in «Journal of Medical Ethics», XLVII, 2021, pp. 159-163.

there is nothing to know) but would only be given based on a position of power and authority, which would make moral advice worthless<sup>22</sup>. This objection misses the point because moral expertise conceived in this way is not material but formal: a bit like the mathematician, who doesn't know the answer to every mathematical problem but knows the methods to obtain results and imagines which ones might be the most fruitful.

On the other hand, some object to the possibility of true moral expertise by arguing that for a judgment to be genuinely moral, it must result from an autonomous choice or evaluation: the individual herself must independently produce it<sup>23</sup>. Even if there were moral knowledge, it would be impossible for the expert to communicate it to others because everyone would have to arrive at that knowledge independently. Again, the objection is brushed aside because the philosopher acts as an advisor, not a substitute for the judgment-maker. The philosopher does a work of clarification and conceptualization of a material provided by the deliberating subject herself. She helps him to clarify agent's ideas; she does not replace agent's will. Therefore, the revolution of which Toulmin and Parfit speak will be complete when philosophers can and begin to deal with practical problems not only from a theoretical and political point of view but also from the point of view of practical cases. The recognition of their expertise is something new. They are not in ethics committees because their authority is recognized (e.g. because they are representatives of a religion), but they are there (or should be there) because they are the ones who, from a secular point of view and the point of view of reason, discuss the validity of the arguments that are presented and contribute to the team's discussion. It is only in this way, by recognizing the moral

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<sup>22</sup> A. Gibbard, *Thinking how to Live*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2003; S. McGrath, *Skepticism about Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for Moral Realism*, in «Journal of Philosophy», CVIII, 3, 2011, pp. 111-137.

<sup>23</sup> J. Driver, *Autonomy and the Asymmetry Problem for Moral Expertise*, in «Philosophical Studies», CXXVIII, 3, 2006, pp. 619-644; K. Jones, *Second-Hand Moral Knowledge*, in «Journal of Philosophy», XCVI, 2, 1999, pp. 55-78.

philosopher as an expert, that the change Parfit spoke of in the birth of a new discipline: Non-Religious Ethics.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have tried to show the future of the moral philosopher's figure. Applied ethics takes the form of the new ethics, understood formally, i.e., the new way moral philosophy is practiced. Moral philosophy is a recent discipline, as it has only recently become entirely independent of religious arguments. It is also characterized by a new investigation method, applied ethics. However, the philosophy practitioner must follow the path laid out by these changes and apply himself in the analysis and discussion of concrete cases. The moral philosopher possesses a unique expertise: she is the one who can recognize and analyze evaluative arguments and is thus able to contribute significantly to the solution of concrete problems arising from the emergence of new technologies. Moral philosophy is practical, and the time has finally come for it to be so in all respects.

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