

ETHICS AS THE SCIENCE OF MORALITY

Learning issues:

- ✓ What is ethics?
- ✓ The world of ethics
- ✓ The universal experience of duty
- ✓ Moral experience is universal, but some moral perceptions and judgements vary
- ✓ Universality and variability of human morality
- ✓ Moral statements

What is Ethics?

Morality is a unique feature of the life of human beings. It is deeply influenced by several cultural factors, such as history, traditions, education, religious beliefs, etc. The intellectual analysis of this human dimension in all of its complexity is the goal of the discipline called Ethics. Ethics does not create morality or moral behaviour. The goal of ethics is much more modest: to explore the nature of moral experience, its universality and its diversity. Ethics and morality are generally taken as synonyms, because they originally had the same meaning: the study of the disposition, character, or attitude of a specific person, group of people or culture, and ways of promoting or perfecting it.

► There are ethical systems ordered around the ideas of law, duty, obligation, virtue, happiness, principles, consequences, etc. In an effort to capture the valuable insights of each of these approaches it will be useful to begin by analyzing the universal moral experience of human beings. Proceeding this way, two concepts emerge as basic: one is 'value' and the other is 'duty'. Values can be identified amongst all peoples and societies and they often provide unique identifiers of those cultures. Values therefore predate the discipline called ethics, being promoted by religions, cultural traditions, history, etc. Values are the background of many other moral concepts derived from them, like principles,

norms, laws, virtues, etc. One of the most important goals of ethics is the intellectual analysis of values and value conflicts, in order to define our duties. And duties always involve the values at stake in each specific situation, promoting them as much as possible.

The universal experience of duty

- ▶ We all consider that some things ought to be done and others avoided.
- ▶ We have a duty to act in certain ways rather than others. The experience of duty is one of the most universal characteristics of human life.
- ▶ There is no human language without the so-called ‘duty-verbs’, such as ‘must’, ‘ought’, ‘shall’, or without imperative moods, in order to express commands, like: ‘do no harm!’, ‘fulfil your promises!’, ‘do not steal!’, ‘do not lie!’. Similarly, there is no human society without some rules of conduct, either ‘prohibitions’ or ‘obligations’

Universality and variability of human morality

- ▶ There are some universal and unchangeable elements in human morality, but others are historically conditioned and particular.
- ▶ Structurally, morality is always the same, but the contents are, at least to some extent, variable. In fact, moral values are constantly evolving. But at the same time, some moral duties remain unchanged, reflecting the logical limits of what counts as part of moral discourse. For instance, do not harm others, or tell the truth

The nature of moral judgements

The words surface grammar refers to the construction of the sentences in terms of subject, verb and complement. The sentences are identical in this respect. As the first sentence ascribes a property to a subject we might expect the others to do the same. However when we look at the way we handle the sentences in the case of apparent disagreements about their truth we see that they behave very differently. This shows that the depth grammar or the logical character of the sentences varies

Moral criteria and moral judgements

In the history of ethics we can find two groups of thinkers who have taken different views of moral statements depending on which of sentence i or ii most resembles sentence iii.

▶ One group have seen passions or emotions as the key element of moral sentences which makes them much like sentence ii. This takes seriously the possibility of no agreement being reachable by the application of reason. However it ignores the fact that there are logical limits to the feelings relevant to moral statements. It has been pointed out that we cannot simply experience feelings like pride by just trying hard. Rather we have to remember some achievement or relation to the object of pride in order to experience pride. Similarly we cannot experience the moral feeling of shame without recalling some unworthy event in our lives.

▶ It has also been pointed out that no rule of behaviour can count as a moral principle except it is related to a family of concepts like respect, truthfulness, pride, ostentation, harm, benefit and so on. These logical limits make moral statements appear to be akin to sentence i.

▶ But to overemphasise this similarity suggests that all moral disagreements can be resolved by appeal to these principles and criteria. But if it were not for moral values there would be no moral problems for these are created by tensions between those values in specific situations.

▶ Nevertheless reason has its role to play in moral deliberation for the logical limits we have referred to have to be respected. In many cases reasonable reflection will facilitate agreement but it simply cannot be guaranteed to do so.

Decision-making and ethics

Ethics is both a theoretical and a practical discipline.

The language of ethics refers to duties and values.

One goal of ethics is to determine right decisions, and in order to do that, it is necessary to go step by step, analyzing, first, the facts of the case, second, the values at stake, and third, the duties.

An ethical method of reasoning

First step: Fact deliberation

- ▶ i The case
- ▶ ii Deliberation about the facts

Second step: Value deliberation

- i Identification of the moral problems
- ii Choice of the main problem
- iii The values at stake

Third step: Duty deliberation

- i Reflecting on the most challenging cases
- ii Reflecting on other cases

Fourth step: Testing consistency

Fifth step: Conclusion

First step: Fact deliberation

- i The case

▶ The deliberation process begins always in the same way, with the presentation of a problem or a case, which is often difficult from the moral point of view. This difficulty is perceived as a conflict, generally called ‘moral conflict’. Conflicts appear when a decision should be taken, and it is difficult to identify the best course of action, because in all possible actions important values are at stake, and selecting one implies the infringement of other compelling values. The goal of

the ethical method of reasoning is always the same, to help people to resolve these kinds of problems, taking wise or decisions.

ii Deliberation about the facts

▶ In order to resolve a moral conflict, the first thing we must do is to make a careful analysis of the facts of the case, lowering the uncertainty in this field as much as possible and also correcting misperceptions.

▶ This is not an easy task, and it usually takes a lot of time. But at this point, the careful analysis of facts is basic if we want to do things well.

▶ For instance, a careful analysis of medical facts is essential in medicine in order to know the situation of the patient, the diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment. This is a very difficult task.

We must reduce uncertainties as much as possible, through the process of individual or collective deliberation. Nobody knows all possible facts involved in a situation

Second step: Value deliberation

i Identification of the moral problems

The analysis of a case starts when somebody thinks that he or she has a problem and thinks it is a moral problem.

Such cases are often more complex than they at first appear.

People ask about a problem, but this does not mean that this is the only problem the case presents.

It is necessary, therefore, to identify and describe the different moral problems we are able to find in the case, to enable full and unambiguous discussion.

ii Choice of the main problem

After the identification of all ethical problems at stake in the case, we must choose one among them, which is to be discussed in the next steps of the analysis.

Problems should be discussed one by one. Only after the discussion of one can we begin the debate about another, and so on.

If we mix different problems, reaching a conclusion will be impossible. In any case, we consider that the problem to be discussed first is, of course, that conveyed by the person who presented the case in step 1.

iii The values at stake

Moral problems' are always concrete, specific. They are not abstract. When someone has a moral problem, it is because he or she does not know which moral value should be respected in the situation. We say that the person has a 'conflict of values'.

Therefore, the specific language of 'moral problems' can be translated into the abstract and universal language of 'values' and 'conflict of values'. Values are special qualities. For instance, justice and truthfulness are values.

Values are qualities that human beings think important. If we think of a world without justice, or truthfulness, we can realize that these are important or positive values. There are, of course, opposite values to them, as injustice. Our duty is always and necessarily to implement positive values, promoting them in our world. And moral conflicts appear when the attempt to implement a specific value infringes the fulfilment of another. In order to solve this conflict, the first thing to do is to identify the different values at stake; that is, to translate 'moral problems' into the language of values and 'conflict of values'.

Third step: Duty deliberation

A conflict of values can be solved in different ways, and our duty is to identify and choose the best one, that is, that which promotes best the fulfilment of positive values, or that infringes least upon the values at stake.

Therefore, we must identify the different possible courses of action of the case. And the easiest way of doing that is identifying first the extreme courses of action

i Reflecting on the most challenging cases

It is important for the doctor to be sensitive to the whole range of ethical values in dealing with clinical cases. Such sensitivity, however, will often present challenges which would otherwise not occur. These challenges are ethical in nature in that it is the tensions between respect for various values which make it difficult to decide what should be done. There will be more and less demanding challenges of this kind. The most problematic for the doctor to deal with will be those where it seems that whichever alternative course of action is taken he will be doing wrong by failing to respect an important value. These situations are called dilemmas and are rarer than might at first appear. More often than not careful consideration of all aspects of the case will show that the dilemma is only apparent.

ii Reflecting on other cases

Most moral problems which face doctors in treatment decisions are less dramatic than the apparent dilemmas such as the case cited above. They usually take the form of numbers of ethical values calling for attention and making demands on practitioners. These call for careful consideration but do not suggest that the practitioner is presented with an impossible task to find an acceptable solution.

We might call these moral problems rather than dilemmas. Nevertheless considerable harms can be caused if the doctor fails to take the various issues into account. The reflection should involve weighing the various values against each other in the specific situation to facilitate the wisest decision.

That decision will be the one which is least morally objectionable, or, to put it another way, involves least disrespect for the values which figure in the case. These reflections can be complex and different cases might involve details which tip the balance one way or the other to give priority to a particular value. Sadly neat solutions are not always available but there are a number of possible outcomes. There are those where each value is compromised somewhat but at no great moral cost, and others where one value or set of values will be seen to outweigh the others in the specific set of circumstances. In the latter cases that

value or set of values will win out over the other at no moral cost for the duty to act in that situation becomes clear

Fourth step: Testing consistency

It is important that moral reflection is consistent. Special pleading involves giving undue weight to one or more considerations because it is in the interest of the decision maker so to do. This will always prejudice the decision and undermine the proper role of reason in ethical reflection. We can use a number of techniques to guard against such inconsistency.

i We can avoid such bad practice by referring to some external measures such as the Law. Though the law does not solve ethical problems it does usually reflect the moral values of citizens. On some occasions laws might be unjust and not serve us in this way

ii We can also ask ourselves the question: Would I behave in this way if it was to become generally known that I had done so? An honest appraisal in these terms would draw our attention to our disregard for the principle which has been extremely important in the history of ethics, namely to act in such a way as to be able to wish that mode of behaviour be a universal law.

iii We should not be hasty in drawing conclusions in moral reflection. Once presented with moral problems in practice doctors experience a considerable injection of emotions. Such feelings are not unimportant but they might cloud any immediate judgement and stimulate rash decisions. Using the time that is available, which might also involve consulting with colleagues, allows these emotional rushes to recede somewhat and facilitate wiser decisions.

Fifth step: Conclusion

❖ The desired outcome of all these reflective activities is to arrive at wise decisions. Practical wisdom, the art of making well-thought decisions is the moral virtue par excellence. Well-thought decisions are not necessarily universally agreed decisions. Serious and responsible people can disagree on ethical matters.