

Epistemological Issues in Ethics

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1 The Place of Ethics in Philosophy

We will here consider both normative ethics (systems of prescriptions and proscriptions) and academic ethics (descriptive analytic studies dealing with at least apparently ethical phenomena). Normative ethics is ethics in the more traditional meaning. This is the domain Aristotle had in mind when he placed ethics under practical philosophy.¹ It is worth continuing the Aristotelian division of philosophy into theoretical and practical,² bringing at least some order to the multiplicity of philosophical domains – but not as any sort of absolute division.

Updating and simplifying Aristotle's classification, we might characterise the basic sub-divisions of philosophy as follows:

Theoretical philosophy (whose core is gnoseology) deals above all with knowledge. And the chief value here is truth.

Practical philosophy deals with action. And its core value is the good.³

As is well known, Aristotle distinguishes two areas in practical philosophy: ethics and politics (in the narrower sense of the word).⁴ With certain reservations, we can maintain this division. We must remember that ethics in the traditional sense (normative ethics) possesses a really philosophical character, rather than scientific ethics – whose research methods approach those of the specialist sciences where only the final research results are of major interest to philosophy. As for Aristotle's "politics", on account of the different meaning we attach today to this term, it would seem better to call the field that the Stagirite had in mind "social philosophy" – without forgetting the normative aspects of this field.

1 *Topics* A 14, 105 b 19; *Eudemian Ethics* I, 8.

2 *Metaphysics* VI, 1.

3 Perhaps it would be good to add the proviso that I am not treating so-called "philosophical values" as absolute, eternal and unchanging Platonic ideas. I rather view them as the reified properties of objects capable of satisfying (what we believe to be) our most fundamental (and frequently most noble) needs.

4 *Nicomachean Ethics* X, 9.

The issues of normativity and descriptiveness, and the relationship of ethics to social philosophy have only been touched upon here, and will be discussed in more detail later.

2 Ethics and Morality

Let us now turn to ethics, our main focus, and ask how it differs from social philosophy – both being a part of practical philosophy. Of course, whenever we ask what makes item *A* different from item *B*, we do assume some basic similarity. Well, the features that jointly characterize ethics and social philosophy are implied by their both belonging to practical philosophy: they both consider human action and the striving to achieve some good. However, ethics determines or investigates what constitutes a valuable (or purportedly valuable) activity of an individual (secondarily: of a group) – regardless of any inter-individual organization. Social philosophy, on the other hand, considers organizations or institutions arising in the course of the development of relations between the people that make up a community.

Now, when characterizing ethics, we speak about a “valuable action”, but this is an inadequate characterisation – not every action considered valuable has been evaluated from an ethical standpoint. Making yourself some shoes or a coat is undoubtedly a worthwhile activity, but rather in an economic, not an ethical, sense. So, it should be said that ethics investigates (or determines) morally or ethically valuable action. But now this characterization falls into the manifest error of *ignotum per ignotum* – a circular definition. To avoid these errors, we need to disclose the specific nature of ethical or moral action. In the first place I claim that the concepts of “ethical” and “moral” are not equivalent, though they sometimes appear to be.

We say, for example, an “ethical system” but not a “moral system”. On the other hand, we say “a moral human being” rather than an “ethical human being”. But both “moral evaluation” and “ethical evaluation” are used.

What is the difference between these concepts? Perhaps we will understand better moving from adjectives to nouns: “ethics” and “morality”.

Ethics (in the traditional sense) is a *system* of rules and norms, governing valuable⁵ courses of action. So, it is a *logical* construction (in a broad sense). This is the meaning when we speak of Stoic Ethics or Medical Ethics, etc.

5 We will shortly explain the particular significance of this valuable course of action.

Morality is the set of *attitudes, views* and *dispositions* of an individual or (secondarily) a social group concerning action that is valuable in a certain aspect.⁶ So, it is a *psychological* construct. It is in this sense that we speak of *The Morality of Mrs Dulka*,⁷ or when we speak about “bourgeois morality”, as sociologist Maria Ossowska does.

With these initial characterisations of the nouns in mind, the meaning and proper use of the corresponding adjectives becomes clear.

“Ethical” in a *general* (neutral) sense means: “concerning the system or principles of ethics”. For example, an “ethical judgment” means “an evaluation on the basis of an ethical system”. We are not concerned here with whether the judgment is favourable or unfavourable. However, the expression “ethical” can also be used with the presumption of a *positive* attitude, for example when we say: “Mr A’s actions were highly unethical”. In this case we are not saying that his actions “did not relate to an ethical system”, but that they “were no in accordance with a (recognised) system of ethics”. Here the adjective “ethical” includes a positive valuation (and “unethical” – negative), not neutral as in the previous example.

The situation is analogous with the adjective “moral”. In a *general* (neutral) sense it means “concerned with the domain of morality”. This is the meaning when we speak of a “moral judgment” concerning someone’s course of action, meaning that this course of action is merely being assessed in terms of a set of views, of an individual or of a group, concerning what is good action. But we need not have decided whether the action was positive or negative. But we sometimes use the concept “moral” with the *presumption* of a positive assessment, for example in the sentence: “Mr K followed highly moral motives” (meaning in accordance with the morality of the individual or group or social circle that is judging Mr K).

To be precise, we should emphasize that the adjective “moral” can also be used in another sense – a non-ethical sense, which we will not be dealing with here. In some expressions, “moral” means “not sensory”, even “speculative”. For example, there is sometimes said to be a “moral discomfort” as opposed to the “physical pain” which is nearly always related to the irritation of sense organs. The English sometimes call philosophical or speculative subjects the “moral sciences”. In some expressions, the word “moral” means more or less the same as pertaining to the “subject”. This is the meaning when, for example, we speak of “moral certainty”, not based on objective, e.g. mathematical, facts. “Moral responsibility”, based on subjective factors that cannot be

6 Cf. footnote 3.

7 Polish play by Gabriela Zapolska, satirising bourgeois morality (editor’s remark).

measured, is opposed to “legal responsibility” which is associated with concrete, defined sanctions.

The distinction between “ethics” and “morality” (and correspondingly, “ethical” and “moral”) is significant when it represents a distinction between action undertaken on the basis of conviction and action undertaken due to principles or rules. In many cases, however, especially where we are dealing with a basic characterisation, ethical and moral act can exhibit the same detailed features. We will now move on to characterising those features.

3 The Nature of Ethical Action

Let us consider one of the most fundamental epistemological problems in ethics, one that demands solution when we use tentative expressions such as a “certain valuable course of action”. The problem is: What is the specific nature of the ethical or moral value of a course of action?

As we have seen, action may be deemed valuable (“good”) when it brings any material benefit, even a temporary one. For example, someone might say after bandaging an injured leg, or after taking and eating a neighbour’s goose, “That was worthwhile! That was a good thing to do”. But were these *ethically* (or morally) valuable actions (even from the perspective of the actor)?

No. The agent may call them “good” but they would not call them ethical or moral. Neither would they call them unethical or immoral – they may not qualify them as having an ethical dimension at all. So what marks out those “good” actions as ethical? What is specific ethical about actions *deemed ethical in a system of ethics*?

Not an easy question. The greatest difficulty is to find a characterisation that includes not only action which is positive in a system of ethics – what we can call “ethical humanitarianism”⁸ – but also actions which may be egocentric (even extremely so) but yet are in accordance with the norms and goals of some ethical system. For example, the acquisition of greater and greater knowledge as part of a program of self-perfection, or – a drastic case – deceiving and murdering in the pursuit of power in Machiavelli’s ethics (sic!).

In order to make a start on this characterisation of ethical action, which must be so broad as to include contradictory conceptions, we need to analyse the structures of ethical systems in general. Every complete system of

⁸ By *ethical humanitarianism* I do not mean a definite system of ethics but a broad (not narrowly defined in virtue of its generality) *type* of ethical system in which one of the leading norms is the prescription to act in accordance with a universal kindness.

normative ethics contains: a more or less precise definition of its “highest good”; a hierarchy or values worthy of realisation in virtue of their relation to this highest good; and prescriptions and proscriptions which show the way to realise the “ethical” goals.

As a case in point, let us take the ethical system of the stoics. The highest good is ἀρετή – virtue based on a wise and courageous sense of justice; out of this virtue issues the purest joy. The following values are “worthy of choice” or προηγμένα: a deeper understanding of the world, reasonable temperance, the respect and love of own’s environment ... Rules of action that would lead to the realisation of these values are: living in accordance with the nature of the world and human nature, becoming emotionally independent of the “slings and arrows” of fortune, developing a state of “dispassion” (ἀπάθεια) ... Proscriptions would prohibit: the use of physical and moral force (infringing the freedom and dignity of another), cheating, flattery, surrendering to the passions ...

Now, let us take a look at an almost opposite system: the maximally egoistic (or egocentric) system of Max Stirner. Here we find another “highest good”: the joy of my own Self. Greater or lesser personal pleasures (changeable pleasures, depending on the moment) represent a hierarchy of ethical values. There are prescriptive commands like: “Be an egoist!”, “Disregard all the delusions of social ethics”, “Do not be a slave of any idea”, etc. – these are the norms of this ethical system.

So, if *ethical* conduct – in the *objective-relative meaning* of the word considered here – is action which *consciously*⁹ *aims to realise the highest good and*

9 Awareness of principles or rules is key to being able to distinguish *ethical* from *merciful* action, even in a humanitarian system. One may give up something for someone when gripped by compassion without being in possession of any conscious ethical principles. This will then be an act of mercy (evaluated positively in a humanitarian system), but it will not be an ethical course of action. It is only when action is on the basis of consciously held principles of an ethical system that it is ethical action, for example, when we treat Pigmies with respect thought they may be ugly by our sense of beauty or living at a low cultural level. We hold to the principle that the dignity of every human being deserves a respect.

Distinguishing merciful action from ethical has led some important philosophers to deny the value of feeling in ethics altogether. The Stoics already claimed that feeling (for example, compassion) muddies the purity of ethical action in a similar that emotion reduces the effectiveness of a surgical operation. Kant also wrote that qualifying action as ethical assumes the elimination of emotional aspects – an opinion that met with the well-known and witty riposte of Schiller in the epigram of *Gewissenskrupel*. It seems to me that the strictness of thinkers on this point contains a double *non sequitur*: from the fact that ethical action is based on principles and not feelings it does not follow that feelings may not *accompany* ethical action – feelings which may be positively assessed. It is also (perhaps all the more) the case that it does not follow that feeling has no value in ethics. After all, the values of

the subordinate values of the ethical system by satisfying the behavioural norms, then “ethical action” (in that system) might be sharing your last piece of bread with a stranger (in a humanitarian ethical system) or, for example, “pushing over one who is falling” (in Nietzsche’s system).

The paradoxical use of “the ethical”, relativising it to an ethical system in question, will be further considered later on. For now, to fill out what we have just said about ethical conduct, we can, it seems, put forward the following, briefer characterisation: *ethical action* (or moral action) *aims to bring an important good to a living being*. This formulation of the thesis of course requires some clarification and justification.

4 Commentary to the Characterisation

We should above all draw attention to the aspect of *intention* in the characterisation, marked out by the expression “ethical action aims ...” (more precisely we should say, “the agent aims ...”). Unwitting actions, then, do not qualify as ethical (or moral): if someone aims a gun at their friend, being convinced it is unloaded, and fires and kills their friend, this action is not considered unethical here. At most it is foolhardy. The stoics already emphasized the key meaning of intention for ethical conduct, arriving, in this way, at some extreme statements: even action which brings about the unhappiness of many must be considered moral if it is undertaken with good intentions.

This position has frequently met with opposition: Can we really consider conduct which is objectively harmful ethical, because its intention was to bring relief or even joy? Can we, for example – invoking La Fontaine’s famous fable of *The Bear and the Gardener* – consider the bear’s act of killing the gardener with a stone moral, because the bear only wanted to kill a fly that was sitting on the gardener’s head, disturbing his sleep?

humanitarian ethics, advocated by both the Stoics and Kant, were established on the basis of feelings: love, compassion, universal kindness ...

A person who acts ethically and at the same time without feeling (insofar as this is even possible) may perhaps inspire respect but the society will remain indifferent to them – as they are indifferent to that society. A person who only acts on the basis of noble impulses may enjoy the love of their community but they will rarely be respected. Long-term respect and deep attachment are usually only granted to those who act ethically together with strongly positive feeling. (We should emphasize that these claims about society’s attitude to various kinds of action is independent of the ethical positions they espouse. The assessment of feeling, however, is here undertaken from the perspective of humanitarian ethics.)

I do believe we should consider the bear's conduct as ethical (leaving aside his merciless intention to kill a fly!), because the intention was good. If we feel shocked by this characterisation, that is because we wrongly interpret the bear's "conduct" as the bear's "killing". This substitution on our part related to the famous "Electra" paradox of Eubulides which shows that we cannot substitute coextensive terms at liberty in intensional contexts. Let us recall the most important aspects of this paradox. Electra may say: "I see a veiled figure". The veiled figure is her brother Orestes. But Electra cannot say, "I see Orestes" if she does not recognise him. "To see" here is an intensional term. Though the case involves implication and not substitution of coextensive terms, the case is similar to the Bear and the Gardener. In the sentence "the bear planned to free the gardener from his discomfort by killing the fly on the gardener's forehead with a massive stone slab", we cannot just replace the words that follow "planned" with "the death of the gardener", even though the gardener's death was the direct result of the bear's throwing the rock. In extensional logic the truth of q follows from the truth of $p \supset q$ and the truth of p . But when an intensional functor is directed at p , the analogous inference is not valid. "Planned" is just such an intensional term directed at p .

What is this "significant" good in our characterisation? Where is it stated that one good is significant and another not?

In every case, it is the ethical system (of normative ethics) in question which settles the matter, which serves to judge the value of an action. In other words, the concept of "significance" is not absolute but relativized.

To demonstrate the relativity of this concept, let us consider a drastic (but historically grounded) example. From the perspective of the Holy Inquisition's ethics, it was ethical to burn a heretic alive at the stake, because it aids the salvation of their soul – an important good granted to a living being. (Physical death and bodily suffering do not, here, represent an overriding "significant good" for the being concerned.)

The same conduct (burning a heretic alive at the stake) would have been judged utterly unethical by supporters of Epicurus' system (indeed by the vast majority of civilised people of a humanitarian disposition). The execution for them was depriving a living being of a significant good, their *κατασθηματικὴ ἡδονή* or undisturbed peace, the absence of suffering, the bliss of friendship and learning – without offering anything in return. For Epicurus did not believe in life after death.

The foregoing discussion, together with the example of the Inquisition, leads to certain paradoxical consequences. If an ethical intention is sufficient for an act to be regarded as ethical, then burning the heretics should be considered ethical even from a humanitarian perspective. After all, the Inquisition

wanted to make the heretic happy by burning them; they wanted them to reach heaven, a place of eternal happiness, thanks to a process of tortuous purification here on earth. This is a consequence which is only apparently unacceptable. If the Inquisitor really believed that he would make the heretic happy by delivering them to heaven, to that extent he acted ethically (and even in a humanitarian way – wanting the happiness of another being). But to the extent they intentionally put the heretic through unspeakable agony, they act highly unethically (from this point of view).

We might say: Do we not frequently put our loved ones through lesser pain so they can enjoy lasting joy (for example, putting a child through an operation)? Does the Inquisitor behave in the same way, according to his conscience? Earthly suffering is a triviality in comparison with the “eternal bliss” it makes available.

If we really did accept the Inquisition’s (religious-)ethical system, we would have to acknowledge their behaviour towards the heretic as ethical – on condition the Inquisitor only acted out of those motives. But we (by “we”, I mean the overwhelming majority of contemporary, civilised people) have a different attitude: a positive attitude that rejects the superstitions of eternal happiness in heaven in return for terrible suffering on earth, just as we reject the superstitions of eternal suffering in hell as punishment for infidelity here on earth. We consider the deliberate infliction of pain for illusory goals as the opposite extreme to a positive humanitarian ethics.

One might interrupt again: “For the Inquisitor, that was no superstition. He was fully convinced that he is offering the highest joy for a moment’s suffering.”

If he were convinced that in reality he was sending the heretic to the flames *entirely* for the purpose of making what he deemed heretics happy, we cannot deny his actions their ethical status. So, why does this conclusion shock – that the Inquisitor’s actions may be deemed ethical? Because we know that it is *not true* that the Holy Inquisition, burning heretics, was guided exclusively by a sincere love for them – not even a deluded and misguided love. For we know that the real motives for sending people to the flames were completely unethical: the predominant desire was to deter other heretics who might undermine the authority of the Catholic Church. These were power games, sometimes even stooping as low as to act to confiscate property to improve one’s own wealth – or the wealth of the Holy Inquisition ...

That is why it is so difficult to accept that the conduct of the Inquisitor might have been ethical. It would be much easier if we believed that they only sent people to their deaths completely convinced that the “victims” would finally be happy. Everything we know about the Inquisition argues against this assumption of burning out of love, even insane love. That is why we shrink from the thought of recognising the Inquisitor’s actions as ethical.

We spoke about a “living being” (more precisely: a being taken to be conscious), and not only about mankind. Some ethical systems also imply that we can act ethically or unethically towards animals, and even towards plants, if we attribute to them a certain primitive level of consciousness, the ability to feel pleasure or pain. Humanitarian ethics condemns cruelty towards animals, and some pan-mystic systems condemn the excessive destruction of plants and minerals. The ancient Hindu perspective based on the principle of *tat tvam asi* (“Thou are that”) approaches this attitude.

5 The Relativist Position and the Humanitarian Position

In the *objectivist-relativist* approach we have adopted until now a course of action is called ethical in accordance with an *appropriate* ethical system, i.e. with a system that: (a) sets out what the “significant goods” are – the highest good and the hierarchy of related values and (b) provides the norms of action whose purpose is the realisation of those values.

In this approach:

(α) ethical from the perspective of Cyrenaic ethics would be the behaviour of a person constantly and everywhere seeking pleasure, unconcerned about the level of this pleasure;

(β) ethical would be (for example, in the solipsistic ethics of Max Stirner) to be exclusively concerned with anything of value only for one’s “Self” – with complete disregard for the needs, sufferings and joys of other people;

(γ) ethical would even be – from the perspective of the ethics of a North American tribe – the behaviour of a warrior whose goal would be to accomplish the greatest number of enemy scalps as a measure of their valour, the highest good;

(δ) we could not call “ethical” (from the perspective of humanitarian ethics) the behaviour of a mother sacrificing herself for her children as this behaviour is not the result of any ethical system – it happens naturally, instinctively. A mother’s neglect of *her own* children is against social¹⁰ norms but not ethical norms. From an ethical point of view, there is no privileged place accorded one’s own children among other living beings to say that only one’s own should be cared for.

This, frequently paradoxical, objectivist-relativist concept of the ethical is extremely useful in *ethological*¹¹ research because: (a) as befits a scientific attitude, it does not privilege any particular ethical system in descriptive-analytical

10 See sec. 7 for the difference between social and ethical normativity.

11 See sec. 12 for the nature of ethology and its tasks.

contexts; (b) it is very broad and apparently includes all possibly objects of academic ethical research – any acts deemed valuable in any system of ethics.

However, it often happens that we more or less consciously, based on an ethical system like the humanitarian system, call “ethical” only that action which contributes to increasing the joy of others or reducing their suffering.¹² This conception of the ethical does not have a ethological character, a scientific character, but is instead normative and necessarily non-scientific¹³ – however, it may be closer to the heart of any civilised person.

From the perspective of the “humanitarian ethics” we have been discussing, a characterisation which would be adequate for the ethologist would suffice. For the “humanitarian” it is not enough to say that certain behaviour aims to bring an important good to a living being. They would require the following supplementations:

- (a) It is of basic significance that we are concerned with granting significant goods to *other* beings; granting oneself important goods should be a matter of self-improvement;
- (b) In bringing a good to some, we should not at the same time do wrong to others;¹⁴
- (c) There is usually also an aspect of self-sacrifice. “Ethical” is usually applied to conduct where the agent brings someone a good by denying themselves (lesser or greater) things of value or by overcoming obstacles. That is why no one will consider a kiss from a beloved an ethical action – though it makes another being happy without bringing harm to others (conditions 1 and 2 thereby satisfied), but it is not an act of self-sacrifice or self-denial; on the contrary it brings the agent happiness too.

This is how ethical conduct is on the whole understood in the contemporary civilised world. We may note that though this characterisation of the ethical as it appears in humanitarian ethics may personally suit many researchers (one hopes!) it does not serve for *ethological* purposes, because it reduces the scope of consideration excluding many cases of action which should be studied as ethics in the context of descriptive-analytic academic study – when we study anything that has ever been deemed ethical by anyone.

12 See Czesław Znamierowski: “Naczelna norma moralna i jej pochodne” [The Supreme Moral Norm and Its Derivatives], *Studia Filozoficzne*, no. 3 (1957): 97–117.

13 On the non-scientific character of normative ethics – see sec. 8.

14 We are not here considering the casuistic question as to how far the “minor” suffering of some can be tolerated if it is a condition of the “greater” joy of others.

6 Ethics and Social Philosophy

Ethics considers the action of the individual apart from any social organisation or institution. Even if there were no society, we could still – at least in certain systems – consider the ethical status of human action, even if it were only towards oneself or towards animals.

Doctrines advocating the self-perfection of mankind as the highest good, the perspective of *perfectionism*, would also be (self)assessed as ethical. Positive ethical behaviour is human action that attempts to sublimate sensory desires into artistic creativity, while negative ethical conduct would be, for example, getting completely drunk every day and behaving like an “animal” (my apologies to the animal kingdom!).

In a similar way, from the perspective of Buddhist ethics (or even from the perspective of a humanitarianism which is more familiar), the conduct of a hunter who kills animals merely to satisfy a killer instinct is highly unethical – even if the hunter was alone in the world. (Let us say our hunter is alone in unchartered territory near the South Pole and he or she pulls out the eyes of each penguin encountered.)

Social philosophy – in contrast to ethics – deals with the activity of individuals and groups in the context of organisation and institutions, the creations of interpersonal relations.

“Society”, the reference point for individual and group action in this perspective, may be the most numerous possible collectivity – the whole of humanity, as conceived of in the cosmopolitan theories of the cynics, stoics, Christians, socialists ... But “society” can also be narrowed down to just two people: there were social relations between Robinson and Friday on Defoe’s otherwise uninhabited island. The institution of slavery is reinstated (the relation of master and slave). A relation between individuals can be called social even when it is the most primitive “institution” or organisation. It need not be the result of deliberate organising activity, indeed all the basic social institutions (family, language, hunter-gathered groups ...) emerged spontaneously.

We call good action in the domain of ethics ethical (or moral according to the situation). We often call good action in the domain of social life proper or just, although this last epithet in particular stands out when we think of social action in terms of theories of “total egoism”.

Distinguishing *ethics* from *social philosophy* (or better: *normativity*¹⁵) only happens at a relatively advanced level of mankind’s civilisational development.

15 We will address normativity in sec. 7.

At lower levels of this development, the necessary distinctions are lacking: moral value (or ethical value) is identified with social value and greater weight is given to the social perspective – it is easier to understand as it invokes external factors like orders and prohibitions issued by social institutions. There are analogies to what we find in the areas investigated by genetic psychology and the history of philosophy. A child first gets some understanding of its surroundings, only later do they discover their own “I”. Greek thinkers were first of all “philosophers of nature” (the Ionian school), only later did they turn to the study of human nature (with Socrates and the sophists). Focussing attention on “internal”, subjective factors and according them key significance requires a certain maturity of thought. That is why social judgements precede ethical judgements in the history of humanity (as reflected in the development of the individual).

7 Ethical and Social Normativity

We call the set of ethical norms (prescriptions, prohibitions) *ethical normativity*. It should be carefully distinguished from social normativity – a set of norms in social philosophy. The distinction is important partly because the two are often confused. So often it happens that the normative prescriptions and prohibitions of social philosophy are presented as ethical norms!

Before we move on to examples, let us make ourselves aware once again of the differences between ethics and social philosophy.

(Normative) ethics regulates the conduct of human individuals with regard to the acquisition or avoidance of some key “important” value, with the additional condition that this value (or “ideal” where its realisation is pursued) is set regardless of any organisational or institutional connections of individuals. If it were not for human society and its institutions, ethical norms such as “love every living being and avoid (if at all possible) harm” would be still be in force. Or others, like: “pursue pleasure ceaselessly”, “improve yourself constantly (by exercising the will, deeper knowledge of the world, etc.)”, etc.

Normative social philosophy provides, as we have already seen, prescriptions and prohibitions for conduct – taking into account society and its institutions. “Show solidarity with the leaders of the working class”, “defend your motherland at all costs”, “do not degrade the social class you belong to by contact with a member of a pariah group”, “incline others, if necessary, by force, to advocating your group’s political views and to acting according to these views” – these are a sample of the social norms of various systems.

The assumed good of the society¹⁶ or a portion of that society is always paramount here. But these social norms may sometimes collide with ethical norms propounded as absolutes by individuals, norms like: “Do not kill”, “Do no lie”, “Do not force anyone to act against their will or convictions”.

It turns out that some courses of action can be deemed proper (socially valuable) and at the same time unethical. Though the maxim “the ends justify the means” has been considered right by some social actors, they often admit that it is not ethical.

Closer analysis reveals that the same norm can sometimes have a social character while in other circumstances an ethical nature. For instance, the principle “Help those who suffer” or “Be actively kind towards others”. These are *social* norms when the value espoused in the behaviour recommended is justified as a good for the society; but the same norms are *ethical* if they are justified by their being conducive to some “significant good” for a human being, regardless of social expediencies. For example, we might believe that active kindness and help for others enriches in an important respect the character of human beings.

Comparing the social perspective with the ethical shows, as we have already seen, that the second perspective, the ethical, is deeper and more “fundamental”. Society, understood as a collection of specific individuals, is a kind of construction and at the same time a kind of abstraction. “Societal good” is only in an indirect way an individual’s good (and certainly not necessarily for all individuals). Besides, society’s good tends to be understood rather narrowly and “horizontally” as material wellbeing – the absence of poverty or the exploitation of one social group by another. The value of culture (whether intellectual, aesthetic, etc.) to be supported for the sake of society is rarely appreciated. Or whether an act is “just” or not (a social value) – abstracting from the agent’s intention: we do not need to inquire too much into the agent’s experience to evaluate whether their conduct has contributed to the realisation of a societal good. This is why the social philosophy of communism condemns “liberals” who often have the best of intentions, but whose actions are deemed “socially hostile” by communists.

16 Social norms can also serve the good not of the entire society but of an individual – but an individual of that society and as such a member of society. For example, Machiavelli’s maxim for the monarch: “Be as cunning as a fox” or the principle (which conceals a norm): “the monarch is permitted to do everything (cheat, poison, strangle, burn) to acquire power,” because “*il fine giustifica i mezzi*” (“the ends justify the means” – a principle which can lead to both a social and an ethical norm).

The situation is completely different when it comes to ethics. Here we do indeed need to look deeply into a person, into their intentions. If the intentions are good, the resulting action cannot be regarded as unethical.

Ethics – in contrast to social philosophy – considers the realisation of the good for a specific human being, goodness directly concerning a person. The good here is not, on the whole, understood as “material” good(s), comfort or economic prosperity but as spiritual goodness: the joy of learning or the experience of beauty, satisfaction from self-discipline or from contributing to another person’s happiness ... And this is why the ethical point of view is deeper or “higher” – it develops in human history later than society and requires a higher degree of spiritual maturity.

8 Critique of Normative Ethics

Having distinguished ethical from social normativity (and what follows from that – ethics from social philosophy), we can now focus our attention on ethics itself and ask ourselves whether ethics in the normative form we have been considering hitherto is scientific in nature. Put briefly: Is normative ethics science?

On closer inspection, it turns out that *normative ethics is not scientific in nature*. The following are the main reasons for this conclusion:

- (1) Normative ethics is *dogmatic*: it does not establish its norms in a scientific manner, basing them instead on – revelation, personal feeling, etc. Science, on the other hand, as we shall see shortly, elicits its “norms” from empirically (objectively) established relations.
- (2) Normative ethics is *absolutist*: ethical norms are universally and absolutely binding; science does not provide this kind of norm.

Every academic or scientific judgment is relativized: to changing experience (in the empirical sciences) or to varying conventions (in the formal sciences).

We do encounter normative judgments in science (whether technical or practical), but they are always relativized.

Case. The owner of a sick dog enters a vet’s and asks for the animal to be put down. The vet says: “Give it an arsenic pill”.

This is not an absolute commandment; it’s shorthand for a conditional judgment: “If you want your dog to pass on (i.e. to cease suffering), please give it the following ..., etc.”. In general: Science never says: “Do unconditionally and absolutely *A, B, C ...*,” instead it says, “If you want to achieve goal *X*, proceed as follows ... (use such and such means) ...”

We might ask: On what basis is science able to issue norms – even conditional norms, relativized to a goal? There is no magical *rationis normativae* analogous to Molière's *facultas dormitiva*. The *conditional norms* proposed by science are based, simply, on the commonest conditional judgements like “If p , for which judgments (when we are dealing with empirical sciences) does one claim there is a relationship between cause and effect” which in intentional human action is a connection between the means and the goal. So, this is the basis for assertive-conditional judgments which are then transformed into conditional-normative judgment of the kind “If you want to achieve q , do p ”.¹⁷

17 There undoubtedly exists an analogy between the relationship of science to life goals and the relationship of logic to genuinely true judgments. The purpose of logic is not to decide whether a judgement in question is true. That is the role of other, empirical sciences, which compare the judgment in question with experience. Despite this, logic supports the empirical sciences by means of: a) critical investigation whether a scientific conjecture is methodologically sufficiently justified, b) investigation of the implications that can be drawn from judgments deemed true on non-logical grounds (i.e. on the basis of empirical evidence). It is precisely because it does not fall to logic to guarantee the truth of judgments that the conditional judgement is so characteristic: if (judgement) p (is true), then (judgment) q (is true). Logic “takes responsibility” not for the truth of p , but for the truth of the judgment q if the truth of p is assumed – and this latter truth cannot be guaranteed by logic. Nevertheless, the logician is a person living in the real world and in possession of their own experience. So, it might happen that their own experience forces them to reject – for non-logical reasons – p as false. This rejection is no longer the work of a logician, concerned exclusively with consequences, but the decision of one seeking genuine truths.

It is said that it is not the business of science to judge whether a given life goal is valuable. These questions are settled by the varied needs of human action. Science can, however, perform a service to ethics by: (a) critically investigating whether a goal recommended by an ethical system is feasible or achievable; (b) investigating possible means of achieving the extra-scientific goals propounded (i.e. in the domain of human needs and human action). If, in these circumstances, science proposes norms of action, it does so in the form of *conditional norms*: *If you want to achieve B, apply means A*. Science cannot guarantee the value of goal B (the goal might be, for example, as it was for Hitler, the removal of an “enemy race”). Science only seeks to provide effective means of achieving the assumed goal (in the case referred to science dictates how to build gas chambers and cremation ovens). Fortunately, the academic is not only a dispassionate researcher evaluating the effectiveness of possible means to a given goal; they are also (and perhaps above all) a sensitive and active human being with their own ethical goals. On the basis of the ethical goals they themselves have developed, they may refuse to search for means to realise certain goals and might even decide to fight against them in society. And though this is not something taking place in the academic world, they use what they have learned when the issues relate to normative scientific judgments even though the main arena here is outside academia.

Someone might say: "But ethics also puts forward conditional-normative judgments. For example, the principles of Christian ethics can be interpreted to mean: *If* you want to be saved – follow the Ten Commandments and the Church's Commandments.

It is easy to note the difference between this "conditionality" and the normative conditionality of scientific judgments. The condition here stated ("If you want to be saved ...") is offered with the clear intention to *express absolute obligation* and its fulfilment. Making it more explicit, the sentence would read as follows: "If you want to be saved – and you absolutely should want this – follow the Ten Commandments, etc."

As we see, the conditionality of normative judgments in ethics is only apparent: at the core of these judgments there lies an absolute obligation from the domain of ethics.

The situation is different with science. The requirement of an "absolute obligation to act" may be connected to scientific normative judgments but still remains strictly non-scientific. "To build a bridge of such and such length, use materials of such and such load-bearing capacity". Expanding the sentence to expose its "suppressed" structure (its conditional structure), the proposition takes the form: "If you don't want your bridge to collapse, use ...", etc. Expanding it more still (to reveal the normativity), the proposition is: "If you want the bridge you build not to collapse – and you should want this – use ...", etc. This formulation reveals the fact that the "should" is not in the domain of science itself but is dictated by social conditions – that we have a social obligation as a bridge builder (or as any other member of society), not to expose other members of society to risks of injury or death.

To be sure that the judgment containing "should" is not an integral part of a scientific judgment, it is enough to recall the facts of cases where engineer-saboteurs deliberately built bridges on poor foundations in occupied countries. They used the same scientific principles (technical rules) but abandoned the normal social duty to achieve a goal that science told them they would achieve – the collapse of the bridge (during the passage of enemy tanks for example).

So, science does not itself contain absolute obligations. Social obligations are, in fact, connected with (conditional) scientific norms, but they remain essentially separate. Scientific norms have an objective value in their practical application, as we have seen, because they are based on objectively (scientifically) confirmed causal relations (in the case of empirical science) or formal relations (in the case of logical-mathematical sciences).

There is, then, a basic difference between scientific judgments and the judgments of normative ethics. Leaving aside the difference in the way the

judgments are justified, it is also worth drawing attention to the principle of the absolute obligation (the absolute imperative) governing action in ethics – and the lack of any such principle in science. These principles only appear for science when science is put to use for social or other similar purposes.

We may further ask: Why does science *not* issue in absolute norms?

The answer is related to the fact that *science does not establish the highest values*, the values governing action, the ideals to which humanity should aim.

We should also not forget that human beings set themselves chief goals of action, not as a researcher in a scientific enterprise, but as a living being, acting to satisfy their desires. In other words: *human needs define the goals* and the task of science is: (a) to critically assess the possibilities of achieving these goals; (b) where appropriate to indicate the means of achieving those goals.

Examples: (a) Considering the goal of mystical ethics – to connect with the divine – science can point to the unprovability of the existence of God, and thus to the chimerical nature of mystical ethics. (b) Considering, for example, the goals of “socialist ethics” (respect for the social good, respect for work, solidarity, etc.), science (pedagogy, psychology, sociology) can look for means to achieve this goal ...

But again: science does not establish goals and it does not issue in absolute norms of action.

It should be noted that although science does not set the highest goals of human action, it can significantly contribute to the realization by man (not as a scientist, but as a willing and acting being) of new goals of action, when, for example, science discovers new phenomena, new sides of reality, new points of view on it.

9 Kotarbiński's Normative Ethics

A supporter of normative ethics (that are absolutely binding) is Tadeusz Kotarbiński. In a sense,¹⁸ he takes a Socratic position: man has a conscience

18 In another respect, Kotarbiński's views differ from those of Socrates. According to Kotarbiński, ethical views are independent of one's theoretical position (see Tadeusz Kotarbiński, *Sprawy sumienia* [Questions of Conscience], Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1956). Socrates, the forefather of “intellectual ethics”, believed that ethical views are a consequence of theoretical concepts. Kotarbiński's thesis on ethical conduct as independent of philosophy may throw some light on the distinction made above (in sec. 3) between conduct based on a positive emotional impulse and conduct based on ethical principles. Undoubtedly the first type of conduct is independent of philosophizing. The latter, on the other hand, seems to be quite closely (although significantly ambiguously) related

that dictates what is right and what is wrong, and it is this conscience that is the source of absolute moral standards.

However, it seems that what Kotarbiński includes under “ethical norms” is to a great extent social norms. After all, it is for social – and not purely individual, internal and fundamental – reasons that every person should recognize the standards that Kotarbiński espouses. *Forcing* others cannot be what Kotarbiński deemed ethical; however, he may have deemed it right for the good of society. In other words: the requirement, the obligation to perform certain acts considered ethical, belongs here to the meta-system. It no longer has an ethical character, but a social character.

From the point of view of the theory and practice of social life, solidarity and diligent (urgent) cooperation is required from all people. It is from the point of view of social norms, not ethical, that Prof. Kotarbiński (as we shall see) requires that a man should not be a coward, that he should be a “trustworthy guardian”.¹⁹

One cannot – from the position of ethics recognizing the freedom of beliefs and feelings – require them to be thrown away like rags, replacing them with beliefs and feelings of the “regulator”. Moreover, it is impossible to recognize such behaviour for psychological reasons: no one can be forced to feel sympathy or love for a person or an idea. You can bring about a significant change in beliefs and feelings only in a free discussion, when your interlocutor has the uninhibited will to accept the idea of it and reject it.

However, forcing people to behave (and not to hold beliefs!) in accordance with the lawgiver’s will is not only possible, it may be effective, because social normativity does not refer to intentions. It would be enough to convince the legislator of one’s externally correct behaviour to become a member of society.

But let us return to Kotarbiński’s defense of normative ethics. Kotarbiński’s normative-absolutist position was clearly visible in his polemics against Sartre’s ethical relativism, about which I spoke in a lecture devoted to contemporary

to one’s worldview, as revealed, for example, in the different nature of the ethical act of the theist and freethinker – consequently subject to different assessments. A follower of Christianity, when he acts in accordance with the ethical principles of his system, justifies his conduct out of “the fear of God”, the desire to serve God, the future reward in paradise, or the fear of torment in hell. Can such conduct, dictated by fear or anticipation of remuneration, be called “purely ethical”? On the other hand, a freethinker who acts in accordance with the principles of autonomous ethics is capable of purely ethical acts, because he can, like Spinoza (*Ethics*, v, prop. XLII), proclaim that *Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself*. As we can see, the nature and value of ethical action varies depending on the philosophical worldview providing the justification.

19 Kotarbiński, *op. cit.*, 14–15.

French philosophy.²⁰ Sartre²¹ is mistaken, according to Kotarbiński. There do exist absolute and universal ethical values: cruelty, fraud and cowardice are everywhere viewed as immoral and have always been. Kotarbiński says more or less the same thing in the political magazine “Polityka” [“Politics”]: “Determinists and indeterminists, materialists and spiritualists etc. *insofar as they think reasonably* [emphasis added by Łubnicki], must agree that goodness, bravery and respect for the law deserve recognition while cruelty, cowardice and fraud deserve contempt”.

What can be said in opposition to Kotarbiński’s absolutist ethical view? Perhaps his own gnoseological views, for the eminent philosopher stigmatized the theories of “absolute values” as hypostasis in the Platonic style.

Indeed, gnoseological critique reveals that ethical values (as well as others: logical, aesthetic, etc.) are the product of thought and experience and human needs – not only physical but also spiritual – and like all human products are not absolutes that rule (this would be the hypostasis that Kotarbiński himself opposes so strongly). They are changeable and dependent on the era, environment, specific situation and above all on the experiences, aspirations and thoughts of the individual. It is not the value that is a separate entity, one can say following Kotarbiński’s reism, but a concrete object with the features to satisfy our needs. These features, “valuable” for us, we detach in a naive thought from a specific object, we “idealize” (generalize, project above ourselves) and in this way we create hypostases of the absolutes that rule us.

It should be noted that Kotarbiński himself in some of his statements states the relativism of ethical evaluation: “[...] at different times and in different countries, moral judgments are made so differently, the evaluations seem so inconsistent ...”. “After all, conscience is unequal to conscience, its voice changes over the centuries and every country is a custom ...”²² How do these claims fit with the absolute ethical normativity developed further in the same work? What is the basis for the claimed consistency – presented a little further on²³ – of the judgments of human conscience?

But from the general and fundamental criticism – let us move on to consider the individual “common and absolute” ethical values quoted by Kotarbiński in

20 At a session of the Polish Philosophical Society in Warsaw, 31 January 1958.

21 In condemning *l'esprit de sérieux*, Sartre contests the subordination of mankind to the values we ourselves have created – and yet have unwittingly alienated from ourselves and made absolute.

22 Kotarbiński, *op. cit.*, 9.

23 *Ibid.*, 9, 24.

“Polityka”. For each of them, it is in fact possible to show a community (or an individual) or a situation in which they were not or are not recognized.

Kindness, such as forgiving your enemy, was considered whining in Rome, by the Germans, Satanist sects, the Nazis, by Nietzsche ...

Courage in many situations and in our environment is considered evil: for example, when a hooligan throws himself at an armed policeman ...

“Righteousness is a value” – is an analytic judgement, as the notion of righteousness already includes a positive valuation.²⁴ But we were interested in what is deemed righteous. In the morality of some groups, it is a mark of righteousness to report the wrongdoing of a close friend or father to the authorities. Will everyone agree to this?

And the cruelty? The Inquisition used elaborate torture on its enemies “in the name of God”, considering this highly just and certainly ethical. These operations were not just about necessary self-defence – for that it would suffice to kill the enemy without inflicting cruel suffering. This was the cruelty of needless and deliberate suffering. And flaying, impaling, breaking on the wheel, tearing by horses – used by military and state authorities during the Thirty Years’ War? And still in the eighteenth century, the dismemberment practiced by the “enlightened” Empress Catherine the Great: cutting off of hands, legs and then (finally) the head? And in Sparta: throwing handicapped children into the ravine in the mountains of Taygetus? And the Inuit leaving old, infirm tribesmen at abandoned rest stops, condemning them to starvation and death by freezing?

It was all supposed to be highly fair, socially valuable and ethically valuable for the communities discussed (at this level of analysis – as I have already emphasized – social norms are not distinguished from ethical norms).

Even cowardice is usually stigmatized not for ethical reasons (for prioritising exclusively one’s own safety and related mental state), but for biological and social reasons: cowardice weakens the ability of the group to survive in the struggle of the group to which the coward belongs. Cowardice can also lose its negative evaluation under certain conditions and be considered ... nice, or at least funny. For example – an emotional girl who herself is a writer dreams of meeting her favourite writer. But when she rings the doorbell of his apartment and hears footsteps approaching, loses her courage and runs away ... Or consider another girl, who on seeing a mouse, jumps on the table ... – can this cowardly behaviour be considered unethical or anti-social? Can we finally

24 A few weeks after writing these words, I found a similar treatment in Maria Ossowska, “Zagadnienie powszechnie uznanych norm moralnych” [The Issue of Universally Recognised Moral Standards], *Studia Filozoficzne*, no. 3 (1957): 80–96.

stigmatize as unethical cowardice of Kordian, who was unable to fulfil his social obligations, or the cowardice of Henri Amiel, who showed us his anxiety with incredible vividness in *Fragments d'un journal intime*?

“Fraud is negative” is also an analytical judgment, just as “righteousness is positive” is. One cannot argue about the truth of analytic judgments (unless by undermining the principle of identity). But let us strip this proposition of its “analyticity” and say, “cheating is a negative thing” – and we see at once that this proposition does not hold true in all situations, in all environments, or for all individuals. Deceiving a terminally ill person, assuring him that his condition is not dangerous, is not immoral. The lie of Bishop Myriel (in *Les Misérables* of Victor Hugo) – declaring that he himself had given the silverware to the galley slave Valjean (who had in fact stolen it) – is considered by many highly ethical. But even cheating for less lofty purposes – cheating enemies for instance – is considered right by many groups and individuals. And Machiavelli, as is known, believed that cheating was a perfectly legitimate means for a monarch to consolidate his power.

This is how the myth of the absolute and universal character of ethical values is dispelled. I would like to emphasize once again that in many of these cases, the assessment is rather of a social than ethical nature – but also that the distinction between ethical and social norms is not everywhere realised.

10 Humanity and Ethical Values

After this “relativistic” argument, one can ask the author a “personal” question: “Do you not then recognize that goodness, righteousness and courage are positive, moral qualities, and cruelty, cowardice – negative, immoral features?”

To this, I will answer: I personally consider kindness (as defined in a particular situation) to be a noble quality, but I do not consider it an “absolute and universal value”. The characterisation of a certain human disposition as “goodness” is subjective and depends on the situation in which this purported “goodness” manifests itself. Here is someone “good”, as Mahayana describes it: *X* sees *Y* attacking *Z* with a knife in his hand. Not wanting *Y* to commit a mortal sin, *X* intervenes and kills *Z* immediately. Now *Y* can no longer commit the crime of murder! And here is a “good” lady who feeds a bird with live flies, so the bird is not hungry ... Is the “kindness” of the self-sacrificing Mr *X*, or the compassion of the lady for the bird *moral*?

Goodness cannot be assessed “absolutely” and abstractly, but relatively and concretely: in a specific situation. But if that is the case, one must not make an absolutist-ethical statement: “goodness has always and everywhere been

considered a moral value” and still less: “goodness must always and everywhere be deemed a moral value”.

Certainly, in many cases we will agree with Kotarbiński that such and such a feature is moral and another immoral – in certain specific situations. However, our assessments will differ in many specific situations. What is more, my own personal assessments from several decades ago are often very different from those of today. And I am not sure whether in a few years or more my assessments will not change again. After all, experience grows (but it also becomes routine ...); thoughts and feelings become deeper – but also come to terms with the realities of life; aspirations and interests are not fixed ...

Man forges values in society and the world not as immutable lumps of bronze, but as constantly evolving ideals – products of his own mind and experience. Each person has specific, unique ideals that change even in the course of his own life, including patterns of conduct and their hierarchy of values.

A conscious man is the creator of values and is their constant sculptor. At some point in his life he may adopt a certain ethical outlook (and more than one “ethical” system can take root in a person’s life, one following the other or even co-existing – it is enough to recall Saul-Paul, Augustine, Pascal, Tolstoy, Papini and so many others). This does mean that he venerates some ideals, and therefore cannot be accused of cynical nihilism – as Sartre was charged by Kotarbiński. But though the noble man respects his ideals at every stage of his moral development, he should at all times remember that they are not a “predetermined” absolute value to which he, the man, is subordinated, but that he himself has put them to the forefront and that under the influence of new experiences and thoughts he has the right to change them – as a creator of values, not their slave. This is what Sartre meant in his critique of *Esprit de sérieux*.
[...]

11 A Few Words about Ethology

But enough about normative ethics with its absolute values, prescriptions and prohibitions that cannot be justified in the place of science. Researchers contrast this kind of non-scientific ethics with a non-normative, descriptive-analytic subject: *ethology*.

Ethology does not ask which absolute goal of action should be deemed “ethical”, nor enquire how to act to make action ethical. It investigates what goals and what action were *considered* ethically valuable in various groups during various periods. Comparing various systems and ethical practices offers rich material as a basis for formulating philosophical hypotheses. For

example, concerning the existence of universally accepted ethical norms. We see from this that ethology is not an isolated science, but one with closely ties to psychology, sociology, ethnology, etc. It should be of great interest to the philosopher too – especially since the views it investigates are of a fundamental nature, concerned with the purpose of human life and the means of realising that purpose.



In this work, which is without doubt somewhat controversial, I have tried to take a new look at some of the traditional problems in the theory of ethics and I have proposed some distinctions which might be of help. In particular, I have been interested in: characterising ethical acts in a way that is useful for ethology; the nature of ethical evaluation and its relativization to ethical systems and the value of normative ethics in the context of the theory of knowledge. The main distinctions I have drawn on are: (1) ethics and morality; (2) ethical and social normativity; (3) conduct on the basis of principles and conduct on the basis of emotional impulse. I am aware of that several of the solutions offered are debatable and will be grateful to the reader for any critical remarks.

Of course, I do not claim to have exhausted the list of fundamental *epistemological* problems – still less of *gnoseological* problems – in ethics. Serious study is required to address, for example: the “nature versus nurture” debate in ethics; how the freedom of the will is to be conceived in ethical matters; and many other matters. But even the problems we have managed to touch on seem worthy of thought and discussion.

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