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1. Ethics as a concept

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Are ethics relevant nowadays? In this article, we claim that ethics are a fundamental and inalienable concept, study and practice. Furthermore, we will examine ethics as a concept: philosophically, etymologically and as an everyday life practice. In conclusion we provide an overview of ethics in this book and at Laurea University of Applied Sciences.

ETYMOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ETHICS

According to the Helsinki Term Bank for Art and Science, ethics is part of the philosophy that studies a moral and good life. Etymologically thinking, ethics (Greek, ἠθική, *ēthos*) means character. Morality is a close concept to ethics (Latin, *moralis*, *mores*) meaning, custom or manner. As a distinction from ethics, morality is the actions and choices done in practice by individuals or societies.

The roots of ethics and morality are alike (Helsinki Term Bank for Art and Science; see also Juujärvi et al. 2007). Nowadays, however, the meanings of ethics and morality are different. Morality means the understanding and view of people and societies about what is right and wrong; ethics investigate right and wrong. Ethics can be described as a systematic aim to understand the views of right and wrong. Ethics also refers to moral views that a person is aware and committed. As a distinction from morality, ethics means reflection and (thoroughly) thought about right and wrong. A moral problem can be more personal, an ethical problem more reflective. A starting point for professional ethics is that it is based on reflections and ponderings about right and wrong (Juujärvi et al. 2007, 13).

ETHICS – IMPOSSIBLE TO DEFINE?

Ethics and morality as concepts are defined multiply, even in philosophy (Clarkeburn and Mustajoki, 2007, 23). Philosophy is impossible to define; even philosophers themselves do not agree on the definition, not to mention the challenge of defining it so that a person who is not familiar with philosophy would understand what it actually is about (Haaparanta and Niiniluoto 1990, 91). This applies to ethics as well, as ethics is part of philosophy.

Defining ethics is often challenging. Ethics as part of philosophy is a field of study in academic universities. Ethics as a concept is not unambiguous nor simple. It is not always clear what actually is meant by ethics. In everyday language ethics and morality are often used as synonyms. In this article by ethics we mean philosophical ethics, that is moral philosophy.

In some ways, ethics are not like other “sciences” (Haaparanta and Niiniluoto 1990, 93). Ethics has not developed like, e.g., medicine or psychology. In ethics we are still dealing with some of the same questions as in ancient times, when Socrates started pondering moral questions (see also Haaparanta and Niiniluoto 1990, 93). Moral philosophical thinking that started a couple thousand years ago has not earned a consensus on the basic nature of ethics or the hierarchy of moral principles, not to mention how to apply those in present-day global situations (Baggini and Fosl 2012, 13). In ethics it is still relevant to use sources from ancient times: Socratic dialogue is still a valid tool for contemplating ethically compelling issues, raising ethical awareness, understanding complex issues, widen one’s thinking, etc. For instance, Nicomachean ethics and Socratic dialogues are still valid sources in the study of ethics.

Unlike other sciences, ethics are often not looking for – not to mention offering – the “right answers”, as that is not the main point of ethics. Ethics has value as such. In ethics it is more important to ask than to answer. Often it is said that ethics are more like a study of questions rather than a study of answers. Some ethicists themselves have argued that ethics might actually be closer to art than science.

As an academic field of study, ethics are similar to other sciences (Haaparanta ja Niiniluoto 1990, 93). Despite differences in the nature of ethics to so called “hard sciences”, ethics is a study all its own at academic universities. It follows the methods of science, even though its nature differs. Still, it uses scientific methods: it is systematic and follows the principles of science.

Ethics as part of philosophy aims to answer the question of what is morally good and what is the right action. Furthermore, ethics aim to solve what is meant by the concepts of good and right – and if it is even possible to define them (Haaparanta and Niiniluoto 1990, 93). Philosophically thinking, ethics can be divided into metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. (Fieser, n.d.) Metaethics is interested in the language used when speaking about actions and situations, and where our ethical principles come from and what they mean. Normative ethics assesses actions and situations on a more practical level (Haaparanta and Niiniluoto 1990, 85; Fieser, n.d.). Applied ethics investigates specific controversial issues, for example abortion, environmental issues and animal rights (Fieser, n.d.).

TOOLS OF ETHICS – ETHICS AS A TOOL

Ethics as a field of philosophy applies principles used in the study of philosophy. When aiming for new philosophical outcomes (“results”), philosophy often applies an approach that can be described as problematisation, explication and argumentation (Niiniluoto 1984, 62; Haaparanta and Niiniluoto 1990, 95). Philosophy and ethics as part of it is based on critical thinking and arguing that is constructed not out

of definite and set knowledge and information but out of continuous aim to analyse, clarify and re-evaluate thoughts and concepts (Niiniluoto 1984, 66–67).

Traditional tools of ethics are concepts, which are crucial in ethics. Ethics are interested in what things actually mean. Ethical *theories* work as tools, as in other sciences. We see ethics as a *personal competence* that a student aims to achieve during one's studies at Laurea University of Applied Sciences. Central tools of ethics can be considered concepts, argumentation and thinking. The starting point for ethical thinking is concept analysis. Before we can say anything about what is a good life, not to mention how to live a good life, we need to define several central concepts, such as what is meant by "good", "justice" and "right".

Philosophical statements are not definite nor infallible. Instead, they are stopping points. To all philosophical problems, there are different, arguable views. Niiniluoto describes one important task of a philosopher to be to question conventional ways of thinking (Niiniluoto 1984, 10); as ethics is part of philosophy, that and the following apply to ethics as well. The point of ethics is to ask questions – including the ones that nobody wants to hear.

Ethics as part of philosophy can be described as more like the study (or science) of problems and arguments than answers (Niiniluoto 1984, 10). Ethics and ethical thinking have value as such. It is important both for individuals and organizations to ponder right and wrong, the consequences of one's actions and so on – even though we would remain in ignorance about what actually is right or wrong. Even though we would not find the answers, it is crucially important to raise the ethically relevant question and ask about and spread ethical awareness.

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO ETHICS

Ethics can play a relevant role in the everyday lives of all human beings. Ethics are paradoxical, because at the same time ethics are quite simple yet very complex, abstract yet concrete. Accessibility to ethics can be seen as a very low threshold, since one does not need a high degree of education to take part in the discussion about what is right or wrong or good or bad. But then again, we can ask whether it is perhaps only moral thinking (not ethical) that is accessible to all – does ethical thinking demand systematic analytical thinking and reflection that is not easily accessible to all?

In this book, we understand and consider ethics as a possibility and a resource, not only demand. Ethics cannot be externalized but it is the duty of all agents to be ethically aware. At Laurea we aim to work according to many ethical principles. The values mentioned in our current strategy are openness, effectiveness and responsibility (Laurea Strategy 2030). The new Laurea UAS Ethical Code of Conduct has been published in August 2020.

Ethics can be seen as the ability to make decisions (Clarkeburn and Mustajoki 2007, 22). By ethics we mean more than anything a capability for clear thinking. Concept and argument analysis, ethical theories, codes of conduct and so forth provide helpful tools for such. Ethics will never become to an end. Even though there are different ethical tools or frameworks, the tools will have to be applied to a particular case at a given time within a given context. Ethics are not just a tick in the box: they demand profound thinking. Ethics as a concept is actually several concepts.

For us at Laurea UAS, ethics are truly a tool for building a better world. Ethics can be built in and are built into our RDI projects – not only as research ethics but as part of planning, implementing and evaluating the solution (outcome and innovation) throughout the entire process with stakeholders (see also Responsible Research and Innovation RRI).

As stated, we think that, more than anything, ethics are the capability to think. While not every one is born a great thinker, one can develop thinking skills. We at Laurea practice ethical thinking daily, such as in our RDI projects and teaching practices. In this book, we offer examples of what kind of ethical thinking and ethical approaches to the RDI practices and teaching practices have recently been applied at Laurea.

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