

Can Ethics be a Science?

Ethics belongs to philosophy, not science. But it does not fit in very well with the other philosophical disciplines, where free thinking and a patchwork of varying opinions prevail. In epistemology, for instance, we might assume that the image of the world in the mind is only structurally reminiscent of the world itself (Wittgenstein), or that certain qualia fully present the characteristics of objects (Locke); that experience is just the soul recalling forgotten knowledge (Plato), or that we do not experience the world at all, but only gather knowledge about our sensory data (Ayer). The Platonist will eagerly debate his or her claims with a Wittgensteinian, an Ayer advocate with a Locke continuator, and such disputes cannot be settled – as everyone knows. In ethics, however, things are different. Advocates of capital punishment are discussing someone's life, after all, so it is most alarming if they begin to quarrel with their opponents, rather than engaging in calm argumentation. Repeated attempts have been made to quell such wrangling by appealing for ethics to stop hiding among the disciplines of philosophy, for it to "grow up" and become a science. The proposal is very tempting but no one has ever been able to determine whether ethics should become a deductive or empirical science. The deductive sciences are based on axioms, and axioms do not have to be true. The issue of correspondence with reality is not raised in their context. Mathematicians are satisfied to evaluate the correctness of a proof, they do not see a room for an additional debate if the theorem is true in some ulterior sense. But ethics does not have a method of deductive reasoning and requires more than consistency. If I make a promise, I should keep it, not only in order to be consistent, but because it is true that an obligation binds me to do so. What "true" means in this statement, nobody can say. But it is not the "true" of mathematical consistency. In deductive sciences building a system serves as a means of systematizing knowledge, while in ethics it would be a means of expanding knowledge. And so, an ethics fashioned after the deductive sciences will not only be imitative, but arbitrary and unconvincing.

Admittedly, we can easily adopt some sort of overarching principle, e.g. "the principle of utility," and next impart a semantically unequivocal interpretation to it, e.g. by recognizing "utility" to signify the maximal satisfaction of preferences, and then pretend that we can solve every conflict of values: after having adopted some sort of scale and asked

every conflict participant to mark their preferences on this scale, we find the solution that is valued most highly by the group, and report: "Empirical ethics stipulates that this is the best solution." However, this method does not have any credibility, and it at most ascertains what it is that people think or say, rather than what their obligations are.

An empirical interpretation of ethics fares no better. When arguing over capital punishment, for example, we can agree that certain facts are more important than others: for instance, whether introducing the death penalty acts as an effective mechanism for deterring potential criminals, or how frequently courts make mistakes when handing down death sentences. But although we know that these facts are important, we do not know how they should influence our theory. If society demands capital punishment, but the courts are incapable of accurately identifying criminals, then should it be introduced or not? To this day we remain bound by Hume's discovery that value judgments cannot be derived from judgments of fact. So, how should we identify values? Should we ask about preferences or desires? Should we recognize that ethics boils down to sociology, psychology, or medicine? It doesn't take much imagination

to realize that none of the empirical sciences can supply a body of data that might be used to solve moral conflicts in a systematic and justified way. The "scientification" of ethics is therefore unfeasible. We cannot build a system of ethics that is simultaneously deductive and authoritative, or empirical and normatively credible. Ethics must be practiced in the spirit of a methodology of falsification – such as Popper's – rather than verification. We can set forth some obscure image of universal happiness, harmony, and peace of mind, a vision of individual development, concern for others and tolerance for eccentricity. However, we cannot from these assumptions develop a strict theory that everyone would have to abide by. Ethics does not point out moral truths, it only protects us from mistakes and boorishness. It enables us to demonstrate that certain views – as a rule, ones that we hold dear – are poorly justified, groundlessly restrictive or excessively permissive, unpopular or poorly formulated. Certain people are scared off by such epithets, others are not. The latter, however, would not stand to gain much from advancing ethics as a science.



Repeated appeals have been made for ethics to stop hiding among the disciplines of philosophy, for it to "grow up" and become a science. An attractive idea, but is it feasible?

JACEK HOŁÓWKA

Warsaw University, PAN Committee on Philosophical Sciences