Ethics

Francesca De Vecchi, Sergio Filippo Magni and Vera Tripodi

7.1 The Discussion on the Foundations of Ethics

7.1.1 The Areas of Ethics

The philosophical study of morality is usually divided into three general areas: normative ethics, which proposes criteria for the evaluation of actions and people, when, for example, an action can be called right or obligatory, and a person can be labeled as good or virtuous; metaethics, which aims to establish, justify, or clarify the nature of concepts, judgments and arguments used to evaluate and prescribe, making abstractions from their content, such as what does it mean to say that a certain action is right and a specific person is good, how one can attribute an objective reality to the properties to which these judgments refer, when and why are they are justified; and “applied ethics” (or “practical ethics”), which applies the other two areas to concrete problems, and tries to determine what is right or dutiful in a particular field. This area has had notable growth in the last forty years and has led to the specialized disciplines of bioethics, animal ethics, environmental ethics, business ethics, and so on.

In addition to these categories, we have the descriptive and scientific study of morality which assumes the most varied scientific perspectives: historical, sociological, ethological, psychological, biological, physical and even ethno logical (with the study of the moral behavior of animals). In this case we are dealing with disciplines like the history of morality, moral sociology, moral ethnology, moral psychology, moral neuroscience and moral ethnology. These are empirical disciplines, part of the so-called “descriptive ethics.” Being descriptive and empirical, this area of research extends beyond the strict confines of philosophical ethics, though philosophy may make recourse to the results gathered by these sciences. Precisely this is occurring more in and more in recent years.

Normative ethics aims to define the general criteria used for moral evaluation of actions and persons: for deciding when an action is right or dutiful, a person good or virtuous, and so on.

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Depending on which the criterion adopted is, different kinds of normative theories can be identified. According to a standard classification, normative theories can be divided into two general groups: deontological theories and consequentialistic theories. According to deontological theories, an action is right (obligatory, etc.) when it is in accordance with some general principles, that is, with moral rules, obligations, rights. Therefore, it is the fulfillment of a general principle (a rule, an obligation, a right, etc.) that determines the moral rightness of the action, without considering the consequences produced by the action itself. On the other hand, according to consequentialistic theories, an action is right for the consequences that it realizes in the world, instead of for its conformity to general principles: an action is right when it has good consequences, wrong when it has bad consequences. All forms of consequentialism have an implicit theory of value that determines what consequences are good or bad, what is good and evil; the main form of consequentialism is utilitarianism, characterized by the possibility of maximize the amount of good consequences.

Beyond deontologism and consequentialism, there are other possible normative theories. The most important is “virtue ethics”. This kind of normative theory is opposed to the adoption of general and abstract principles and maintains that the right action results from some mental traits of the agent, intrinsically worth: virtues. According to this kind of normative theories, the right action flows from these mental traits, regardless of its consequences or its conformity to general principles: for instance, a right action flows from the virtue of charity or justice, or courage and so on. It is the virtuous man that does the right action and not vice-versa.

In the last forty years, all these kinds of normative theories have had their development in application to specific and concrete issues (the treatment of human life, the treatment of animals or nature, and so on), and represent the normative framework of the main forms of applied ethics, as seen before. Yet, these aspects will be put aside from the main focus of this section. The first part of this chapter will discuss the theories of the foundations of ethics developed in the last forty years, focusing primarily on the discussion among analytic philosophers.

7.1.2 The New Phase of Metaethics
Many maintain that with the publication of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, in 1971, a new phase has begun in reflections on the foundations of ethics—the phase of new metaethics. It sets itself against the phase of the old metaethics, which in turn has been separated into two distinct periods: the first marks the