Reflections on lay ethics

Author:
Sven Ove Hansson

Appendix 10
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1. Background
The initial starting-point for our attention to lay ethics is an observation made in the previous Nanobio-RAISE project that laypeople’s discussions on ethics, in particular the ethics of new technologies, differ from those of professional ethicists in several respects such as:

(a) factual issues are not separated from value issues in the way that is standard in moral philosophy,
(b) there is no clear separation between ethical requirements and the requirements of rationality, and
(c) the argumentation is not based on a single moral theory but is a is "free mixture" of arguments that a moral philosophy would describe as deontological, teleological and virtue-ethical. (This may prevent us from being locked into an implausible standpoint that follows logically from some allegedly sovereign thought pattern; on the other hand is a challenge to account for such a “free mixture” – or something to the same effect – in an intellectually tenable way.

Based on these observations and the results from participative procedures conducted or in Ethentech we have attempted to clarify how laypeople’s discussions on ethics differ from professional moral philosophy, and reflect on how professional ethics can be more supportive of lay ethics.

2. Conclusions from the first two convergence seminars
The three above-mentioned characterizations of lay ethics were confirmed in the convergence seminars and Democs games, and in addition two further differences between lay ethics and moral philosophy were found:

(d) considerations of nature and purpose are important: differences between authentic and artificial human needs, what is essential in human nature, etc.
(e) future changes in moral beliefs are referred to in the argumentation: The actions we take today can influence future moral values, and these changes can be desirable or undesirable.

3. Neuroethics as a special area
There are some areas of moral deliberation in which our moral intuitions tend to fail us more often than in other areas. This applies in particular to areas in which we are concerned with changes of ourselves as moral agents, and neuroethics is the paradigm example of this. (Similar problems arise in population ethics, where we are concerned with changes in what moral agents there are.) This is therefore a field that is particularly well suited for discussions on the very nature of moral inquiry.
There are many aspects of this, in what follows the focus will be on one important and fundamental issue in how we conceive ethics.

4. Can ethics be discovered or only developed?
This fundamental issue is whether (i) we discover, or can at least hope to discover truths about what is morally right or wrong, i.e. truths that exist independently of our discovery process, or (ii) moral inquiry by its very nature consists merely of the construction of moral standpoints. (With "by its very nature" is meant there: not just due to our inability to discover moral truths that are there nevertheless, available at least in principle for our discovery.)

The discovery version dominates in much of moral inquiry. In religious ethics, ethical inquiry is often seen as a process of discovering the will of God. (And the influence of religious ethics may be stronger in secular moral philosophy than has in general been realized.) In secular academic moral philosophy, the focus often on finding out which moral theory is the right one and what are its implications. In superficial sense, everyday moral thinking may also seem to subscribe to the discovery version, since moral statements are regarded as true or false. But on closer scrutiny, lay ethics differs from the common religious and academic versions of the discovery account in not subscribing to the idea of a single and identifiable source of moral knowledge (such as God’s will or a particular moral theory).

A major reason for the dominance of the discovery approach is that without it we may seem to be driven to moral relativism and "anything goes". That, however, is a non sequitur. Appeals to truth are not the only ways in which one can argue that we should all hold on to something.

5. Euclidean ethics?
The discovery approach to moral inquiry seems to be closely connected to the ideal of a complete moral theory from which all moral standpoints in concrete issues can be derived. This ideal is usually also aprioristic: it is believed that access to this theory can be obtained through a priori reflections, without empirical premises.

Of course, the apriorist view is falsified by the actual developments in ethics. Over the last century social developments with a deep influence on moral philosophy include: democracy, gender equality, freedom of expression, freedom of religion and secularism, and many other changes. Standpoints dependent on these developments (such as pro-democratic standpoints) are often taken to be part of the same apriorist moral philosophy that was previously considered to imply opposite principles.

What we see is in fact a Euclidean ideal in ethics. Euclid’s geometry, that successfully derived an impressive amount of geometric knowledge from a few seemingly self-evident axioms, became the ideal of science for many centuries. Medieval physicists try to develop a theory of mechanics in the same way, but they failed since the
principles for movement of bodies that they developed intuitively do not correspond to the real world.

The Euclidean ideal was given up in empirical issues as a consequence of the rise of modern science, in the Renaissance. It was given up even in pure mathematics in the 19th century when it was discovered that non-Euclidean geometry can be equally consistent and mathematically interesting. But does the Euclidean ideal remain in ethics? Is perhaps ethics the last Euclidean science, and in that case for how long?

Although the ideal of deriving ethics from a single, complete source has a long history it has not been very successful. It has repeatedly been pointed out that moral theories do not differ much in their practical implications (e.g. in medical ethics), and that proponents of one and the same ethical theory may have widely different standpoints in practical ethical issues. (There may be a theory of everything to discover in physics, it is much more doubtful whether there is one in ethics.)

All this gives us reason to consider fundamentally different approaches, approaches that are not just another aprioristically discoverable complete theory from which to derive ethical truths. We should be prepared to question assumptions such as:

- the completeness of moral theories
- the derivation ideal ("Euclidean approach")
- the independence of morality from empirical fact

6. Implications for the modal status of moral theories
The modal status of a moral theory can be expressed in terms of the range of situations in which it is claimed to hold. A moral theory can be claimed to hold for instance in

- all thinkable circumstances
- all physically possible situations
- all the situations that we have knowledge about

The discovery approach to ethical inquiry is usually associated with a high modal status for ethical statements. In academic moral philosophy, this of often more or less taken for granted

From the viewpoint of the discovery approach, it is natural to assign much weaker modal statements to moral theories; they should apply to the types of situations that we have had reasons to think of but not necessarily much more.

The high modal status assigned to moral theories is a major reason why rather remote science fiction scenarios are standardly taken to be just as relevant for moral inquiry as more mundane ones. Moral philosophy progresses largely with very special types of examples. Many of these examples are far beyond the scope of practical application. There is a strong focus on the special and relatively few
examples that can be constructed in which fundamental principles from standard ethical examples work all the way through and give clear answers. (Trolley cases are examples of this; but very few real-life moral quandaries are like that.)

According to the discovery approach to ethics, even very far-fetched examples can be useful since the moral theory we are looking for is assumed to be so general that it should cover these cases as well; they are taken then to be good test cases. According to the development approach, such cases are of little or no help. They may even be misleading. An ethical theory that is better equipped (as it seems) to deal with problems in a science fiction world may even be less suitable to deal with the problems that we are facing here and now. One example of this is that considerations of science fiction cases in which we can connect our brains to each others like computers are linked together may mislead us in discussions on ethical issues of privacy.

The assumption of a very high modal status of moral statements seems to have led, generally speaking, to a focus on situations and examples that satisfy criteria of decidability by certain types of theories, often at the expense of relevance in actual moral situations. The idea that we best discover moral principles to be applied in real life by an inquiry that gives preference to science fiction examples over realistic examples has the burden of proof.

It should also be mentioned that it is a prominent feature of the standard type of examples in moral philosophy that they take place in a deterministic world. Moral philosophers tend to defer issues of risk, indeterminacy, and uncertainty to decision theory where it is treated as a matter of instrumental rationality – and as a consequence the ethics or risk-taking is not treated at all. In contrast, ethical aspects of risk-taking and risk imposition tend to have a prominent role in laypeople’s discussions for instance of the ethical issues connected with new technologies.

7. Implications for the role of applied ethics
The term “applied ethics” is suitable for the discovery account since it implies that there is a ready-made theory to be applied (as in applied mathematics). This, however, is not the case in ethics, in particular not in the ethics of new technologies. As one example of this, when we discuss personal identity in the context of enhancement and the limits of neuropsychological interventions, we do not have much use of previous philosophical investigations of personal identity. The influence goes in the other direction: so-called applied investigations provide information that can be used to develop basic theory.

According to the discovery approach to ethics, ethics of particular problem areas (such as neuroethics) are “just” applications; the real work has to be done elsewhere. In contrast, in the development approach, that has its focus on how ethics develops, and does not treat ethics as timeless, it would seem natural to claim that even the best of minds could not have come up beforehand with the ethical principles that we need to deal with new situations such as the new technologies.
that are now being developed. The ethics of new social and technological phenomena have to develop in a social process that is informed by concrete knowledge about these phenomena and the societies into which they are introduced.

In this way, the development approach to ethics invites us to give up the traditional division between fundamental moral theory and applied ethics.

8. Implications for the role of expertise
In the development approach, there can be no experts that are the discoverers or the keepers of eternal moral truth. No experts can stand above lay ethics or social consensus in moral issues.

What experts can do is for instance:

- facilitate the development of moral standpoints suitable in new situations, e.g. new enhancement technologies and neurological devices
- analyze the effects of social and technological developments; find new ethical issues
- discover incoherences and potential conflicts between principles; such conflicts may be reasons for development and discussions
- systematize moral standpoints (but not necessarily as complete theories)
- promote the development of reflective equilibria in moral issues

A focus on lay ethics does not make professional ethical inquiry redundant, but it may significantly change its agenda.