ETHICS AND VALUES

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Contents

Summary

This essay distinguishes three main areas in ethics: meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. It introduces some basic concepts, including the concepts of ethical considerability and ethical significance, that are useful in thinking about ethics and values and discusses the kinds of moves that feature in rational adjudication of conflicts about ethics and values. The essay shows how rational objectivity can assist the resolution of disagreements about ethics and values. The discussion is conducted in the context of issues arising in environmental ethics, since it is in this domain that many of the concerns relevant to sustainability arise. Various types of environmental ethic are next described and discussed. In the process, key concepts to do with ethics and values are introduced and the styles of argument that are deployed for and against these ethics are described. The emphasis is not on justifying particular conclusions: it is on uncovering the processes of justification that may be used in reflecting on actions and on the policies that governments, as well as other institutional agents, pursue. The essay exemplifies a philosophical or analytic approach to ethics and values, as opposed to a spiritual or religious approach.

1. Introduction

Many who employ the language of ethics and values have not reflected on the claims they make. They engage in ethical assertion in the public domain, but have not paid attention to the nature of ethics and values, nor have they carefully identified the ethical principles that underpin their comments, and nor have they carefully and consistently applied those principles in practical contexts. Much of what they say is important, worthy of our attention, and provides good direction so far as action and policy is concerned. Such comments and the related injunctions to act would have more force if they were built on a reflective approach to ethics and values; if, that is, they were more sensitive to philosophical analyses of ethics and values. Here, issues concerning environmental ethics and environmental values provide the focus for an introduction to a theoretical consideration of ethics and values. These theoretical considerations aim to clarify a range of ethical and value considerations that, for many, are at the center of the sustainability debate.

2. Meta-Ethics, Normative Ethics, and Applied Ethics

Ethics, as a domain of philosophical inquiry, can be usefully divided into three areas: meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Meta-ethics is the investigation of the nature, meaning, and function of ethical judgments. One might wonder whether ethical judgments can be literally true or false and, if they can be, what kinds of facts or considerations make them true or false. Or, again, one might wonder whether there is a logical or conceptual gap that distinguishes questions of fact from questions of value and that prevents reasoning validly from factual premises to ethical conclusions. The question of whether ethical judgments are merely expressions of affective states such as emotions, attitudes, desires, or preferences, as opposed to substantial claims to knowledge concerning ethical facts or value facts, is likewise a meta-ethical question. Another variant of this question is whether there is an ethical reality that is independent of our emotions, preferences, attitudes and desires and that determines the truth of our ethical beliefs independently of our states of mind. Exactly what these various questions mean and what they amount to, will become clearer as the essay unfolds. At this stage it is enough to have a rough grasp of what meta-ethics is about. Note also that it is possible to undertake meta-ethics without making or even discussing any normative judgments; that is to say, without judgments about what is right, wrong, good, bad, obligatory, permissible, or impermissible.

Normative ethics is the enterprise of developing and evaluating general principles that provide the basis for our particular ethical judgments. A principle to which many would subscribe is, "act so as to reduce suffering." One might ask whether this principle is of relevance in making ethical judgments. If it is relevant, a person might go on to ask whether it is overriding or whether there are other ethical principles by which it is constrained, or against which it might be traded off or balanced. For example, it might be suggested that the principle, "never take an innocent human life," constrains the earlier principle in the sense that it is only permissible to obey the former if, in so doing, one does not disobey the latter. Here the two principles are hierarchically ordered. The one always dominates the other, implying, "do not reduce suffering by taking innocent

human lives." Certainly many would think that there are very few, if any, cases where it is ethically acceptable to take innocent lives in order to reduce suffering.

Alternatively, it might be suggested that there is a plurality of relevant principles, which includes both of those already mentioned, and that individual principles may be traded off against one another. Here the principles are not hierarchically ordered: the relationships between them are not rigid and inflexible. So, one might think it is impermissible to reduce suffering to a moderate extent by taking an innocent human life but not impermissible where a catastrophe can be avoided by taking an innocent human life. These are all issues in normative ethics, involving questions about the general principles to be used in evaluating actions, policies and states of affairs. In other words, normative ethics is the enterprise of identifying the ethical principles that one believes ought to govern one's actions, and working out how these principles fit together.

Finally, applied ethics is the enterprise of applying normative principles to particular practical issues. So, in bioethics, for example, normative principles are applied to issues concerning human life, particularly in medical contexts. And in environmental ethics normative principles are applied to issues concerning the natural environment.

While these three areas of ethics are conceptually distinct, in ethical discussions it is inevitable that there is movement between them. Mostly the shifts will be between normative ethics and applied ethics because one way in which sets of normative principles are developed and evaluated is through their application to particular issues. In discussing particular issues, one notices strengths and weaknesses in suggested normative principles, and is often consequently moved to modify or reject them. In offering ethical assessments of particular practical issues, one inevitably appeals to general, normative principles. There are no tight connections between answers to meta-ethical questions and answers to questions from the other two areas.

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Biographical Sketch

Professor Robert Elliot is the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and Professor of Philosophy, at the University of the Sunshine Coast, in Queensland, Australia. His area of expertise is applied ethics, including bioethics and environmental ethics. He also has interests in meta-ethics, personal identity, and philosophy of religion. Prior to moving to the Sunshine Coast five years ago to take up the position of Foundation Dean in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, he was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the University of New England, Australia. Other educational institutions Professor Elliot has been associated with during his career include the University of Queensland, the Brisbane College of Advanced Education, Monash University, and the State College of Victoria. His teaching expertise includes applied ethics, philosophy of education, philosophy of mind, meta-ethics, philosophy of religion, and personal identity. As well as teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate level, he has supervised Honours, Masters, and PhD students. After graduating with First Class Honours in Philosophy from the University of New South Wales in 1973, Professor Elliot was awarded a Master of Arts from La Trobe University in 1977 and a Diploma of Education from the University of Melbourne in 1979. In 1983, his Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Queensland was conferred. Professor Elliot has an extensive publications record including over 40 international refereed journal articles and more than 30 chapters in books. He has edited several books, including *Environmental Ethics* published by Oxford University Press. Professor Elliot's book, *Faking Nature: The Ethics of Environmental Restoration*, was published in 1997. Apart from serving on several University committees and participating in community programs, Professor Elliot is on the editorial boards of the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy, Environmental Ethics* and *Environmental Values.* He is also the Director of the Environmental Ethics and Regulation Program in the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice, and Governance at Griffith University.