

Translation of selected chapters of the Book
in the course of the project ProEthics

Allgemeine Ethik
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I. The Dimensions of Ethics

Learn to walk before you run!

Aller Anfang ist schwer.
(Volksmund)

In this chapter, philosophical ethics will be introduced by roughly outlining its content matter. This will be done by differentiating three basic ethical issues and by defining the relation of philosophical ethics to the everyday understanding of ethics on the one hand and to other philosophical disciplines on the other. In addition, three levels of philosophical ethics and two perspectives will be distinguished. Finally, an overview of the structure of this introduction will be given.

1. Introduction

Ethics is currently on everyone's lips. It fills feature articles, talk shows and scholarly papers. It evokes ethics commissions and ethics advisory bodies. The urgent problems of our age – be it the question raised afresh of whether wars are just or at least justifiable, or be it the many issues in medicine and biotechnologies – bring in their wake a profound need for ethical orientation. Ethics seems to be a prerogative of experts, something difficult, of which it is to be feared that despite its complexity, it is not capable of getting to grips with impending problems. So ethics seems to be concerned with difficult cases or extreme problems. It seems to be a special discipline in both content and method, which concerns us all more or less directly, but is nonetheless delegated to experts.

Yet ethics is also an everyday matter. Every one of us reacts with indignation to some of what happens to him, or to reports of what has happened to others. We praise selfless commitment to a good cause as much as the caring concern for friends or relatives. Most of us sometimes ask ourselves if life should go in this or that direction, and whether we should do this or not do that. Sometimes we ask ourselves if we have done the right thing, if we are capable of justifying our decisions and actions to ourselves and, above all, to others.

We demand of others that they treat us fairly, that they observe the rules of politeness and award us respect. If this does not happen, we demand compliance with the respective rules and standards so that we can be given the appropriate treatment. We recognize when others criticize our conduct as being ethically wrong or unjust. Most times, we then try either to submit a justification or at least an apology. Or we realize, even if only covertly, that we have made a mistake. However, we not only evaluate actions towards others in this way. We also criticize when someone wastes his talent, or handles his health or vocational future irresponsibly. For the most part we also understand very well when others criticize our lifestyle under this perspective. One can point out to smokers that they damage the health of others. One can point out to reckless drivers that they endanger others. But even if they only harm or rashly endanger themselves, one will reproach them.

In other words, we are both transmitter and recipient of ethical assessments such as praise and reprimand; we are subjects and objects of ethical attitudes. Ethics is, viewed in this light, everyday and familiar: a way of life, no, our way of life. And yet, when the possibility of ethics arises, this fosters skepticism. These days, ethical orientation is difficult. In fact, the justification of ethical requirements seems for many to be downright impossible.

This introduction shall give an overview of the difficulties and possibilities of philosophical ethics. The reasons for the widespread skepticism towards ethics shall be defined and, as far as possible, rebutted. Of course, a philosophical introduction cannot answer all questions. In the end, it will probably raise more than it can

answer. But it can help to clarify one's own thinking about the most important issues, to get to know the most important theoretical positions and to ask the questions in the right way. It can provide orientation and a platform from which one can ask specific questions and carry out research.

In order to attain this orientation, it is necessary to clarify central concepts and to differentiate between important lines of argumentation and types of theory. The introductory chapter shall serve three aims:

- Philosophical ethics shall be contextually defined in rough outlines.
- Some central conceptual distinction shall be introduced.
- The relation of philosophical ethics to the everyday understanding of ethics and to other philosophical disciplines shall be provisionally defined.

2. Basic questions in philosophical ethics

a) The first basic question

Ethics confronts us in many ways in our everyday life. Now and again, nearly everyone comes across discussions about embryo research, euthanasia or animal and environmental protection in the media. The difficult and painful dispute about force as a political instrument has doubtless not entirely escaped the notice of anyone in recent years. In a difficult decision situation, a friend asks our advice: Leave her partner and children so as to have a career or fulfill herself? Have an abortion because the unborn child will probably be suffering from Down syndrome? But we also find ourselves in diverse decision situations. Shall we take a holiday in a country in which human rights are massively ignored? Is it defensible to buy a product of which we know that it has been manufactured by child labor in underdeveloped countries? Does the feeling not come over us sometimes that we should forego a little of our standard of living and donate some of our cash to humanitarian causes? Someone or other possibly asks himself if it would not be more expedient to get involved in politics instead of using his free time for various leisure activities. Hadn't I better visit my grandma in her old people's home again instead of going to the concert I've been looking forward to for such a long time? Visiting the old lady will probably be rather strenuous and not very entertaining, whereas the concert would be enjoyable and beneficial in many ways. And yet: Should I not nonetheless make my grandma happy by visiting her again?

Questions of this kind are not at all unusual. On the contrary, we are constantly surrounded by them. They can be put into a general formula that at the same time is the first basic question in philosophical ethics:

(F 1) How shall I act?

This is a *normative* question. It does not aim at theoretical truth in the sense of establishing facts, but at normative validity. And it does not aim at theoretical knowledge, but at practical implementation. Someone who asks how he should act does not just want to acquire a theoretical belief in the way that applies to someone who wants to know if whales are fish or mammals.

One can, of course, also ask knowledge questions with a practical intention, for example, when Tina wants to know if the Town Hall is also open on Wednesday afternoons. But the answer to this knowledge question is independent of whether she connects it with practical consequences. This is not the case for the question: “How shall I act?”, which concerns a *practical* question as to which action is the right one.

With this, the first characteristics of philosophical ethics have been named. Ethics belongs to *practical* philosophy and aims at normative validity. Philosophical ethics has, as one could paraphrase, the job of orienting our actions. But this does not adequately conclude our provisional definition of the subject matter of ethics. Rather, the hook-up question concerns why I should act in such or such a way. In other words, it is a question of what kind of normativity, what kind of validity is involved.

When Peter plays a game of chess, he could ask himself: What move shall I make? Which move is the right one? To this question, there are two different answers on different levels. Let us suppose that we are dealing with the chess player Andreas, who has just learnt the rules of this game and is not yet sure of them. When Andreas asks if the move he envisages is the right one, this question could mean: Is this move allowed?

Let this be the case and his opponent Barbara confirm that Andreas’ planned move is right in the sense that it is “within the rules”. But is it the right move? Maybe the experienced chess player Barbara can see at a glance that Andreas’ planned move will result in his losing the game within a few moves. Let us imagine that she can also see that Andreas could make an alternative move that would keep the game open. Here, it is not a matter of whether Barbara is bound in any way to tell Andreas that his envisaged move is not right, i.e. not good. Normally, a chess player is not obliged to offer advice to their opponent. But normally he would not ask, either. Whether there is such an obligation cannot be decided without further information about the concrete situation. To blind out this problem, we can also imagine that Andreas asks himself whether his envisaged move is the right one. It is only important that the second meaning of his question becomes clear. It can be rephrased thus: Is this move suitable for realizing the aim or sense of the chess game? Does it render or make it possible to win the game? Or is it at least adequate to avoid being on the losing end?

Obviously, the first basic question in philosophical ethics cannot be understood in this way. If someone says that it is wrong to drink and drive, he does not normally want to say that such conduct breaks the rules of the game, in this case the road traffic regulations. Although contexts are feasible in which this remark can have that meaning: such as at a legal seminar or a driving school. Presumably the statement is not meant as an indication that drunken driving contradicts the sense or aim of driving a car, either. As a rule, it is meant to indicate that such conduct is ethically unacceptable because it is reckless.

When someone asks the question “How shall I act?” with ethical intention, he is asking if his action is appropriate with regard to what is ethically right or ethically good. This answer is of no use as a definition of philosophical ethics because it is circular and is thus also not really informative. On the contrary, one of the main tasks of philosophical ethics can be viewed as the task of giving concrete answers to the question of what is ethically right and good. However, such answers can only be given, if at all, at the end of an introduction and certainly not at the beginning. This question will probably not even have been answered fully and satisfactorily by the end. But our current deliberations are important for two reasons. On the one hand, they reveal that one must analyse the central concepts of ethics such as “ought”, “right” or “good” more closely, since they can obviously also be used in a non-ethical sense. We will deal with this in more detail in the next chapter. On the

other hand, one of the central tasks of philosophical ethics is already becoming apparent here: the formulation of concrete answers to the question of what is ethically good or right agency.

b) The second basic question

Ethics is only ubiquitous in our lives because we often ask ourselves how we ought to act. Presumably, we are equally often confronted with the consideration of why action A rather than action B is ethically the right one. We then seek not only an answer to the first basic ethics question, but also a *justification* for this answer. Frequently, the question of justification arises in situations in which we have to defend or at least explain our action to others. Occasionally, it also arises when we are asked for advice or give advice to others. Our ethical attitude characterizes the way we live together. Thus we assert reciprocal ethical claims, we demand that others behave ethically correctly and we criticize perceived misconduct. Accordingly, we can view the question of justification as the second basic question in philosophical ethics:

(F 2) Why is action A ethically right (good) or wrong (bad)?

In contrast to the first basic question, this second question does not aim at determining what action is to be taken. Rather, it asks what the features are, on the grounds of which the ascertained answer proves to be the right one. So, in the context of ethics, one is asking about the features or criteria of ethical good and right.

In a radicalized form, the question of justification can move away from the individual action A. It is then directed at ethical agency as such. The question then reads: Why ought I act ethically, anyway? What reason shall there be for me to shelve my egoistic interests in favour of the needs of others? (Here, for one thing, I am using the term interest in the general sense, which shall embrace needs, wishes and ideals equally. Moreover, at this point I am using the term „egoistic“ in a neutral sense: egoistic does not necessarily mean ethically wrong or bad). However, these are precisely the cases in which egoistic interests clash with what is ethically appropriate and which prompt the second basic question in philosophical ethics in its radicalized form. It then reads:

(F 2*) Why ought I act ethically?

Now, though the question of justification in its radicalized form, oriented to ethical agency in general, is raised mainly by the cases in which egoistic interests and requirements get into conflict, this should not entice fallacies. For one thing, it does not follow that ethically required action is by definition at variance with the fulfilment of egoistic interests. Many of our egoistic interests can be satisfied in an ethically acceptable way. For another, an ethically appropriate action is not already downgraded through also serving the satisfaction of egoistic interests. The joy and satisfaction that Christa feels in giving Dieter the bone marrow donation he urgently needs do not automatically cheapen her action to ethically bad. Nevertheless, one of the characteristic features of the ethically appropriate is that an obligation or ought seems to be imposed upon us that makes its presence felt by being contradictory to our egoistic interests, to satisfy which we are more or less immediately motivated.

As already for basic question (F 1), with regard to the second basic question it is also of decisive importance to distinguish between the various questions and their directions of impact. With the above made differentiation into two questions of justifications, (F 2) and (F 2*), we have taken a first important step. But it is not only important to distinguish between the ethical justification of a specific action and the ethical justification for the ethical viewpoint. Differentiation is also required between the question of justification in the sense of determining rational arguments on the one hand and the problem of motivation on the other. Here, a whole spectrum of possibilities needing differentiation emerges. So Erika, who is quite willing to do the ethically right thing, can ask for a reason why action A rather than action B is the ethically right one. In contrast, Ferdinand asks why he should carry out the ethically right action A, e.g. to visit his grandma, instead of realizing action B, to go to a concert, which satisfies his egoistic interests. Whereas Erika asks for a factual, ethical reason for choosing one action over another, Ferdinand wants to hear an argument that makes it clear to him why he should be motivated to act ethically.

Whilst Erika and Ferdinand can both be taken to be members of the ethical community who are only motivated differently, in the philosophical ethics literature there is also a figure – let's call her Greta – one identifies as an amoralist (compare with the figure of the amoralist [I-1,], Chapter 1). Greta is a rational person who is not prepared to align herself to the ethical ought. In contrast to Ferdinand, who asks for a reason for allowing the ethical viewpoint be the decisive factor, Greta refuses to even assume the ethical standpoint. Sometimes an amoralist is described as someone who is incapable of taking this standpoint, so is therefore stricken with a kind of ethical blindness. But in most cases it involves a person who sees no reason to participate in the ethical way of life. Let's leave the pathological amoralist out, since he would lead us to the question of whether there can be any rational human without any sense of ethical claims. Instead, let's assume that "rationality" and "amorality" are compatible. So regarding Greta, the question of justification "Why be moral?" is being posed in its most radical form. Can there be a justification of ethics that, due to its rationality, convinces rational beings who stand completely outside of this ethical way of life that they should participate therein? One can designate the first two justifications, demanded by Erika and Ferdinand, as *internal* justificatory approaches because they inquire into the normative validity that results within the ethical way of life. In comparison, the hypothetical dispute with Greta involves the attempt at an *external* justification, since one is seeking an argument for the ethical way of life that is itself not already a part of ethics.

Remark: The situation is for three reasons more complicated than was illustrated just now. For maybe one can indeed, firstly, also say Ferdinand is an argument outside ethics for letting oneself be motivated by ethical claims. At least in philosophy there is a suggestion for analysis in which ethical validity is attributed to values outside of moral values. If this succeeds, then there is quite generally the chance of translating the question of ethical right and good into a language that is free of ethical concepts and principles. In chapter VII we shall discuss in detail whether such a strategy – called ethical naturalism - is meaningful. Secondly, as already intimated, there is an attempt to prove that from the rationality of A it follows self-analytically that A has an understanding of ethical standards. The amoralist Greta is then either a pathological case (i.e. not rational), or an inconsistent (i.e. contradictory) construct of philosophers.

Moreover, the radicalized second basic question (F 2*) poses a follow-up question that is being discussed controversially in the philosophical literature. This is the question as to the correlation of ethical concepts, of features and human motivation. Some maintain that a rational being fully recognizes the meaning of ethical concepts and can correctly grasp the ethical demands without thereby having a motive to act according to the ethical demands. If one supports this position of *motivational externalism*, the question arises as to the actual source of ethical motivation, since this cannot stem from rational aspects. Others maintain, in contrast, that the correct grasp of the ethical aspects of a situation and the correct understanding of a claim to ethical validity

represents a motive for agency. This means that a subject A only correctly grasps the meaning of ethical concepts such as “ethically right” when A’s judgment that action X is ethically right, at the same time also constitutes a motive for A to do X. A supporter of this position of *motivational internalism* is not fixed on the strong thesis that this motive for action must always be the strongest and thus effective. He can pull back to the plausible weaker thesis that the correct grasp of ethical aspects or the correct understanding of ethical validation claims are necessarily accompanied by a motive to follow these aspects or demands, even when this motive can be superimposed by rival motives.

c) The third basic question

The question of justification already arises in both its forms as the second basic question in philosophical ethics in our everyday ethical practice. Philosophical ethics deals with these problems of justification in a systematic way and strives to make ethical justifications transparent in their immanent structure, to analyse the basic concepts being used and to understand the specific nature of ethical claims and justifications. Thus, although there is no sharp division between our everyday ethical practice and philosophical ethics, since both are concerned with answering questions and justifying answers in respect of ethical validity, philosophical ethics stands out because it is a *theory*. Though this does not hinder philosophical ethics from also giving material answers to the first and second basic questions, it does demand systematic penetration and analysis of this practice over and above the practice customary in everyday life. Presumably, philosophical ethics will be able to proceed reconstructively and interpretively to a great extent. However, there is also a possibility that philosophical ethics will have a modifying effect on our everyday ethics and ethical self-understanding. If this is the case, this should be due to the potential of critical reflection, through which philosophical ethics differs from our everyday ethical understanding. Philosophical ethics should stand out and prove itself by rationally justifying our practice and thereby enabling us to understand and justify our own ethical practice better.

Thus, we can formulate a third basic question in philosophical ethics, raised on this systematic aspect:

(F 3) How are the basic ethical concepts constituted and how do ethical justifications work?

Philosophical ethics is an ancient discipline, as ancient as philosophy itself. Humans have dealt philosophically with the phenomena of perception and action, of knowing and willing for as long as they have pursued philosophy. So it is no wonder that in the course of more than two thousand years of occidental philosophy, different and rival philosophical ethics have developed. They all begin with experiences from our everyday practice, but are then embedded in further philosophical and other assumptions that are held to be true or right by the respective philosophers. Over the course of this introduction, we will get to know the main types of philosophical ethics that have been generated during the historical development of philosophy. As we go along, we will encounter them as possible and rival answers to the crucial systematic questions that arise in the field of philosophical ethics. However, before we can devote ourselves to this systematic line of thought, some clarifications are needed.

3. Two central differentiations

A well-known and indeed accurate bon mot recounts that it is easier to get two philosophers to use the same toothbrush than the same conceptual framework. In association therewith, in the diverse philosophical theories, suggestions for differentiation and classification are made that are at variance with one another. Many are translatable into one another and thus do not pose any fundamental problems. But others have contextual consequences and can therefore only be viewed in connection with the material statements of the respective philosophical ethics. With regard to our subject matter, it is particularly unfortunate that some of the central concepts in philosophical ethics are also used in everyday language, but with a different meaning.

Since finding terms that can be conciliated with all the others that are in use is a lost cause, our only possibility is to decide on a conceptual framework and use it consistently. Wherever this becomes necessary in the course of this introduction, we will carry out such commitments. From the start, two differences are central to our deliberations; they concern firstly, difference in levels and secondly, difference in perspectives.

a) The three levels of philosophical ethics

Even if there is argument about the exact relationship of the levels to one another, the differentiation of three levels has proved useful [I-2], p. 39-43). One differentiates between:

- descriptive ethics
- normative ethics
- metaethics

This differentiation becomes necessary because different types of statement can be found on these three levels.

(i.) If, for instance, a historian describes which customs were acceptable in the Roman Empire, then he does not himself formulate normative claims. If someone ascertains that eating pork is forbidden in a society, he is formulating an empirical statement, but is not himself claiming that one should not eat pork. The same applies when someone claims that suicide is a deadly sin according to the Christian conception. Or if it is pointed out that the freedom of research and teaching is protected constitutionally in the Federal Republic of Germany. None of these cases presents a normative statement.

Empirical studies of this kind are usually called *descriptive ethics* in the literature. Although statements from this field play a role in philosophical ethics, in essence it is, first, not a philosophical but an empirical discipline (e.g. ethnology, sociology or historiography). Second, this level is not about normative questions, claims or justifications. For this reason I do not want to use the term ethics at all for this level because the basic questions formulated at the beginning of this chapter do not come into play.

(ii.) On the basis of our characterization of ethics up to this point, it is clear that the characterization „*normative ethics*“ is just as redundant as the characterization „unmarried bachelor“. By definition, ethics is concerned with normative statements. It postulates normative claims, analyses normative claims that we formulate in our everyday ethical practice or that are postulated in other ethical theories, and inquires into the justifications for these claims (here, non-cognitivism presents a borderline case that we will deal with in detail in

the third chapter). The differentiation between “descriptive” and “normative” is, however, most certainly useful in the characterization of statements. For descriptive statement can, of course, also occur in philosophical ethics. For this reason, from now on ethics will always be taken to mean philosophical, normative ethics. While the differentiation between descriptive and normative ethics, in contrast to the differentiation between normative and descriptive statements, will thus no longer play a role in the future course of our deliberations, I will continue to use the qualifying adjunct “philosophical” ethics now and again. For one thing, it serves to separate it from everyday ethics, i.e. stresses the systematizing and reflective character of philosophical ethics as a normative theory. For another, this designation shall emphasize that it is concerns an ethics striving for *philosophical* justification as opposed to, say, theological reasoning. So when the concept of ethics is used without a further qualifying adjunct in the following, the normative discipline of philosophical ethics is intended.

Remark: Alongside the differentiation between descriptive and normative ethics, in the literature there is a further differentiation between ethics and morality. Unfortunately, this is inconsistent. Occasionally, the concept of ethics is used to denote descriptive ethics; the concept of morality then stands for normative ethics. The same objections apply to the differentiation between ethics and morality in this sense as were submitted just now against the differentiation between descriptive and normative ethics. But frequently in philosophy, a difference is made between ethics or morality in the wide sense and morality in the narrower sense. Following John L. Mackie (1917-1981), morality in the narrower sense is understood as those behavioural codes whose main task is to protect the interests of others and is consequently perceived by the agent as the restriction of his egoistic interests. In contrast, every general theory of behaviour that someone makes his own is understood as ethics or morality in the wide sense (see [I-3], p. 133). Although Mackie’s definition of ethics or morality in the wide sense is possibly too general and therefore inadequate, in this introduction the concept of ethics stands for morality in the wider sense. The main reason for this decision is that the dominant conception of philosophical ethics as moral philosophy in the narrower sense represents marginalization, in contrast to everyday prior understanding and philosophical tradition. Why should all ethical questions only be concerned with the effects of my actions on others? Bernard Williams (*1929) is of the view that the term ethics, which comes from the Greek, indicates more the individual character of the agent and the notion of the good, whereas the term morality, which comes from the Latin, tends more towards social expectations and notions of right (see [I-4], p. 6). The restriction of philosophical ethics to the narrow concept of morality should, as Williams recommends, be understood as a modern development, which at the very least needs philosophical justification. Until this happens, it is reasonable to speak of philosophical ethics as morals in the wider sense. Even if it should later prove necessary to limit the definition of morality in the wider sense, this approach is more meaningful than restricting our viewpoint *ex ante* to questions of morality in the narrower sense (cp. [I-5]).

(iii.) Thirdly, a special kind of claims must be delineated, in which statements about the basic concepts and forms of ethical justifications are made. On the one hand, these statements do not formulate normative demands, but on the other, neither do they describe factual systems of norms. Instead, these statements, which constitute the field of *metaethics*, involve philosophy of language and methodological statements, which for their part are tied to further philosophical assumptions from other philosophical disciplines.

If, for example, one reflects on the particular nature of ethics via a linguistic analysis of the various uses of „good“ or „right“, then one is carrying out the same metaethical research as when one wishes to determine the specific form of ethical argumentation. The same applies if one tries to define philosophically the linguistic character of a normative ethical statement. Let us take the statement “It is ethically wrong to kill an innocent person against his will”. There is metaethical disagreement about whether this is really an asserting statement with which the claim for truth is being raised. In this controversy, some philosophers have advocated the thesis that this statement is only a claim in respect of its superficial structure. In fact, one should understand this speech act as a recommendation, an expression of feeling or an imperative. For now, I do not want to dwell on this

discussion, which will occupy us in-depth in the third chapter. But it points to two things: First, far-reaching contextual consequences can result from answers to metaethical questions, since, quite obviously, ethical statements can only be justified when claims to truth are raised with them. Second, these metaethical statements are themselves neither normative statements nor mere descriptions of actual accepted systems of norms.

Hence, metaethical statements should be distinguished from ethical statements by virtue of their type of statement. But this should not lead us to the assumption that the levels of ethics and metaethics are completely independent of one another, though it is right to say that specific metaethical assumptions do not necessarily commit a philosopher to a particular type of philosophical ethics. Many metaethical findings can be integrated in diverse types of ethics. On the other hand, metaethical assumptions establish a general frame for philosophical ethics, so that metaethics is not completely neutral towards philosophical ethics. Metaethics has ramifications for answering the material question of philosophical ethics. What for the main part receives too little notice is that the dependency also goes in the other direction. It is not feasible that a metaethical suggestion for analysis that is incompatible with the material convictions of philosophical ethics must in each and every case be viewed as a mandatory frame. A contradiction between ethics and metaethics must not automatically be resolved in favour of metaethics. This would only be valid if metaethical statements had the same status as logical statements. But, since metaethics, unlike logic, is not contextually neutral, consideration must in cases of conflict be given each time to the level on which corrections must be made.

Because philosophical ethics, unlike everyday ethics, requires systematic and theoretical penetration, it cannot eschew metaethics. That is why the question as to the character of our basic ethical concepts and justifications was brought in above as the third basic question in philosophical ethics. It will be shown in the further course of our deliberations that the reason the various philosophical theories differ from one another is chiefly because of diverging metaethical convictions. Above all, in the twentieth century metaethical disputes have played the main role in the differentiation of various philosophical ethics.

b) Two perspectives

Thus we arrive at the differentiation of two *perspectives*, which will become relevant for our further deliberations: the differentiation between an internal and an external perspective on ethics. Unfortunately, the internal-external-difference is also used with various meanings. We have already referred to the problem of an external justification in the sense of a justification of ethics without recourse to ethical concepts or ethical assumptions. In general, one can differentiate between an internal and an external perspective of ethics as a way of life.

An *internal* perspective is always taken when single actions or ethical statements are reflected on or justified with recourse to other ethical assumptions. This perspective is only rescinded when one suggests a naturalistic analysis for the whole ethical conceptuality on the level of metaethics. Whether such a naturalistic conception can be rendered plausible will be discussed later (cp. Chapter VII).

In contrast, an *external* perspective rests on giving an explanation or justification of ethical attitudes, agencies or social practices that are themselves no longer formulated within the ethical frame. This characterization is also only valid on condition that the ethical conceptuality cannot be naturalized.

Prominent examples of such an external perspective are, for one, an ideology-critical unmasking argument of

the type: An ethical discourse is only a cover-up for the factual economic interests. Ethical arguments and justifications are not true, even when individuals believe them, because the real motivation is dictated by the economic interests. For another, evolutionary ethics presents - at least in one variant (cp. Chapter. VII, 2 and 3) — a classic example of the external perspective. There, the ethical attitudes and convictions as well as the ethical social practice are interpreted as an evolutionary strategy for the propagation of one's own genes. Ethics as an individual behavioural pattern is therefore meaningful and justifiable because by and large it serves the propagation of one's own genes or the protection of the species. A third ethical conception in which our differentiation between the internal and external perspectives becomes obsolete rests on the assumption that ethical requirements can be explained in terms of a rationality that is free from morality and directed at the agent's self-interest (cp. Chapter IV). In such a conception there is a reduction of ethics to an ethics-free, enlightened rationality, so that the basic ethical questions can be answered in conceptuality that is itself not part of ethics. To be sure, this conception does not represent ethical naturalism because the concept of rationality cannot be elucidated scientifically. But at the same time, tucked into the reductive programme is the idea of embracing ethics as a whole in the external perspective.

At this point, we cannot discuss the sense or nonsense of these approaches. Maybe the first two research projects are implausible, but maybe significant insights can also be gained in this way. For the moment it is only important that they evidently involve an external perspective. This already becomes clear in that they cannot handle the first basic question in philosophical ethics. When someone wants to know if action A or action B is ethically right, ideology-critical or biological evolutionary explications are of no help to her basic ethical attitude. At the most, they can lead to the person concerned refraining from asking her question. If someone asks which action is ethically right and if someone asks for an ethical justification, she is clearly taking the internal perspective for granted and thus also expects an answer from within ethics, not an explanation for the ethics from outside. The external perspective on ethics as a whole is thus unsuitable for answering concrete basic ethical questions. This does not apply in this form to the third path of reduction from the ethical to enlightened self-interest, as here the translation of our ethical conceptuality into another normative conceptuality is being suggested. However, since, from our prior understanding, we make a difference between our self-interest and the demands of ethics on us, the answer by this ethical conception to the first two basic questions is, at the very least, surprising.

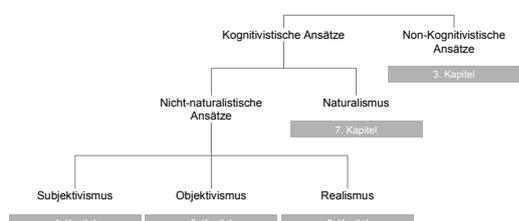
Since the discussion of the conception of enlightened self-interest (in Chapter IV) and ethical naturalism (in Chapter VII) is yet to come, three things remain to be recorded at this point. Firstly, the distinction between an internal and an external perspective has heuristic character because it can only be upheld meaningfully if the various reduction strategies in which our ethical conceptuality takes recourse to something outside ethics can be rebuffed for sound reasons. Secondly, this implies that the argumentative recourse to this distinction between an internal and an external perspective is not contextually a neutral distinction (it is thus an example of the contextual significance of metaethical deliberations). Finally, this heuristic distinction is, thirdly, vindicated in that it articulates a difference that we normally take for granted in our everyday ethical self-understanding.

4. The structure of this introduction

In the *second* chapter we will turn our attention to an aspect of metaethics and analyse three central terms in philosophical ethics; „good“, „right“ and „ought“ in more detail. As the deliberations in this first chapter have shown, it will primarily have to concern the difference between the specifically ethical meaning of these terms and their non-ethical meanings. In the *third* chapter, the basic idea of non-cognitivism will be introduced. This form of philosophical ethics starts from the assumption that ethical utterances only have the structure of claims on the grammatical surface. Philosophical analysis will then show that they are cases of linguistic utterances that have no truth value. After this discussion we will see non-cognitivism off with ample convincing arguments and in the following deal with the main types of ethical cognitivism. In the *fourth* chapter, the different variants of subjectivist theories will be discussed. Starting, for one thing, from the cognitivistic assumption that ethical statements are a matter of truth-enabled and therefore justifiable claims. For another thing, philosophers who support subjectivism in ethics think it possible to reduce these statements ultimately to statements about individual interests. In contrast, supporters of ethical objectivism, which we will tackle in the *fifth* chapter, assume that ethical statements cannot be ascribed to subjective interests. They share with subjectivists and realists the cognitive assumption that ethical utterances are truth- and justification-enabled statements. However, in contrast with realists, they are of the opinion that this objectivity can ultimately be ascribed to valid intersubjective aspects of general or even transcendental reason. In the *sixth* chapter we will then apply ourselves to the ethical realists whose central basic assumption consists in the thesis that ethical aspects and requirements cannot be completely reduced to achievements of empirical or transcendental subjectivity. Here, in strong and weak realism, two forms can be discerned that are frequently not set apart clearly enough in the literature. After we have by then acquired an overview of the contrast between subjectivist, objectivistic and realistic theories within the non-naturalistic camp of ethical cognitivism, the *seventh* chapter will be concerned with the contrast between naturalistic and non-naturalistic approaches. Naturalistic approaches start with the basic thesis that ethical concepts, statements and phenomena take recourse to non-ethical concepts, statements and phenomena. In comparison, non-naturalistic ethics start from the autonomy and irreducibility of the ethical.

In Chapters III to VII, the distinctions between cognitivistic approaches and non-cognitivism, between naturalism and non-naturalistic approaches, and the different ontological preconditions of non-naturalistic cognitivistic approaches will be used as guidelines. The structure of this line of thought can be shown schematically as follows:

		Cognitivistic approaches		Non-cognitivistic approaches
				Chapter 3
	Non-naturalistic approaches		Naturalism	
			Chapter 7	
subjectivism	objectivism	realism		
Chapter 4	Chapter 5	Chapter 6		



In the *eighth* chapter, two further classificatory schemes will be introduced with which one can classify philosophical

ethics as different types. The criterion for one of the classifications shall be the question as to which subject matter is the actual subject matter of ethical assessment according to the respective ethical theory. Teleological theories measure the validity of an action according to the result, deontological theories focus on the validity of the type of action and virtue ethics concentrates on the character of the agent so as to determine the validity of an action. In the other classification scheme, the ethics theories are then differentiated according to how many criteria (or principles) they draw on for the ethics. The *ninth* chapter gives an overview of the different philosophical justification models for ethics. In this chapter, alongside the problem of relativism, the central structural features of ethical justificatory models will be presented. In the *tenth* chapter, we address a philosophical perennial, meaning the problem of freedom and more exactly: the relation of freedom and responsibility. Here, the task will be to define more closely the links between the various questions that are concealed behind the freedom issue, so as to acquire a more exact picture of how freedom and responsibility react to one another. Finally, the *eleventh* chapter in this introduction takes on board the question: What can philosophical ethics achieve? Among others, it concerns the question of ethics experts and the meaning of ethical education. But above all, the limitations of philosophical ethics shall be illuminated to prevent false expectations from even surfacing and to enable the rejection of excessive demands for good reasons.

5. Summary, suggestions for reading, questions and exercises

Summary

Starting with everyday prior understanding, this chapter has undertaken an initial contextual determination of philosophical ethics by formulating three basic questions in ethics: (F1) “How shall I act?”, (F 2) “ Why is action A ethically right (good) or wrong (bad)?” and (F 3) “How are the basic ethical concepts constituted and how do ethical justifications function?”. In addition, (F2), which is directed at the justification of individual actions, was differentiated from the radicalized question (F2*) „Why ought I act ethically?”; this question is directed at a justification of ethics as a whole. The relation of philosophical to everyday ethics was defined in such a way that the former raises the claim that everyday ethics be systematized and advanced to a theory. The differentiation between descriptive and normative ethics was introduced and rejected as being unusable for our introduction, since ethics always involves normative statements and purely descriptive accounts of ethical practice do not fall under the concept of ethics. On the other hand, the differentiation between ethics and metaethics has proved important because the latter brings into play reflections on ethical concepts and statements that are indispensable in the frame of an ethical theory. In addition, with the internal and external perspectives two different approaches to ethics were made out. This differentiation is necessary because different questions and justification aims emerge within both perspectives. In the internal perspective, answers to the basic questions in ethics are sought, which can be formulated using ethical concepts and assumptions (i.e. from within ethics). By contrast, in the external perspective the aim is to answer these questions from a viewpoint that lies outside ethics. Finally, the structure of this introduction was outlined.

Suggestions for reading

On the history of ethics see [I-6]; [I-7], a presentation of the development of ethical theories up to the 19th century still worth reading. A brief and informative complete overview of all important areas in philosophical ethics can be found in the contributions in [I-8]. Important essays on the development of metaethics are collected in [I-9].

Question and exercises

- Define the relation of the first and second basic questions in ethics to one another.
- Why is the question of rule consistency not identical with (F 2)?
- In which sense does the modified second basic question (F 2*) represent a radicalization of the second basic question (F 2)?
- What is understood by an amoralist?
- Why is the differentiation between descriptive and normative ethics not useful?
- What is understood by metaethics?
- Explain the difference between the internal and external perspectives on ethics.
- Draft a dialogue between Immanuel and Karl, in which Karl carries out an ideology-critical unmasking of ethical justification.
- In what sense does philosophical ethics go beyond our everyday practice of ethical justification?
- What difficulties are there with respect to the differentiation between ethics and morality?

II. Basic concepts of ethics

'Tis written: "In the Beginning was the Word."
Here am I balked: who, now can help afford?
The Word?—impossible so high to rate it;
And otherwise must I translate it.
If by the Spirit I am truly taught.
(Faust)
Translation by Bayard Taylor, 1825-1878

In this chapter, the basic concepts of ethics will be analysed from within the metaethical perspective. We will study the basic central deontic concepts “ought” and “right” and the fundamental validity concept “good”. In addition, we will determine the relation between metaethical analyses and material ethical statements.

1. The indispensability of metaethics

In the first chapter we saw that both the question about which action is right and the search for appropriate justifications for the answers to this question are already anchored in our everyday ethical language game. In the attempt to develop answers to these two basic questions in ethics, philosophical ethics goes beyond everyday ethics by striving for a *systematic* analysis and presentation of ethics. In doing so, it proves indispensable to subject the basic central concepts and statement forms of ethics to a philosophical analysis. We have named this clarificatory issue the third basic question in philosophical ethics and thereby awarded it exceptional status.

In the first chapter, alongside the three basic questions in ethics, we introduced two important differentiations, of which the first, the differentiation of levels, will now be the focal point. The task of this chapter consists in the analysis of the basic concepts of ethics. This task is of a metaethical nature because we shall make non-normative statements about the meaning, logical structure and use of central basic ethical concepts (we will deal with the likewise metaethically directed analysis of the logical structure and the use of ethical utterances in Chapter III). So in the following, we will take up a kind of bird’s eye view of ethics in the sense of a linguistic practice and analyse the many uses of some of the central basic ethical concepts.

a) The status of metaethical statements

At the beginning of this chapter, I would like to point to two statements from the first chapter.

(i) First, the fact that metaethical deliberations are not themselves normative ethical statements should not deceive one into assuming that metaethical premises or results of analyses are completely neutral towards material ethical statements. This is false in two ways: for one, certain metaethical assumptions are not compatible with some of these positions, even if they do not commit us to a specific ethical position. One could say of them that metaethics has a *limiting* function for ethics. For another, the relation of ethics and metaethics should not be understood as a one-sided relationship of dependency. At least some metaethical assumptions, namely those that have contextual consequences for ethics, must compete with our ethical prior understanding. They are not assigned any function that is independent of ethical assumptions; on the contrary, the philosophical task is to bring metaethical and ethical assumptions in a relationship called *reflective equilibrium*. This means that the reciprocal correction and adaptation of the various assumptions must be directed at achieving a maximally positive overall effect on our deliberations and their coherence and usefulness. A metaethical assumption that is not compatible with our basal ethical assumptions thus needs, for example, exceedingly strong reasons for justification, so that the appeal effect that is thereby engendered can be justified. This can be summarized thus: Ethical assumptions have a plausibilising function and determine how much justification a metaethical assumption needs to be assigned (see [II-1], Chapter 1).

(ii) The second remark in the previous chapter that I would like to bring to mind consists in the pointer that metaethical analyses are interwoven not only with our ethical, but also with our everyday linguistic intuitions. Admittedly, a metaethical analysis of ethical concepts is thus, on the one hand, an attempt at clarification and systemization, but on the other hand, it should be too far removed from our everyday linguistic prior understanding, at least, not without serious reasons. The evidence of logical inconsistency, such as ambiguity, is doubtless such a serious reason. But even here, the boundaries between logical and contextual aspects are blurred. To be sure, whether or not one can, for instance, apply the concept of person to mature, rational persons, human embryos and hominids or dolphins equally or in the same sense is not just a question of logic or semantic analysis. Here it also holds that there are no one-sided dependency relations and that the model of reflective equilibrium should be employed.

b) Three types of definitions

The relation of philosophical analysis and everyday intuitions also extends to the following

problem area. George E. Moore (1873-1958) pointed out an ambiguity in the undertaking to define concepts that is on the whole relevant for the understanding of philosophical analysis and the use of concepts (cp. [II-2], p. 37 ff.). He differentiates three kinds of definition:

- The nominal definition in the sense of arbitrary verbal definition.
- The standard definition in the sense of normal everyday usage.
- The real definition in the sense of the analysis or reduction of objects that are denoted by the concept in question.

(i) A *nominal* definition is understood as a convention by which e.g. an author, a discussion group or also the members of a scientific discipline specify that they want to use a concept with a particular meaning. For instance, if I were to adopt the linguistic convention of using the term “bear” to mean “the heaviest philosopher in Münster”, in this chapter my use of “bear” would then mean just that. Such nominal definitions can be convenient or useful for particular theoretical tasks and even indispensable in a hopeless equivocation of concepts. As a strategy in the framework of the philosophical project of an analysis of a concept or usage, the nominal definition is, however, patently uninteresting.

(ii) The *standard definition* in the sense of everyday normal usage is what we usually find in a dictionary. When the meaning of a concept and the most important ways it is used are listed, this does not mean that in actuality every speaker of that language uses the concept in such a way. But it does mean that deviant uses are indeed deviations from standard and normal usage. A philosophical analysis of meaning is wise to stay in contact with these standard definitions (cp. [II-3], p. 2). The wording „keep in touch“ by William D. Ross (1877-1971) expresses the flexible relation between everyday language usage and philosophical analysis very well. The aim of philosophical analysis cannot only be the subsequent transcription of actual language use. Such an ultimately empirical-statistical undertaking would be the task of linguists. And neither should philosophical analysis sheer off standard usage unnecessarily or even ignore it altogether. However, due to the many factors to be considered, there cannot be a universal theory or a general standard for the relation of philosophical analysis to standard meaning.

(iii) Moore’s third kind of definition on the list is the philosophically most relevant and demanding type : the *real definition*. First of all, here it is important not to aim at the analysis

of the meaning or use of linguistic expressions, but at an analysis of the objects referred to by these expressions, or the objects you mean (understood in the widest sense of the word as “objects of discourse”). The differentiation of this level from the level of analysis of meaning and usage is extremely important. I agree with Moore and Ross that the linguistic-analytical approach to philosophical problems must not be misunderstood as the analysis of language for its own sake. In point of fact, this analysis should be understood as a methodological and epistemological approach in the sense that one can approach the problems (only) via an analysis of the language. But, ultimately, it is always about problems and these are only to a limited extent the language and its components. For one thing, we can leave open whether Moore’s classification is complete, or whether further kinds of definition in the sense of philosophical analysis are conceivable. At this point, neither do we have to decide if a real definition always has to be interpreted in Moore’s sense, as a reduction of a whole to its components. However, it is important to be mindful of the difference between conceptual analysis and object analysis and the relation between standard meaning and philosophical meaning.

c) The dichotomy of basic concepts as a heuristic strategy

This brings me to the actual theme of this chapter: the basic concepts of ethics. It can be taken as a largely undisputed consensus that a dichotomy of ethical normative statements in deontic and value statements is useful as a heuristic strategy. For this reason, we will study the basic deontic concepts and the central basic concept of validity statements separately.

It should be said beforehand that the philosophical consensus reaching beyond the thesis that the above named dichotomy is useful has already come to an end. The order in which the two areas are dealt with in the following ought not to be interpreted as factual weighing. In the philosophical debate, the most diverse theses are represented to this effect. Some claim that validity statements are dependent on deontic statements. A few are even of the opinion that modern philosophical ethics can do without value concepts and value statements altogether and should confine itself purely to deontic statements. Needless to say, there are also inverse positions. Among philosophers who consider both areas to be equal and indispensable there is no consensus about how the relation of the two areas is to be reconstructed and constituted in substance.

All these questions are already of a contextual nature, so answering them goes far beyond the metaethical perspective now available to us and we will therefore not address them until

later chapters. In this chapter we will avoid contextual deliberations on ethics as far as possible. However, in the next two sections I will occasionally try to elucidate where the contextual questions begin, even if we do not then follow them up.

2. The ought: basic deontic concepts

Just now, I mentioned basic „deontic“ concepts and thereby used a basic philosophical term. The characterization “deontic” means that the basic concept in question points to duty, in the case of deontological ethics therefore ethical duty. The first basic question in ethics concerns how I *ought* to act. A deontological ethics takes this ought – in Chapter 1 we spoke of ethical validity – as its starting point. If we start by once more deferring the question of how this ethical ought differs from other kinds of ought, such an ethical ought is expressed in two fundamentally different forms.

- As a command in the sense of an imperative: You ought not to commit adultery!
- As a command in the sense of an *assertive statement*: Adultery is forbidden!

The assertive statement „Adultery is forbidden“, in which the deontic term „forbidden“ crops up, can be replaced by the assertive statement „Adultery is morally wrong“.

Before we begin with the analysis of the mentioned basic deontic concepts, two further remarks are needed. Hidden behind the difference between the analysis of the ethical ought as an imperative versus assertive statement is, firstly, the philosophical dissent between ethical non-cognitivists and ethical cognitivists, which will be elucidated in the next chapter. In the following, we will start from the cognitivist assumption that the ethical ought goes back to facts that are expressed in assertive statements. Secondly, we can distinguish between two interpretations regarding the question of which deontic concept should be viewed as a basic concept. Thus, on the one hand “ethically right” can be seen as a basic concept in deontological ethics (compare [II-4] for this position, p.65: there, “morally” right is used as the equivalent of “ethically right”) For the most part, however, the view is held that the “ethical ought” can be taken as a basic concept of deontological ethics. Because, as will be seen shortly, the concepts of being forbidden and being allowed can be defined with the help

of the concept of ought, one can even view the latter as the only basic concept in ethics (compare [II-5], p.1. for this position). Since we do not have to decide this priority issue for our own purposes, we can now move on to analysing these two basic concepts in more detail.

a) The first basic deontic concept: „ethical ought“

Let us start with the analysis of ought (compare also the presentation in [II-5], p. 1-10 for the following deliberations). In general, one assumes that deontic assertions refer primarily to actions or courses of action (and the related aspects such as wishes or preferences) For the moment, I will accept these generally shared contextual premises, but will later return to them. In the following, an *action* will be understood as a concrete spatio-temporal event, i.e. a datable doing realized by a particular person at a particular place and point in time. Omissions will thereby also be counted as actions. So Andrea bringing herself to attend a lecture at 7:45 this morning is just as much an action as Bernd's concurrent not getting up and omitting to attend that lecture.

In contrast, a *course of action* is a type of event that can be executed by different persons and different times or at different locations. The concept of course of action ought to be conceived widely enough to include omissions. Attending-a-seminar and skipping-a-seminar are thus in equal measure courses of action. Unlike a concrete action, courses of action can be realized repeatedly.

As will now be shown, one can define the other deontic concepts „allowed“ and „forbidden“ using the basic concept “ought”. Let us take as the standard form

(1) It is forbidden to do F.

F refers thereby to a course of action. Then one can analyse the statement

(2) It is forbidden to do X.

as:

(2*) One ought to do non-X.

Whereby non-X represents an act of omission. The statement

(3) It is allowed to do X.

can also be analysed with the concept of ought as

(3*) One ought not to do non-X.

There is no reason to extend our analysis beyond the concept of ought. But it is important not to understand our ought sentence either as an imperative or as a description of the fact that a person P sets an imperative. Thus three readings of our standard form should be

differentiated:

- (1) It is forbidden to do F.
- (4) P commands: Do F!
- (5) It is the case that P commands F to be done.

Whether the interpretation of the ethical ought in the sense of (1) or (4) is appropriate will be discussed in the next chapter. Reading (5) can most certainly be precluded, since it does not express any kind of normative requirement, but only provides a description.

Sentence (1) is accordingly an assertive, possibly true statement in which the existence of an ethical obligation is expressed. In contrast to imperatives, in which something is required in the mandatory sense, (1) expresses that ethical validity is being ascribed to the wording. Form (1) imperatives can both refer to specific persons and be formulated unspecifically. Thus the two following statements come under form (1):

- (6) There is a person P, for whom it is imperative to do F.
- (7) It is imperative that someone does F.

At this point we cannot go into the fundamentals of deontic logic, as this would take us too far away from our real theme. But the distinction between (6) and (7) already clearly shows that the area of validity of imperatives can be specified. On the one hand, this succeeds through various contextual fillings of the course of action. Let us take the following two statements:

- (8) It is imperative to help starving people in the Third World.
- (9) It is imperative to donate 10% of one's income to starving people in the Third World.

At first glance one can already see that (9) is more specific in the sense of materially specified, or more 'concrete' than (8). On the other hand, imperatives can also be specified in a different sense by tying their validity to conditions. Take

- (10) Under condition A, it is imperative to do F.

Condition A might describe a specific starting situation such as: If there is a road accident and there are victims who are not getting medical help, it is imperative to administer first aid.

Since (1) and (10) are fundamentally different because in (10) an imperative is formulated under a limiting condition, we must distinguish between different types of being imperative. It is useful to distinguish between conditional, non-conditional, unconditional and unlimited imperatives (see also [II-5], p. 6 ff.).

Conditional imperatives are those in the form of (10) in which the validity is linked to a

limiting condition. Kant's "hypothetical imperatives" are a special case of limited imperatives, in which the limiting condition makes reference to the interest of the agent, as for example "if you want x, it is imperative that you do y" (cp. [II-6], p. 414 f.).

Non-conditional imperatives are those in form of (1), in which no limiting conditions are named. However, in the non-conditional imperative limiting conditions cannot be ruled out. A non-conditional imperative applies under the tacit requirements that the conditions of its validity have not been breached (in terminology referring back to Ross, non-conditionals are also called *prima-facie* imperatives, compare [II-3], Chapter 2 on this).

On the other hand, if one understands by the standard form (1) that the existence of limiting conditions shall be precluded, then one formulates *unconditional* imperatives. An imperative counts as unconditional when absolutely no limiting conditions are permitted. As one can easily spell out, unconditional imperatives are, however, too strong because they can also postulate logical or causal impossibilities.

If one limits imperatives to the logically and causally possible, one gets *limited* imperatives. In contrast to entirely unconditional imperatives, these are also thus liable to limiting conditions. What is required must be logically and causally possible, either in total, or, if it concerns imperatives specific to persons, for the respective person. Otherwise it infringes the fundamental ethical intuition that ethical ought implies can.

Thus the following statement must be false because it logically requires contradiction:

(11) It is imperative to do F and non-F at the same time.

For the same reason, imperatives cannot hold if they generally demand something that is causally impossible. So no actions can be demanded of us humans if, in principle, they go beyond the extent of our causal possibilities. Thus the following assertion cannot be true:

(12) It is imperative that humans run 10 km in 10 seconds.

This limitation to what is causally possible can moreover refer to features of the specific situation or to individual attributes and abilities of the agent (whereby the concept of the causally possible is defined broadly). Let us imagine that Christoph, who is quadriplegic, sees how a child falls into a river and threatens to drown. Nobody apart from him is anywhere near, who could help. Christoff has no way of notifying someone in time and he is not able to swim. Thus he has no causal possibility of saving the child from drowning, The statement

(13) For Christoff it is imperative to save this child from drowning.
is therefore false.

Behind the limitation of ethical imperative to unlimited imperatives is the ethical principle “ought implies can”. If an action (for someone in a particular situation) cannot possibly be realized for logical or causal reasons, then this action cannot, under these circumstances, be imperative. In all, we therefore get four kinds of ethical imperative:

- Conditional imperatives (a limitation is named)
- Non-conditional imperatives (limitations are neither named nor ruled out)
- Unconditional imperatives (every kind of limitation is ruled out)
- Unlimited imperatives (imperatives are limited to the logically and causally possible, otherwise no limitations are permitted)

b) Broad’s distinction

At this point, it is necessary to return to the initially conceded limitation of the ethical ought to actions and courses of action. Charles D. Broad (1887-1971) pointed out that one must distinguish between two meanings of „ought“: ”ought-to-do” and ”ought-to-be” (see [II-7], p. 141 f.).

- ”ought-to-do”: something ought to be done.
- ”ought-to-be”: something ought to be the case.

The first is the familiar imperative of actions and courses of action. By ”ought-to-be”, Broad means that there are situations of which one can say that they should or should not be the case. For instance, if one says that no human on earth should starve, then one is aiming at a global condition that should be the case. Broad extends thereby the range of ethical imperatives because now not only actions, but also global conditions are included. Indisputably, he gratifies a widespread ethical intuition that certain situations, conditions or events should or should not be (or should or should not happen).

The systematic reason for the necessity to discriminate between these two meanings of the ethical ought is that only in the case of ought-to-do does the limiting function of the agent’s causal abilities come into play, whereas a requirement of ought-to-be does not contain this limitation, as is made clear in the following case: We can consider a particular event, e.g. the crash of a meteorite on earth, through which all life on this planet is destroyed, to be

something that should not take place ethically, even if we have no possible courses of action that could prevent such an event. The ethical principle “ought implies can” is therefore only adequately formulated if one interprets “ought” in the sense of “ought-to-do”.

c) The second basic deontic concept: “ethically right”

With this, I would like to look briefly at the second basic deontic concept „ethically right“, which some consider to be the basic concept of deontic ethics. In his analysis of “ethically right”, Ross promotes the thesis that “ethically right” means the same as “ethically imperative” and in general “right” means the same as “imperative” (see [II-3], p. 4). So according to this analysis, there is a semantic connection between the two basic concepts.

In the framework of his reflections Ross points out three important differences. First, he differentiates between two questions: the question of the linguistic meaning of a concept and the question of attributes on the basis of which a concept applies to an object. So we must distinguish between:

- | | |
|-------|---|
| (F 1) | What is the linguistic meaning of a concept? |
| (F 2) | Based on which attributes of X does a concept apply to X? |

In this chapter, we are concerned only with the formal analysis of „imperative“ and „right“ in the sense of (F1). It is not about the question of what criteria there are for using these concepts on objects (the attributes of X in question are such criteria). Second, he distinguishes between “right” and “ethically right”. We saw in Chapter I that this is necessary when we differentiated between rule consistency, means adequacy and the ethically right. Third, Ross distinguishes between the action qua carrying out an action and the action qua result. For actions, one can talk about a process sense and a result sense. When we speak of the right action, according to Ross we are referring to the result of an action ([II-3], p. 7). The principle of deontic ethics can then be formulated thus:

(14) The result of action F is ethically right.

According to Ross, this is the same as

(15) The result of action F is ethically imperative.

As already stated above, it seems to me to make little sense to discuss whether there is still a foundational relation between „ethically imperative“ and „ethically right“. Instead, it is

important that the rather unusual ring of the statement

(15) The result of action F is ethically imperative.

can clarify something. Up to now our basic formulation was

(1) It is imperative to do F.

The two sentences differ by dint of the way „ethically imperative“ is used grammatically. Let us take the following parallel two sentences:

(14) The result of action F is ethically right.

(16) It is ethically right to do F.

Following my linguistic intuition, the use of “ethically right“ in the sense of (14) is more likely than the analogous use of „ethical imperative“ in (15). To be ”ethically right“ seems more likely to be a kind of attribute of the result of an action than the attribute „ethically imperative“.

3. The good: the fundamental value concept

There are many value concepts, but “good” is indisputably the most fundamental one. For this reason we will limit ourselves to this concept and try to keep our analysis as parallel as possible to the deontic value concepts. Both there and here we must also differentiate between a wide concept of good and a narrow concept in the sense of ethical good. Just as the concept of value is more comprehensive than that of ethical value, „good“ embraces more than just the ethical good. However, as will be shown, what is ethically good cannot be segregated from what is good in some non-ethical sense simply on the grounds of metaethical criteria. On the contrary, for this there is a need for contextual deliberations as to what comprises the ethical good. But since we cannot go into these questions in this chapter, let us primarily confine ourselves to an analysis of the broad concept of good.

In contrast to the widespread limiting of the area of “imperatives“ to actions and courses of action, “good stands” out because it is testified equally by actions, courses of action, intentions, things or circumstances. When, in the following, we speak of something being classified as “good”, that “something” ought to be used in a broad sense under which the kinds of entities just named fall.

- a) The different types of use of „good“.

(i) First, the classification-specific, the comparative and the metrical uses of the value concept „good“ should be differentiated (compare the presentation in [II-5], p. 10-20). In the *classification-specific* use, an object is characterized as good, bad or indifferent. “A is bad” can be defined as “non-A is good” and “A is indifferent” can be defined as “It is not the case that A is good and it is not the case that non-A is good”. Thus we can set “good” as the only basic concept in the classification-specific use of “good”. In the *comparative* use of the value concept „good“, comparisons are made in which an object is defined as better, worse or just as good as another object. In a *metrical* sense, the value concept is being used when one expresses the goodness of an object quantitatively i.e. through the order of numbers. We will limit our further analysis to the classification-specific use of “good”, which we thereby set as basic concept of the classification-specific value concept. But within this area, other kinds of usage can also be differentiated.

(ii) On the grammatical level, the diversity of uses of “good” can be illuminated by the following statements:

(17) Good health is a great good.

(18) Dorothee is good at playing the piano. (=Dorothy plays the piano well)

(19) This is a good bicycle.

In (17), “good” is used in the *substantivist* sense; an object is therewith defined as good. In (18) “good” (or “well”, respectively) is used in the *adverbial* sense, i.e. to qualify an activity more closely. In (19), on the other hand, “good” is used in the *adjectival* sense.

These statements have in common that “good“ is being used to recommend an object, to characterize a course of action positively, or to praise an action. Since we presuppose ethical cognitivism in this chapter, such a recommendation is not comparable with the expression of an emotion (e.g. Oh, that’s nice!). Unlike expressions of emotions, recommendations refer to reasons in the sense of substantiations (cp. Chapter IX on this). An object is recommended because it is good. Its goodness serves as justification for the recommendation, not the recommendation as explanation of its goodness.

This justificatory relationship also provides an objective reason for the view that one can even distinguish between “is good“ and “is thought to be good“. For this differentiation presumes that error is possible i.e. a subject thinks something is good although it is not good. But this is only conceivable if there are criteria for the intersubjective justifiability of our validity statements, on the basis of which one can detect and prove an error. However, before we can concentrate on the different kinds of reasons for which a value judgment operating as

“good” can be articulated, we must first become familiar with one central differentiation.

(iii) In the adjectival sense, “good” is used as an attribute. However, one must distinguish between predicative and attributive adjectives. The difference meant here can be made clear when we compare the following two statements with one another:

(19) This is a good bicycle.

(20) This is a green apple.

These sentences both have the same superficial structure. On closer scrutiny there could, however, be a grave difference (see [II-8]). Sentence (20) can easily be dismantled into the conjunction of two statements:

(20*) (i) This is an apple. & (ii) This is green.

If one tries to do this with (19) the result is

(19*) (i) This is a bicycle. & (ii) This is good.

Predicates such as “green“, for which such a dismantling is permissible, are called *predicative* adjectives; predicates that do not allow this are called *attributive* adjectives. After the dismantling of (19), “good” suddenly stands alone as a grammatical predicate i.e. it is used predicatively in that it builds the predicate of the sentence with the linking verb “be”.

Among philosophers, it is in dispute whether the predicative use of “good” makes sense in certain cases (this is presented in [II-5], p.11), or whether it should always be rejected. Many assume that a predicative use of “good” is inadmissible because “good” can never occur as the sole grammatical predicate (this claim can be found e.g. in [II-4], p.55). The reason normally proffered for this claim is that no criteria are available for its usage (and thereby to vindicate our judgment). Statements of the type

(21) X is good.

are nonsense under this requirement. In contrast, other philosophers use this difference in the predicative and attributive usage as a characteristic for distinguishing the ethical from the non-ethical usage of “good”. For the attributive uses of “good”, which cannot be interpreted as predicative, the criteria for usage arise from the associated subject (e.g. the bicycle in (19)). The criteria by which a bicycle can be described as good quite obviously differ from those by which, for instance, a poem is to be appraised as “good”. If one demands for ethics that in this sense its basic concepts are not dependent or context-sensitive, the ethical use of “good” stands out from the non-ethical use thereof precisely through the designation of “good” as a predicative attribute.

At this point it becomes clear that a purely metaethical analysis independent of further

assumptions cannot be adequate for ethics. For one cannot see there is anything wrong in sentence (21). On the contrary, Moore considered it to be the most basal ethical principle of all. According to him, “is good” functions completely parallel to “is yellow”. Both assign to an object an attribute that itself cannot be dismantled further. Except that “yellow” is a natural attribute, whereas “good” is a non-natural one. On the other hand, critics of his position claim that we have no application criteria for the attribution of “is good” i.e. for the predicative-adjectival use, so that we cannot have controlled availability of “is good” in this sense. For the most part, however, this objection overlooks the fact that in ethics we are dealing not only with justification, but also with perception. As we will see in later chapters, the criticism of Moore mentioned just now rests as a rule on the rejection of ethical realism. Conversely, Moore’s postulation of the existence of the non-naturalistic attribute „good“ is not binding, since he overlooked the difference between the attributive and predicative-adjectival uses. For this reason, he could not defend himself against the above objection. Admittedly, the mere introduction of this differentiation does not yet show that “good” cannot be a predicative adjective and that “is good” is not a meaningful expression. To substantiate this, one must take recourse to further assumptions. The answer to this question cannot be obtainable solely on the level of metaethics.

b) Criteria for use

„Good“ is remarkable for its tremendous scope of application not only on the grammatical, but also on the contextual level. For this reason, Georg H. von Wright (*1916) spoke of a variety of goodness. It can be viewed generally as consensus among philosophers that hidden behind “good” is a complex diversity of different contextual uses. This can be recognized, e.g., by which alternative expressions can replace “good” in the various contexts. When one says that something smells good, one can easily replace “good” by “pleasant”, whereas not in the expression “good test”. The various attempts to establish order in this diversity can be sorted into two groups. Those attempts that belong to the first group are oriented primarily towards the contexts of use, while those in the second group try to incorporate more general definitions as criteria for classification.

(i) In his philosophical analysis of this diversity, von Wright differentiates between the various kinds of usage according to the contextual contexts in which “good” is used (compare [II-9], p. 8-12). *Instrumental* goodness („a good car“) e.g. describes the suitability of an artefact for fulfilling certain purposes. *Technical* goodness (“good piano-playing”) consists in

an activity being carried out in an excellent way. *Medical* goodness is a special case that promotes the correct functionality of organs as a contribution to health (in the negative case: to ill-health). Generally, one receives goodness in the sense of *wellbeing*, which as a rule refers to the good overall condition of a living creature. More generally, one can then use goodness in the sense of *beneficial* (e.g. “Fresh air is good.”). Even more generally, “good” is used to define the *usefulness* of an object for application as a suitable means for a purpose. In the history of ethics, one particularly relevant kind of goodness is hedonic goodness, which draws on the pleasant (or unpleasant) sensations something can evoke in an object (e.g. chocolate ice-cream is good.”). If one cannot reduce it to one of the other forms of goodness then, lastly, *ethical* good should also be considered as a separate form of “good” (Whether such a reduction of the ethically good to one of the other kinds of goodness is possible will also occupy us in the coming chapters).

(ii) Alongside this list of different kinds of usage of „good“ oriented on contextual contexts, in the history of philosophy one can find numerous attempts to organize this diversity by means of a more abstract classification system. William K. Frankena (*1908) representatively summarized the main differentiations that had thereby been generated. With the inherent validity that corresponds to von Wright’s hedonic good and moral validity he also heads two contextual categories that we can ignore at this point (compare [II-10], p. 100). After adjustment, we get the following list:

- Utility value
- Instrumental value
- Intrinsic value
- Value in the element sense
- Final value

The *utility value* denotes the usefulness of an object for the realization of a given purpose and the *instrumental* value denotes that an object is suitable as a means. The *intrinsic* value stands for the value that an object is awarded from within itself. This means that the goodness of this object does not depend on any other objects (e.g. external purposes, interests). In the *element sense* an object is good because it is part of another good object. If, for example, the preoccupation with philosophical ethics is an essential part of a good life, then this

preoccupation is awarded value in the constituent sense. The *final value* is understood as the goodness awarded to an object taking into account all aspects, attributes and circumstances. For it can happen that something would be evaluated as negative in itself, but in view of its effects is awarded a positive final value (e.g. a painful dental operation that serves overall health).

(iii) The last example already illustrates that systemization of the various kinds of goodness is difficult. Firstly, there is this great diversity of possible meanings of “good” and the possible aspects and criteria for reasons of which the characterization of an object can be vindicated as good. Secondly, to complicate matters, an object can be good in several of these meanings at the same time. Without additional arguments, nothing precludes that e.g. moderate jogging is both instrumentally good, because it contributes to health, and at the same time inherently good, because it invokes positive feelings. Knowledge acquisition is possibly good in all the above-mentioned meanings. Thirdly, this diversity of criteria is problematic because, among philosophers, conflict has almost unavoidably built up over whether absolutely all differentiations can be upheld. Some do not accept the division of instrumental value and final value, others adduce objections against the thesis that there are intrinsic values. Central to the entire analysis of ethical terminology is thereby whether, like e.g. von Wright (compare [II-9], p. 17 f.), one starts from the assumption that the concept of the ethically good can only be defined contextually in the context of the non-ethical uses of “good”, or one presupposes the premise that the basic value concepts in ethics can be analysed from within themselves without such integration. One or other of these disagreements, none of which are of a purely metaethical nature, will preoccupy us in the course of this introduction. But this chapter was only concerned with gaining an overview of the diversity of types of use of “good” and the different types of reasoning.

4. The limitations of conceptual analysis

The analysis of the basic deontic concepts and the central classification-specific value concept “good” shows, on the one hand, that metaethical analysis can demonstrate important differences between the ethical and non-ethical use of these concepts. In the other hand, it makes it clear that the contextual interpretation of these differences can either be made circularly, through recourse to ethical concepts or statements, or it is inadequate for shedding

light on the use of the ethical concept.

In all, it has been shown, firstly, that it cannot be stated with respect to which entities the central basic ethical concepts can be meaningfully used without the aid of material ethical assumptions. Secondly, no statements can be made about which of the various uses is the most appropriate in the context of ethics. Thirdly, in this perspective, it does not become clear which object criticisms should be drawn on for reasons of which e.g., an agency should qualify as ethically right or a global condition as ethically good. Fourthly, on the metaethical level, what can qualify as an ethical reason or even as a plausible ethical justification of such a deontic or value statement remains open.

However, before we are in a position to tackle these more or less objective questions in philosophical ethics step by step, in the next chapter we must again turn to a metaethical approach. Whereas up to now it primarily concerned the analysis of basic ethical concepts and their types of usage, we will now turn to the philosophical analysis of the use of ethical utterances. With regard to these utterances, there is a dispute between ethical cognitivists and ethical non-cognitivists. The former presume that ethical utterances are to be understood as assertive statements that are true or false, or at least intersubjectively justifiable. We have adopted this cognitivist requirement for the analysis in this chapter without further reasoning. In contrast, the supporters of non-cognitivism propose an analysis of the use of ethical utterances, the result of which is that these utterances are no longer understood as assertive statements. They are then neither true nor false and neither are they intersubjectively justifiable.

It is evident that for this issue we must provide ourselves with an overview and a justified position before we can pursue the issue of objective ethical criteria and justifications. For, if the non-cognitivist proposal proves to be accurate, the search for the ethically right or even true and the search for the justification of ethical statements does not stand a chance from the outset.

5. Summary, suggestions for reading, questions and exercises

Summary

Starting from the differentiation between deontic and value concepts, this chapter first analysed the deontic concepts “imperative” and “right”. Thereby, the cognitive premise was accepted that “is imperative” and “is

right” make assertions that can be true (or false), or can be intersubjectively justified. Various kinds of imperatives (conditional, non-conditional, unconditional and unlimited) were differentiated. Unconditional imperatives that preclude any limitations prove to be ineligible. Since they can demand e.g. logical or causal impossibilities. In contrast, unlimited imperatives restrict imperatives to what is logically and causally possible, but otherwise do not permit any further limitations. In contrast, non-conditional imperatives remain neutral, regarding the question, whether there are limitations, whereas conditional imperatives are tied to prerequisites of different kinds. In addition, the differentiation between „ought-to-do“ and „ought-to-be“ going back to C.D. Broad was introduced: The former expresses that an action should be done, the latter that, on the other hand, content is graded as the condition it ought to have. Second, “good” was analysed in detail as the basic classification-specific value concept. By means of the differentiation between the attributive and predicative use of adjectives, the close connection between metaethical and objective ethical statements was shown. Whereas attributive adjectives can only be used in connection with other adjectives, predicative adjectives stand out because they can be used alone to qualify an object. The argument about whether “good” is a predicative adjective cannot be decided solely by the grammar of the sentences used and is therefore an example for metaethical analyses not being independent of contextual ethical assumptions. Further, in this chapter the contextual extent of the different ways of using “good” were presented.

Suggestions for reading

On the concept of reflective equilibrium see [II-11]; basic studies on deontic logic are at [II-12], [II-13] und [14], for an overview of the whole research area of deontic logic, see the contributions in [II-15] und [II-16]; helpful analyses of basic ethical concepts can be found in [II-17], Chapter IV, [II-18], Chapter III, [II-19], Chapter III and [II-20], Chapters VI and XII.

Questions and exercises

- How does the real definition differ from the standard definition?
- Explain the difference between non-conditional and unlimited imperatives.
- Which principle do unconditional ethical imperatives contravene?
- Formulate an example for a hypothetical imperative.
- Why is it necessary to differentiate between ”ought-to-be” and ”ought-to-do”?
- Explain the difference between attributive and predicative adjectives.
- Which three types of usage of „good“ must be differentiated?
- Explain the difference between the substantivist, the adjectival and the adverbial use of „good“.
- Explain the concept of reflective equilibrium.
- Explain the connection between ethical and metaethical assumptions using the example of the thesis that „good“ is not a predicative adjective.
- Name the contextual types of usage of „good“ that Wright differentiates and formulate an example sentence for each one.
- Define the relation of intrinsic value

IX. Justification in ethics

“To preach Morality is easy,
to found it difficult.”

(Arthur Schopenhauer)
(translation by Mme Karl Hillebrand)

In this chapter, we will present the central models of ethical justification and the concepts based on them about the necessary strength of justification claims. In addition, as a first step, broad-spectrum deliberations will be held on the advantages and disadvantages of justification in ethics. In the second section, with the basic form of relativism, the figure of thought will be presented, which was largely responsible for the shift of the issue of justification to the centre of modern ethics. In a third step, various justificatory models will be introduced with which attempts are made to provide ethics with a base that is shielded from relativism and skepticism.

In the previous chapters we saw that the question of the possibility of justifying ethical statements and claims has moved to the centre of modern ethics. As we ascertained in the first chapter, the search for justifications is one of the basic questions in ethics. The specific form this basic question takes respectively as a justification of ethics e.g. in the frame of subjective ethical rationalism or ethical objectivism, can only be understood before the background of skeptical and relativistic approaches in which the possibility of the justification of ethical statements and claims is contested. Even the surrender of every justification claim for ethical statements, as proposed by non-cognitivism, and the attempt to translate ethical statements into scientific ones, to which ethical naturalism aspires, can be understood as extreme reactions to the justification problem to which modern ethics sees itself subjected.

Concentration on the aspect of justification as seen in modern morality has changed the face of ethics so drastically that meanwhile voices are being raised that challenge the sense in the whole project of ethical justification. For this reason we will first have to come to an understanding about the sense of ethical justification before we can move on to thematize the basic concept of relativism. Finally, we will distinguish between the various justificatory models that can be found in ethics and discuss the diverse approaches to providing ethics with an invulnerable, infallible instrument against skepticism and relativism.

1. Why justify?

The question of whether ethical statements can be justified at all and how this could possibly be done arises for every cognitivist form of ethics. It originates in the need for

justification within our everyday ethical practice. The second of our three basic ethical questions is geared towards why a certain option for action is ethically right (cp. Chapter I, 2b). If someone is advised that a certain action of several alternatives is the ethically right one, she can rightly ask why this action and not some other should be carried out. The question of justification can then, as we have seen, be stepped up to the principle question of why one should even comply with ethical aspects in one's actions. If ethical demands are either per definitionem or factually contrary to one's own interests, the question of how one can justify to other subjects that they should behave according to ethical rather than egoistic aspects hangs in the air. So if one accepts that a central area of ethics can be characterized by the opposition of one's own rational interests and the ethical ought, and that the basic assumption of the ethical conception of enlightened self-interest is false, the problem of justification in ethics takes on a harsher form. Because the explicit acceptance of the ethical and political requirement that ethical claims must be legitimized toward the rational subject is one of the central achievements to assert itself in the wake of the Enlightenment. Any wanting to hold on to the project of a cognitivist ethics thus has good reasons for asking about the possibility and the nature of ethical justification.

But not everyone who rejects the project of ethical justification is an ethical non-cognitivist. Some philosophers, such as Bernard Williams, have expressed the suspicion that the fixation of modern ethics on the aspect of justification or the formulation of excessive justificatory claims is altogether detrimental to our ethical practice (cp. [IX-1], Chapter 2). In the present day ethical debate there is thus not only a dispute over which justificatory model is appropriate for ethics. There is also a discussion taking place on the meta level as to whether this project of justification can itself be justified. Before we get involved in the contextual description of the various theory offers, we must first gain clarification on the possible advantages and disadvantages of the project of justification itself. A second step will involve defining beforehand and more precisely how a justification should be understood. In doing so, our rejection of ethical naturalism will again play an important role. Moreover, we must at this point separate two fundamentally different ethical projects of justification from one another. For this, the difference between the internal and external perspectives will be helpful (cp. also Chapter I, 3b).

a) Uses and shortcomings of the project of ethical justification

Generally speaking, there is an epistemic gradient between mere opinions, prejudices or

groundless assumptions on the one hand and knowledge on the other. This means that in the system of beliefs that we, as empirical subjects, take as true, various degrees of validity can be established for these beliefs. Some assumptions with empirical content, such as that the dog from my neighbour's garden standing in front of me is not aggressive, are more easily confirmed than other assumptions of an empirical nature (e.g. that the oriental looking air passenger is a potential danger to the safety of the other passengers). Universalities that refer to empirical facts (e.g. all swans are white) are less well justified than universalities whose truth follows from the meaning of concepts (e.g. all bachelors are unmarried men). Relative to our beliefs, we can decide how well they are supported e.g. by experience or other assumptions we consider to be well-founded.

Some epistemologists presume that there are individual beliefs or kinds of beliefs that are in principle resistant to error and thus cases of infallible knowledge; one of the most famous, but at the same time also most difficult candidates for this is the argument going back to René Descartes (1596-1650) of *cogito (ergo) sum* (cp. [IX-2], second meditation). But even without the assumption of a knowledge that is resistant to error, one can support the position that beliefs for which we can produce sound justification as a rule have higher plausibility and are more likely to be true than unjustified or weakly justified ones.

In the context of ethics, it is a question of orientation in the practical context and the legitimization of ethical claims and statements. To this end, four advantages can be cited for the project of ethical justification:

- a secure basis for our ethical orientation
- the possibility of justifying ethical requirements to others
- the possibility of rejecting skeptical doubt in the justifiability of ethical statements
- the possibility of criticizing factual ethical beliefs and belief systems

The *first* advantage of ethical justifications emerges straight out of the observation that justified assumptions are a secure basis for our orientation (this applies in respect of assumptions about the ethically right just as much as for assumptions e.g. about the quality of a fridge to be bought, or the correct turnoff to take to the party). *Secondly*, sound justifications are quite obviously indispensable for the legitimization of ethical requirements to other rational beings. A *third* advantage obtained through ethical justifications is that skeptical

doubt about individual ethical requirements or even about ethical practice as a whole can be cleared up. If an ultimate justification of our ethical practice were to succeed as it e.g. is striven for by ethical objectivism, then a basis would have been gained that is immune from every skeptical doubt. But even if the justificatory possibilities in ethics are not strong enough to put every form of skepticism in its place as a matter of principle, better ethical positions can still be distinguished from worse ones on the basis of sound justifications. Anyone who asks for ethical advice in everyday life collects experiences during the course of time and after a while will at least get a feeling for which persons are good advisers and which pieces of advice are based on reasonable ethical judgments. In any event, the radical skeptical thesis that all ethical assumptions, statements or positions are equally well or badly justified and that the ethical attitude is thus ultimately arbitrary, can be rejected even when one does not have an ultimate philosophical justification of ethics. For the moment, we can leave open whether the challenge of skepticism can only be parried by ultimate justification, or can succeed on epistemically weaker bases. From the historical viewpoint, as the platonic dialogues show, the resistance to skepticism and relativism was, alongside the epistemic ideal of attaining knowledge through opinion, one of the central motifs for the project of ethical justification (cp. [IX-3]). A *fourth* positive aspect of the project of justification is its critical function. Although one can see from the historical example of Socrates (470-399 BC) that practising philosophical criticism via justifications for valid ethical beliefs does not always have to be positive for the individual demanding justification: Socrates was sentenced to death by the Athenians because his search for ethical justifications and his critical scrutiny of existing ethical views was judged by the ruling elite to be subversive and dangerous for youth and state (cp. Plato's representation (about 428-347 BC) in [IX-4]). On the one hand, the critical function of the project of ethical justification becomes clear when one elucidates its central prerequisite. A justification only becomes necessary where a critical i.e. a justification-motivated question has been asked. So in a first step, it is part of the project of justification to challenge predefined ethical requirements or claims (whoever asks for justification rescinds the unquestionability and implicitness of that for which he requests justification) On the other hand, there is an inherent critical component in the request for justifications because in the attempt to justify a particular ethical statement one must always check how well rival ethical claims are justified. So of necessity, part of the essence of the project of justification is, firstly, to ask for reasons in general and secondly, to ask about the quality of the justifications submitted.

On the one hand, the project of ethical justification is thus instructive: it takes into account the claim of rational beings autonomously, i.e. with their own insight and judgment, to adopt or reject the legitimacy of ethical requirements or claims. On the other hand, this instructive project has an antiauthoritarian direction of impact. Ethical validity cannot be justified purely by reference to conventional morality or with recourse to divine, papal or state authority. Unquestioned compliance with traditional ethical norms must, at least in the frame of the normative self-understanding of autonomous rational subjects, be replaced by the autonomous decision, reached through rational insight, to follow and accept what has proved best ethically justified by means of rational inspection.

Considering that the criticism of mere authority and the compliance with or upgrading of individual autonomy have become central parts of our modern culture, objections to this project of ethical justification seem to represent only an expression of an authoritative attitude and to have no plausibility. But the factual situation is not that simple. The motivation behind the reservations against the project of a justification of ethics becomes clear when we remind ourselves that an unavoidable part of the project of ethical justification is the assessment of existing justifications and the demand for justifications where none have been requested or given. If one wants to assess existing justifications, one needs criteria for when an argumentation can qualify as a good justification. If one asks critical questions where hitherto justifications were neither demanded nor given, for starters one will cause irritation. This is admittedly often aroused by philosophers so that they can subsequently come up with a much better or even watertight justification themselves. But what happens when such a justification is either – with skeptical intention – not intended at all, or when the proposed attempt at justification fails? The awakened doubt can no longer be placated, the previous security of the ethical self-understanding evaporates and the hitherto accepted ethical order dissolves. At least, this is the worry of those philosophers who warn against seeing the project of ethical justification as the only or primary function of philosophical ethics.

We must heed these danger warnings. There is evidence to suggest that the widespread skepticism of the possibility of rationally justifying ethical claims and acknowledging them as independent value claims must also be viewed as a product of the critical potential of ethical enlightenment and the failure of a comprehensive justification of ethics. If only the critical part of the project of justification can be executed, whilst a constructive justification of our ethical practice does not succeed, one can truly ask whether the destruction of ethical naturalness and the heritage of general ethical disorientation was (or: is) not an ethical losing

game. Since the process of enlightenment in the sense of the attempt at justification of our ethical practice has developed a far-reaching critical potential during the past centuries, on the one hand, whether the balance of this project has been advantageous for our ethical practice and self-understanding in the ethical sense. And since this project still continues in the present day, one can ask if holding on to the project of justification in ethics will lead to the destruction of currently existing ethical awareness (the ongoing dispute in Germany over the appropriate ethical handling of early forms of human life can serve as an example for this dimension of contemporary ethical developments; compare with the contributions in [IX-5]).

Due to the entrenchment of the search for justifications in the basal structure of our ethical practice, in general it is almost impossible to waive ethical justification. Given the historical experiences with the value of individual autonomy and maturity and our experiences with social systems in which individual autonomy was systematically ignored, such a waiver would also be anything but desirable. So we must ask whether dreaded negative consequences inevitably ensue from the project of ethical justification. On closer examination this does not seem to be the case. The critical function of the demand for justification will at any rate be retained and is ethically welcome. But the general skeptical consequence follows only when the bar written into the justification project is raised too high for convincing justifications. The advantages of the justification project can be retained if appropriate and realizable standards for ethical justifications can be worked out. As we saw in the context of ethical objectivism, the prospects of general rebuttal in the form of a final justification by skepticisms are probably poor (cp. chapter V). But nothing forces us to accept that ethical claims are only well justified when skeptical doubts can always be precluded. On the contrary, we can take up the standpoint that we can hold on to ethical principles or moral concepts that have proved themselves in our practice even without explicit justifications until good reasons are brought forward, which are qualified to cast doubt on the suitability of these principles (cp. [IX-6], p. 3 ff.). The yardstick for ethical principles standing the test in a given practice cannot be taken from outside that practice. Standing the test therefore means that those participating in the practice succeed in living a good life on the basis of the relevant principles. The practice thereby becomes a litmus test and the absence of critique of the principles in question a feature of their suitability (cp. [IX-7]). However, if the critic or the skeptic succeeds in making misgivings about individual ethical principles plausible to those taking part in the discussion, then a justification for the claims in question must be developed, which can refute these objections (such a justification procedure is called default-and-challenge; cp. [IX-8], p.

176 ff.).

The justification strategy of *default-and-challenge* displays two central aspects. Firstly, the conservative aspect that starts from the assumption that – in our case – ethical practice stands the test and thus the elements that are not the object of controversial disputes or are no longer observed in practice, can qualify *prima facie* as well justified. This is why it does not demand that every possible or thinkable skeptical objection be refuted offensively. On the contrary, the burden of proof is imposed on the critic to first make his objection plausible. If this succeeds, however, the problematic part of the ethical practice must then be justified. This justification of controversial ethical principles or value judgments is then effected in such a way that only the objections recognized as justified have to be rejected. Moreover – and this is the second central aspect of *default-and-challenge* – there is no requirement that such a rejection rests on incontestable reasons; good reasons are enough.

Ultimately, an ethical justification does not therefore rest on an incontestable foundation. On the one hand, this has the advantage that no justification standard is established that might not be realizable and whose application might lead to the erosive effects that are feared by the critics of the project of ethical justification. On the other hand, our ethical practice therewith remains a risky business because it is basically not always possible for us to assume ethical principles and value judgments that later turn out to be unsuitable. Alongside the belief that our ethical practice could be a relativistic affair, the agitation caused by a constant threat of ethical error certainly illustrates one of the main motives for the project of justification or strong justification programs. However, in view of the chances of a philosophical final justification and the dangers accruing from this project of justification for our ethics, all in all it would seem wise to allow ethics this tried and tested, if fragile base.

b) Two differences

Before we can deal with the specter of relativism and the various conceptions of philosophical justification in ethics in the coming sections, we must introduce a new distinction and recall one already introduced: the difference between causes and reasons on the one hand and an internal and an external perspective on ethics on the other (cp. on the latter also Chapter I, 3b).

Causes versus reasons: In the history of philosophy the category of reason exhibits an ambiguity that is of great relevance for the project of ethical justification. For a start, a reason can be meant as a causal reason: The reason the windowpane was shattered was the impact of

the football. But a reason can also be meant as an argument or a justification for an assumption or conviction: My reason for the assumption that Claus won't come to work today is that he's getting married to Claudia. In the first example the reason points to a causal relation, in the second example to a rational one. The same ambiguity can also be found in our use of „because“. The windowpane shatters because the football hits it. This is a causal because. I believe that Claus won't come to work because I know he has a different appointment. This “because” does not name the cause of Claus's absence, but the rational reason for my being convinced that he won't come today, It is thus a logical because.

In view of this ambiguity, it is vital to distinguish terminologically between causal explanations and rational justifications. The project of ethical justification aims at the latter, as does the second basic ethical question, too. Whoever asks for reasons for ethical statements, is not requesting causal, but logical and sense-related reasons. If Peter asks Paula why she considers abortions to be ethically impermissible, he would probably be pretty disappointed with her causal explanation that it is the consequence of a specific socialization. Her answer lies simply beyond what Peter's question is aimed at.

The difference between causal explanation and rational justification already played a decisive role in the context of our discussion of ethical naturalism (cp. Chapter VII, 3). The finding, that causal explanations cannot replace rational justifications, was a central argument for the non-naturalizability of ethics. This finding does not preclude that one can ask, e.g. for evolutionally theoretical purposes, about the causal reasons for certain behaviour patterns.

Leaving aside the question of the compatibility of freedom and determinism, which we will discuss specifically in the next chapter, we need at this point only insist that a causal explanation cannot exhaust the specific value dimension of rational justifications (and therewith also ethical justifications). Our deliberations on the possibility of ethical naturalism and that of ethical justification thus refer reciprocally each to the other; they are mutually supportive and dependent.

Internal versus external perspectives. Alongside the distinction between causal explanation and rational justification, the difference between an internal and an external perspective is relevant for our current deliberations. On the basis of this distinction, we can keep two different projects of ethical justification apart; it thus leads to an internal distinction in the area of rational justification.

If an ethical justification is requested in the internal perspective, ethical arguments are admitted as reasons. Individual pieces of ethical advice for or evaluations of actions are

thereby undertaken from an internal ethical standpoint. If Cassandra advises Diana how she should act from an ethical standpoint in a conflict, Cassandra is allowed to make use of ethical premises when formulating and justifying her suggestion. And if Bob asks Neil what reasons support the ethical standpoint, Bob takes up the internal perspective for as long as he is prepared to acknowledge ethical justifications as the answer. The project of ethical justification, if it feels committed to the internal perspective, demands no rational justification that does not itself make use of ethical premises.

In contrast, under the prerequisite of the external perspective, Diana demands a rational justification for Cassandra's suggestion for action, which does not rest on ethical preconditions. In radicalized form, Bob's question then takes the form of asking what non-ethical, rational reason there could be for even taking up the ethical standpoint and aligning my action to ethical aspects (cp. [IX-9]). This distinction between an internal and an external standpoint is, as already intimated (cp. Chapter 1, 3b), not metaethically neutral. It only makes sense when it is not possible to translate ethical concepts and statements into non-ethical concepts and statements. So if we make use of this difference, we assume that neither the recourse of ethical claims to the enlightened self-interest of rational subjects can succeed, nor is a translation of our basic ethical concepts and statements possible in a scientific theory. In our discussion of the corresponding approaches (Chapters IV and VII), we saw that these reductive approaches have little chance of success, since essential aspects of our ethical self-understanding cannot be reduced to conditions of rationality, and scientific explications cannot embrace the sense of ethical questioning and justifying. In consequence, our ethical practice contains an ethical validity surplus compared with the explanation strategy of the sciences and the demands of rationality that can only become accessible if inquired after from within the internal perspective.

The assumption that our ethical practice can only be considered rationally justified and justifiable when it is possible to give a satisfactory answer to the question of justification from the external perspective is nevertheless one of the most important driving forces of the project of ethical justification. Due to the systematic difficulties worked out in the previous chapters, the prospects of such a project of justification are rather poor. This has contributed to a general skepticism toward the possibility of ethical justification and caused not only critics of the project of ethical justification to spring into action, but at the same time considerably intensified the need for a rational justification of our ethical practice.

On closer inspection, however, very little speaks for the assumption shared by both

factions that our ethical practice can only be viewed as rationally justified or vindicated when it can be rationally justified in the external perspective. The correct answer to this variant of the project of ethical justification is hence first to insist on the reasons that speak for its basal assumptions being named. As long as these complex preconditions cannot be justified convincingly, it is sufficient to operate the project of ethical justification in the internal perspective. Taken in the sense of the strategy of default-and-challenge, the need for ethical justification, which is deeply rooted in our ethical practice, can be satisfied without evoking the skeptical consequences that could erode our ethical practice that are dreaded by critics of the project of a justification of ethics.

2. The spectre of relativism

Ethical relativism has escorted and engaged philosophical ethics from the very beginning. Plato's dispute with the sophist Prothagoras (about 490-420 BC) can already be understood as a dispute over the relativistic interpretation of ethics (cp. {IX-1β}, from p. 172). Even if it is not historically clear whether Protagoras himself really championed relativistic theses, the position ascribed to him by Plato still has supporters and defenders today (cp. [IX-11]). As we will see in a moment, a central motive for relativism is, surprisingly, itself of an ethical nature. Ethical relativism is frequently defended in the name of tolerance and non-interference in foreign or internal affairs. From Plato right up to the present day the rejection of relativism has remained vehement. Thus Bernard Williams, for example, defines relativism as "the typical heresy of ethnologists, the most absurd conception that has ever been supported within the field of moral philosophy, which is not exactly lacking in absurdities" ([IX-12], p. 28).

a) The basic idea

The simplest and at the same time most widespread form of ethical relativism in our everyday practice is a combination of one metaethical and two normative theses, which are to be collectively supported by further extra assumptions. The *metaethical thesis* states that our everyday self-understanding of the basic ethical concepts "ethically right" and "ethically good" is elliptical, because we do not mention for whom or relative to what standard something is ethically right or good. According to this metaethical thesis, we have to e.g. analyse „ethically right“ as „ethically right for X“ or „ethically right according to standard S“. Depending on the radicality of the ethical relativism supported, X can stand for an individual,

a social group, a society or even a cultural epoch (the same applies to the definition of the S standard). Metaethical relativists are conscious of the fact that with this philosophical analysis they do not convey what we mean factually by our ethical statements in everyday life. They uphold their interpretation as a revisionary philosophical proposal for what our ethical claims should really mean (cp. [IX-13], p. 144-164). So they do not claim to convey the meaning of our basic ethical concepts correctly, but suggest orienting the sense of our basic ethical concepts to the factually recognized conditions of truth for ethical statements. Since the validity of these statements is limited to specific areas (= X) or dependent on specific standards (= S), we should accommodate this dependency explicitly in the sense of our basic ethical concepts and restrict our justificatory claims accordingly.

Generally, a *normative* relativism also appears alongside metaethical relativism. Acceptance of the thesis of metaethical relativism is solicited by pointing out the ethically advantageous consequences that arise from its recognition. These consequences can be formulated as the first thesis of normative relativism thus: Metaethical relativism implies that X has no right to interfere with the practice of Y with reference to its own ethical standards because these standards always apply only relatively to X. From metaethical relativism— as one can express this line of thought - a non-interference imperative and a demand for tolerance ensues (cp. [IX-14]). A second normative thesis that follows directly from the metaethical thesis then reads that every person should act and judge according to the moral tradition to which she herself belongs (whereby there are different variants according to what is inserted for X and S in “ethically right for X” and “ethically right according to standard S”).

Relativism is frequently supported by two complementary assumptions that refer to empirical facts. Relativism is firstly justified by reference to the following fact: A large number of deviations between ethical beliefs can be observed both between individuals and above all between different cultures and epochs, for which reason Williams also calls relativism the heresy of ethnologists (one can define this justification for relativism as the *divergence thesis*). Furthermore, as the second justification says, it can be observed that the ethical beliefs of individuals depend on the factual norm systems in which they live (one can define this justification as the *dependency thesis*). Thus we obtain five central relativistic theses in all:

- Our basic ethical concepts should be defined relative to a reference value

(metaethical relativism)

- Tolerance is imperative towards diverging ethical beliefs (*tolerance thesis* of normative relativism).
- Every individual shall keep to the norms valid for him (*conventionality thesis* of normative relativism).
- The empirically observable variety of mutually incompatible ethical beliefs speaks for relativism (*divergence thesis*).
- The empirically observable dependency of individual ethical beliefs on factual norm systems speaks for relativism (*dependency thesis*).

Beyond these arguments in favour of relativism, the range of rational argumentation is often factually restricted in ethical disputes. Metaethical relativism tries to explain these findings without giving up cognitivism entirely by limiting the scope of ethical statements and claims. For although relativism is occasionally attributed to non-cognitivism, in keeping with its basic concept it maintains that ethical beliefs are true and can claim validity. However, its strategy is to limit the scope of these beliefs i.e. restrict the universality of ethical claims.

b) Objections

Alongside the fact that relativism provides a good theoretical explication for why ethical justification is normally laborious and often fails (and thereby also provides a justification for no longer bothering to make the effort), it is above all the tolerance thesis of normative relativism that makes relativism in ethics attractive (in contrast, the *conventionality thesis* enjoys less popularity, especially when it demands that the individual accepts socially established values and norms, as it seems to invoke conservatism and conformism).

However, elegant as the tolerance argument might be at first glance, just like the conventionality thesis, it cannot stand up to closer scrutiny. This is because the theses of normative relativism are incompatible with the basic assumption of metaethical relativism. For the norms deployed therewith demand precisely that universal validity for ethical rightness that does not exist according to the metaethical thesis. If normative relativism applies its metaethical analysis to its own ethical demands, it cannot interpret them as universal instructions to deal appropriately with the factual plurality of ethical beliefs. Those who support relativism in ethics cannot defend themselves with arguments (!) that members

of other ethical belief systems do not comply with the tolerance imperative, but instead attempt to assert their own ethical standards e.g. by force. In doing so, they can even claim that the tolerance imperative is incompatible with their own ethical beliefs and therefore cannot be followed by them because then they can no longer take their own ethical beliefs seriously [IX-15]).

But even with the plausibility of the metaethical thesis itself all is not well. Since it represents an interpretation that is revisionary towards our self-understanding, it has to be supported by the extra assumptions named. However, the supportive allusion to the empirically observable heterogeneity of factually existing ethical practices and beliefs no more carries the argument - which is formulated in the thesis of metaethical relativism - than does the reminder of the dependency of our ethical beliefs on factually existing norm systems. One can illustrate this with the following example: In a society X, action a (= incinerating a human corpse) counts as ethically right, whereas in another society Y, action b (= permanently preserving a human corpse) counts as ethically right. If one suggests action b to a member of society X, he reacts with ethical indignation because he considers b to be ethically unacceptable. The same reaction follows if one prompts a member of society Y to carry out action a. At first glance this is clear evidence for the relativity of ethical concepts. X and Y are evidently ruled by perceptions of the ethically right that are incompatible with the respectively other society. However, three objections can be formulated against the interpretation of this case in the sense of the divergence thesis.

The *first* objection against the relativistic interpretation of our example points out that in this situation there are no incompatible ethical assumptions at all. The members of X consider it ethically imperative to promote the salvation of the deceased and on the basis of metaethical assumptions believe that this can only happen if the soul of the deceased is finally freed of its earthly prison, which can only be guaranteed by destroying the corpse. The members of Y also consider it ethically imperative to promote the salvation of the deceased, but on the basis of metaethical assumptions they believe that this can only happen if the body of the deceased is preserved for the moment of physical resurrection. What looks like grave ethical disagreement at first glance, turns out on closer inspection to be a variation in terms of other beliefs.

The *second* objection against the relativistic interpretation of ethical disagreement takes off from the possibility that parts of the ethical practice of X and Y are mutually exclusive. But this is compatible with the assumption that there are likewise parts of ethical practice for

which there is consensus. The relativistic interpretation then presents an impermissible generalization. It may only take a graduation from contextually specific to more general ethical principles so enable the apparent disagreement to be understood as two different interpretations of one and the same principle. (If one supports the metaethical thesis that the ethical validity of the more specific principles is owed entirely to the ethical validity of the more general ethical principles, the second objection becomes a variant of the first objection. On the other hand, if one imputes a plurality of values each with intrinsic value, the second objection is an independent argument against the relativistic interpretation of the divergence).

The *third* objections takes up the standpoint that an existing disagreement does not have to be interpreted in the direction of relativism. Instead, one can also hold on to a cognitivist and non-relativistic interpretation of ethics and support the thesis that both assumptions cannot be right in such a case. At least one of the parties must, if it really is a case of irresolvable disagreement, be making an ethical mistake. This also provides an implicit answer to the relativistic interpretation of the dependency of ethical beliefs. If the norms on which the ethical beliefs of single individuals depend are true, no relativistic consequences follow from the dependency.

Incidentally, this answer to the relativistic proposal for interpretation leaves it open whether one tolerates the other side's imputed ethical mistake, or whether one intervenes to prevent the violation of ethical claims. Whether the intrusion is by and large ethically imperative or not depends on far-reaching assessments of the consequences of such an intervention. All in all, there are thus no compelling reasons for inferring relativism from the factual divergence of ethical beliefs and the factual dependency of these beliefs on existing norm systems.

3. Justificatory models and justificatory claims

The problem of the rational justification of our beliefs and the question of which knowledge or justificatory claims we can meaningfully raise with our beliefs belong to the basic subject areas that have occupied philosophy from the very beginning. The models of rational justification that have been developed over the course of time can also be found in the field of ethics. As a first step, we will provide ourselves with an overview of the most important justificatory models. After that and with these justificatory models the different

approaches to providing a basis for ethics that is immune to skeptical objections and relativism will be introduced.

a) Deductivism, inductivism und coherentism

In general, three justificatory models can be distinguished: deductivism, inductivism und coherentism. In *deductivism* the justification is conceived as getting from general ethical principles via empirical statements to ought or value statements or ways of action. In so doing, we will limit ourselves to the deontological version (the teleological variant can be formulated analogously by replacing deontological ought statements with value statements). In addition, we will take the ex-post perspective as a basis i.e. choose the point in time for the description when the action has already been carried out and we can refer to concrete events (cp. Chapter VIII, 2b). As a general schema, one can present the justificatory model of deductivism thus:

- | | |
|-------|--|
| (P 1) | Type X Actions are ethically prohibited. |
| (P 2) | This action h is type X. |
| (S) | It was ethically prohibited to carry out action h. |

The first premise consists of a general principle with which it is stated that all actions of a certain type are ethically prohibited. The second premise is an empirical statement through which a concrete event is subsumed under a general description. The conclusion formulates a deontological statement from which an ought statement can be deduced (action h should not have been carried out).

It is characteristic for the justificatory model of deductivism that the ethical validity of the conclusion is deduced from the ethical validity of the general principle. On the other hand, the validity of this general principle does not itself depend on the validity of the conclusion. In a monistic ethics there will only be one general principle (or general validating statement), whereas there will be several in a pluralistic ethics (cp. Chapter VIII, 4a). In a deductivistic justificatory model, the validity of the individual principles is not deduced from the validity of the other principles even in a pluralistic theory (in case of conflict, it can at the most be limited by the validity of rival principles in their effect on the individual case of conclusion)

In the deductivistic model justification is thought of as a one-way street going from the general to the specific or the individual case.

Inductivism shares with deductivism the assumption of the deductivistic model that justification is a relation going in only one direction. However, inductivism is characterized by the assumption that this justificatory one-way street graduates from the individual case to the general. In an ethics resting on inductivism, the basal factors of ethical validity are concrete actions or situations to which we can assign ethical validity in judgments. General principles should then be understood as generalizations achieved via ethical experience. However, they have no validity for individual cases. So in inductivism it is ruled out that the ethical evaluation of an individual case can appeal to a general principle. In point of fact, such general statements or principles must be treated with caution in ethics. Inductivists are more concerned with guidance and rules of thumb that in any case have to be corrected (or confirmed) by means of individual case evaluation (cp. [IX-16]).

Both deductivism and inductivism understand justification as a relation that only goes in one direction. So both justificatory models are set to the assumption that there are one or more top (or bottom) fixed-points for justifications. On the basis of these justificatory models, a central task of ethics consists of locating a special class of ethical beliefs that are first assigned ethical validity independently of our other ethical assumptions and second, whose ethical validity can serve as justificatory resource for all ethical beliefs that do not belong to this special class. We can call this concept “fundamentism” so as to avoid the connotations of the alternative label “fundamentalism” that are unwelcome in our context (this terminological suggestion refers to [IX-17], p. 84 Note 9). The difference between deductivism and inductivism and the various concrete ethics of this type lies in the kind of ethical beliefs that are respectively awarded this special substantiated status.

Coherentism rejects the concept of fundamentism and with it likewise the two models of deductivism and inductivism based thereon. In a coherentist approach, justification is not thought of as a one-way street, but can go in all directions. Individual actions and situations are evaluated by reference to general principles in which we e.g. consider a concrete action to be false because it involves the infliction of bodily injury. At the same time, the general principles can also be contextually modified through the individual case assessment that forms an essential part of our ethical practice. Thus one sees e.g. that the general rule that deliberately killing a human being is always ethically prohibited is currently on trial on our society. Cases of assisted suicide requested by patients on the basis of an autonomous

decision, are in the meantime held by many to be ethically permissible (and in some countries, such as Holland, for example, have been exempt from punishment for some years). If the adherence to general norms under the changed conditions of our agency practice (e.g. on the basis of intensive medicine and the sustainment possible with its help) often or regularly leads in specific contexts to results that those involved assess as ethically inappropriate, it is then possible in the frame of coherentism to correct the general rule through the ethical intuitions oriented to the individual case. Unlike inductivism, in which the rule is always only thought of as the result of the individual case assessment, and unlike deductivism, in which the individual case is not assigned any independent ethical significance, in a coherentist model such tensions (or changes) can be seen as conflicts between the different levels. The justification thus goes both from the general to the specific and the individual case and vice versa. Moreover, the general principles, the special rules and the individual case assessments justify one another. This means that the various regulations and evaluations must endorse and support one another by collectively facilitating a practice that is experienced as meaningful in its main features and is for the most part supported. In so doing, there is no requirement that every single conviction of one of the levels is directly related to all other beliefs that are part of our ethical theory. Coherentism only requires that there are no parts in ethical theory or in our system of ethical beliefs that are assigned ethical validity independently of their integration into the whole system of ethical beliefs. According to coherentism, ethical validity comes about when a principle, a rule or even a single case assessment stands the test in the context of the entire system of our ethical beliefs and experiences. This probation should be understood primarily as a kind of practice test resting mainly on our everyday experiences with the relevant ethical assumptions when we align our actions and ethical judgments to them (cp. [IX-7]). On the one hand, this experience is always gained in the light of ethical beliefs and thus fits into this system. On the other hand, individual experiences in which a discrepancy between ethical rules and intuitive single-case assessments comes to light, or proposals for ethical revision, when they are well-founded, can lead to a change in the whole system. Such proposals for revision are well-founded in the frame of coherentism when the criticism of existing ethical norms survives the first step on the principle of default-and-challenge and when the suggestions for improvements provide good reason to assume that the coherence of our ethical practice grows as a whole through the required changes.

So for coherentism the validity strength of individual ethical judgments depends on the performance of the whole network of our ethical beliefs. Their justification arises via the

contribution the individual ethical beliefs make to the performance of the whole ethical justificatory system. This performance consists of the possibility of achieving a stable ethical practice that is experienced as meaningful and justified by the parties concerned. In the frame of coherentism, there can thus be no external benchmark for either the evaluation of the performance or the contextual regulations of ethical practice (e.g. ethical rules, value judgments or experiences).

b) Infallible bases for ethics

Alongside the distinction between the three models of ethical justification undertaken above, the difference between two claims made on ethical theories are important for the understanding of ethical theories. Like the three justificatory models, these claims do not stem from the field of ethics, but manifest themselves in all philosophical contexts. On the one hand, one can start from the premise that a fallible base in principle only suffices to justify beliefs, theories and existing practices. Such a base is fallible when it is allowed to be proven false in the wake of new knowledge or changed framework conditions. On the other hand, there is contradictory assumption that only an infallible base is adequate for justification from the philosophical viewpoint. Infallible means that one can show that the base in question cannot prove to be false. Not only philosophers can be unsettled by the concept that our entire philosophical practice rests on bases that could turn out to be false. There are both fallibilist and infallibilist conceptions of the three different justificatory strategies just mentioned. Deductivist and inductivist forms of *fallibilism* presuppose that the fundamental assumptions to which every ethical justification must take recourse, can for their part prove to be false. The pragmatic strategy of default-and-challenge introduced in this chapter provides a fallible basis and can thus be seen as a case of fallibilistic coherentism. This strategy is called “pragmatic” on the one hand because it is ultimately oriented toward the retention of practical claims. On the other hand, it is labelled with the philosophical art term „pragmatist“ so as to avoid evoking the negative connotations of „pragmatic“ in the sense of mere usefulness or thinking aligned to practicability. This pragmatic strategy is in my view the most promising option of fallibilism in ethics; it is based on the idea that our knowledge claims in general (and therewith also our ethical beliefs) do not have to count as unjustified because they could hypothetically prove false. On the contrary, we are entitled to hold on to them as justified assumptions for as long as doubts about them cannot be substantiated plausibly. So this strategy is not fallibilist because the bases of our ethical practice are false, but because it

cannot or (need not) be shown that they cannot be false. So what is already recognized in everyday life also applies to knowledge claims and justifications from the philosophical perspective: Knowledge claims and justification do not collapse because they are supported by something that can in principle prove false.

This fallibilist reaction to the possibility of our knowledge claims being falsified has not, however, convinced many philosophers or non-philosophers. Some who allow themselves to be unsettled by the elemental possibility of ethical error have drawn skeptical or non-cognitivist conclusions. Others have come to the conclusion that one should naturalize ethics so as to steer it into an epistemologically safer haven. But in philosophy there is also a tradition of thought that is characterized by exactly the opposite reaction. Starting from the impossibility of ethical naturalism, these philosophers, also deeply unsettled by the possibility of ethical error, have searched for infallible bases or justificatory procedures through which every possibility of error can be fundamentally excluded. In other words, they have searched for an infallible basis for ethics.

It is evident that *infallibilism* best matches fundamentalism most easily. Before we look at the main forms of this fundamentalist infallibilism, we can take a look at the possibility of coherentist fallibilism. If it could be shown for a specific network of beliefs that there is no alternative and that it is resistant to change, it would be an infallible justification system. Unlike in deductivism or inductivism, infallibility is not ascribed directly to the basal elements of our system of beliefs, but has to be viewed as a feature of the whole network. Because of the claim of completeness, insularity and lack of an alternative for such a distinguished system of beliefs, a coherentist infallibilism must most certainly assume the form of an ultimate justification. But, as far as I know, presently nobody actually subscribes to such an ethical theory; the burdens of proof taken on with it would seem to be too immense from the perspective of most philosophers' self-understanding.

So fundamentalism inarguably represents the most important form of infallibilism in ethics. With respect to the epistemological and justification-theoretical foundations, it can be differentiated even further. The first variant of fundamentalist infallibilism tries to provide a rational, indisputable justification for the bases of ethics (cp. Chapter V, 3). Unlike the strategy of default-and-challenge, ultimate justifications take offensive action against skeptical doubt, which they want to rule out from the start and for good by way of a justificatory procedure. So this form of infallibilism is oriented to the paradigm of justification.

In contrast, the second variant of fundamentalist infallibilism claims that we can reach certain ethical judgments with evidence. This special quality is owed to a special human cognitive faculty that is open to postulated ethical evidence. At this point one must again distinguish between deductivist and inductivist variants. Supporters of *inductivist* infallibilism assume that our basal ethical judgments refer to concrete actions or situations. The evidence for these basal ethical judgments stems from an intuitive perception of the ethical quality of such concrete entities. In this conception, the epistemic source of ethics is thought of as being analogue to the sensory view or perception (cp. [IX-18], Chapter 3 and [IX-19]). Supporters of *deductivist* infallibilism assume that our basal ethical judgments are justified by the acquisition of ethical principles of whose ethical validity we are intuitively certain. In this conception, the epistemic source of ethical knowledge is thought of as being analogue to the intuitive show of principles, as frequently postulated in philosophy e.g. referring to mathematical or logical principles. Traits of such a conception can be found e.g. in Ross (see [IX-20], Chapter VIII).

Show of principles conceived as it is often postulated in philosophy with reference to mathematical or logical principles. Traits of such a conception can be found e.g. in Ross (see [IX-20], Chapter VIII).

Fallible base

Infallible base

Coherentism

Fundamentalism

Ultimate Justification
complete
resistant to change
no alternative
e.g. Hegel

Ultimate justification

Evidence

inductive

deductive

Reason

e.g. Kant, Apel

sensory perception

e.g. McNaughton

intuitive show
of principles
e.g. Ross

These two forms of *evidence-based* fundamentalist infallibilism differ in the way the structure of their evidence-vouching intuition is defined philosophically (this difference ultimately stems from the respectively prefixed entities to which our ethical intuitions are oriented). Their commonality toward *ultimately justified* infallibilism is that they portray the basal epistemic relation between the knowing subject and the ethically distinguished entities as evidence. Thus they are obligated to the perceptual model whereas the concept of ultimate justification aims at discursive rationality. The tension between ethical perception and practical reason, which already became noticeable in the context of our discussion of ethical objectivism and ethical realism, is thus also reflected in the context of ethical justification.

c) Conclusion: Who's afraid of relativism?

As we have seen, the reference to factual disagreements and mutually incompatible ethical claims does not suffice per se to justify ethical relativism. So is Williams right when he defines relativism as the most absurd conception to be found in the field of moral philosophy?

Considering that the spectre of relativism is probably the most central motive for the development of an infallibilist ethics, for the programmes of ultimate justification, or the postulation of a priori values in the sense of strong realism, then this absurd conception at least has enough strength to evoke vehement counter-reactions in ethical theory construction. Because relativism limits the universal validity claim and therewith the unconditionality of ethical validity, it is construed – especially before the background of the experience of ethical divergences in modernity – as a threat to ethics. This applies above all to philosophers who assign generality or even necessity to ethical claims and wish to eliminate every form of contingency from ethics.

In this and the previous chapters we saw that such a strong conception of ethics with its maximal claims on ethical justification in turn leads to implausible views in ethics. The anchorage of ethics in purely practical subjectivity or in values that are accessible quite independently of the subject and a priori, owes its attractiveness to the need to put ethical validity on a base that is neither contingent nor changeable. The philosophical programmes that must be utilized for such a conception are, however, problematic due to their preconditions, and the ethics resulting from them are in many ways rather incompatible with our ethical practice. Intuitively, the assumption that ethics is characterized in essential parts

by how we live our lives as human beings in this world seems much clearer (the dependence thesis of relativism). Here, alongside individual idiosyncrasies, social, cultural and historical framework conditions play just as formative a role as, for example, our biological constitution. Much in this area is – at least with regard to humans – factually universal (this is why neither the divergence nor dependency of ethical beliefs implies relativism). However, the foundation remains contingent and is in principle even changeable through our agency (one just has to think of the possibilities of reconstructing our biological nature that result e.g. from reproduction technologies or the long-term options of human genetics). If one ties ethics to the empirical basis of human life, one puts it on a foundation that is relative to fragile anthropological standards. Furthermore, if one takes the ontology of weak ethical realism as a base, values of varying universality and scope of validity can be postulated (depending on the universality of the subjective elements that enter into the constitution of the evaluative relation). At all events, ethics retains a contingent foundation and in this sense the relativism also persists therein. Metaphysical relativism contains the accurate insight that our ethics does not develop in a vacuum and is not completely free of empirical requirements or framework conditions. If understood correctly, this relativity in ethics has no destructive effect on our ethical self-understanding and our ethical practice. This applies at least where we do not, due to misinterpretation of this relativity or due to epistemic or other theoretical concepts, inflict exaggerated justificatory standards on ethical statements and thereby ultimately aid and abet skepticism.

4. Summary, suggestions for reading, questions and exercises

Summary

Starting from the question of the uses and disadvantages of the project of ethical justification, in this chapter the central theses of ethical relativism were introduced, whereby we distinguished between metaethical and normative relativism. Metaethical relativism claims that the validity claims of ethical statements are always relative to a specific reference group. From this finding normative relativism comes to the conclusion that no one has the right to interfere in an ethical practice that is based on ethical foundations that differ from one's own respectively. Whereas normative relativism is incompatible with metaethical relativism because it formulates a universal norm itself, the discussion has shown that the factual plurality of ethical beliefs and the divergence between various ethical systems of belief brought into play as proof by relativism, is not adequate to justify the thesis of metaethical relativism. The possibility of skeptical objections and relativistic conceptions in ethics represents one of the main motives that have led to the formulation of strong justificatory claims for ethical beliefs. On the basis of the most important models of justification (deductivism, inductivism and coherentism) the attempts to put our ethical practice on an infallible base were introduced. In view of the dangers that emerge for ethics through the adherence to overly strong justificatory claims, the option of a pragmatist and coherentist conception was developed, which waives infallible bases and considers certain relativistic features to be

acceptable. Vital for the question of the justification of ethics is thus whether an infallible (on evidence or ultimate justification) base is being sought of which one can show philosophically that it is immune to skeptical objections. In this chapter, the alternative position was developed, that our practice can be seen as justified until objections against specific principles or value assumptions of our ethical self-understanding can be made plausible. A general rejection of the possibility of skeptical doubt is just as unnecessary for ethics as a base that is not relative to the anthropological conditions of human existence.

Suggestions for reading

Important contributions to the forms of justification in philosophy can be found in [IX-21], for further literature cp. the recommendations in [IX-22]. On the problem of relativism in philosophy in general cp. the contributions in [IX-23]; especially on ethics s, the essays in [IX-24] and [IX-25] and the recommendations in [IX-26].

Questions and exercises

- Describe the advantages provided by the justification of ethical beliefs.
- Why does the claim for the justification of ethical beliefs contain a critical component?
- What are the dangers of the project of justification of an ethics?
- Explain the justificatory strategy of default-and-challenge.
- Show the difference between causes and reasons.
- What is the difference between the internal and the external perspective on ethical justifications?
- Why is the distinction between internal and external perspectives not metaethically neutral?
- Explain the basic assumptions of ethical relativism.
- Why are the theses of normative and metaethical relativism mutually incompatible?
- Explain why the factual divergence between ethical beliefs does not allow the implication of metaethical relativism.
- Which assumption common to deductivism and inductivism is not accepted by coherentism?
- What is the difference between deductivism and inductivism?
- Explain the difference between fallibilistic and infallibilistic approaches to justification in ethics.
- Explain the difference between ultimate justificatory and evidence-based fundamentalist infallibilism..
- Which types of theory can be distinguished within evidence-based fundamentalistic infallibilism? And what are the distinguishing features?
- Define the relation between the relativity, contingency and universality of ethical beliefs in the frame of a fallibilistic and pragmatist coherentism.
- According to a pragmatist conception of ethics, what comprises the probation of ethical beliefs (rules or norms)?

IX. Justification in ethics

“To preach Morality is easy,
to found it difficult.”

(Arthur Schopenhauer)
(translation by Mme Karl Hillebrand)

In this chapter, we will present the central models of ethical justification and the concepts based on them about the necessary strength of justification claims. In addition, as a first step, broad-spectrum deliberations will be held on the advantages and disadvantages of justification in ethics. In the second section, with the basic form of relativism, the figure of thought will be presented, which was largely responsible for the shift of the issue of justification to the centre of modern ethics. In a third step, various justificatory models will be introduced with which attempts are made to provide ethics with a base that is shielded from relativism and skepticism.

In the previous chapters we saw that the question of the possibility of justifying ethical statements and claims has moved to the centre of modern ethics. As we ascertained in the first chapter, the search for justifications is one of the basic questions in ethics. The specific form this basic question takes respectively as a justification of ethics e.g. in the frame of subjective ethical rationalism or ethical objectivism, can only be understood before the background of skeptical and relativistic approaches in which the possibility of the justification of ethical statements and claims is contested. Even the surrender of every justification claim for ethical statements, as proposed by non-cognitivism, and the attempt to translate ethical statements into scientific ones, to which ethical naturalism aspires, can be understood as extreme reactions to the justification problem to which modern ethics sees itself subjected.

Concentration on the aspect of justification as seen in modern morality has changed the face of ethics so drastically that meanwhile voices are being raised that challenge the sense in the whole project of ethical justification. For this reason we will first have to come to an understanding about the sense of ethical justification before we can move on to thematize the basic concept of relativism. Finally, we will distinguish between the various justificatory models that can be found in ethics and discuss the diverse approaches to providing ethics with an invulnerable, infallible instrument against skepticism and relativism.

1. Why justify?

The question of whether ethical statements can be justified at all and how this could possibly be done arises for every cognitivist form of ethics. It originates in the need for

justification within our everyday ethical practice. The second of our three basic ethical questions is geared towards why a certain option for action is ethically right (cp. Chapter I, 2b). If someone is advised that a certain action of several alternatives is the ethically right one, she can rightly ask why this action and not some other should be carried out. The question of justification can then, as we have seen, be stepped up to the principle question of why one should even comply with ethical aspects in one's actions. If ethical demands are either per definitionem or factually contrary to one's own interests, the question of how one can justify to other subjects that they should behave according to ethical rather than egoistic aspects hangs in the air. So if one accepts that a central area of ethics can be characterized by the opposition of one's own rational interests and the ethical ought, and that the basic assumption of the ethical conception of enlightened self-interest is false, the problem of justification in ethics takes on a harsher form. Because the explicit acceptance of the ethical and political requirement that ethical claims must be legitimized toward the rational subject is one of the central achievements to assert itself in the wake of the Enlightenment. Any wanting to hold on to the project of a cognitivist ethics thus has good reasons for asking about the possibility and the nature of ethical justification.

But not everyone who rejects the project of ethical justification is an ethical non-cognitivist. Some philosophers, such as Bernard Williams, have expressed the suspicion that the fixation of modern ethics on the aspect of justification or the formulation of excessive justificatory claims is altogether detrimental to our ethical practice (cp. [IX-1], Chapter 2). In the present day ethical debate there is thus not only a dispute over which justificatory model is appropriate for ethics. There is also a discussion taking place on the meta level as to whether this project of justification can itself be justified. Before we get involved in the contextual description of the various theory offers, we must first gain clarification on the possible advantages and disadvantages of the project of justification itself. A second step will involve defining beforehand and more precisely how a justification should be understood. In doing so, our rejection of ethical naturalism will again play an important role. Moreover, we must at this point separate two fundamentally different ethical projects of justification from one another. For this, the difference between the internal and external perspectives will be helpful (cp. also Chapter I, 3b).

a) Uses and shortcomings of the project of ethical justification

Generally speaking, there is an epistemic gradient between mere opinions, prejudices or

groundless assumptions on the one hand and knowledge on the other. This means that in the system of beliefs that we, as empirical subjects, take as true, various degrees of validity can be established for these beliefs. Some assumptions with empirical content, such as that the dog from my neighbour's garden standing in front of me is not aggressive, are more easily confirmed than other assumptions of an empirical nature (e.g. that the oriental looking air passenger is a potential danger to the safety of the other passengers). Universalities that refer to empirical facts (e.g. all swans are white) are less well justified than universalities whose truth follows from the meaning of concepts (e.g. all bachelors are unmarried men). Relative to our beliefs, we can decide how well they are supported e.g. by experience or other assumptions we consider to be well-founded.

Some epistemologists presume that there are individual beliefs or kinds of beliefs that are in principle resistant to error and thus cases of infallible knowledge; one of the most famous, but at the same time also most difficult candidates for this is the argument going back to René Descartes (1596-1650) of *cogito (ergo) sum* (cp. [IX-2], second meditation). But even without the assumption of a knowledge that is resistant to error, one can support the position that beliefs for which we can produce sound justification as a rule have higher plausibility and are more likely to be true than unjustified or weakly justified ones.

In the context of ethics, it is a question of orientation in the practical context and the legitimization of ethical claims and statements. To this end, four advantages can be cited for the project of ethical justification:

- a secure basis for our ethical orientation
- the possibility of justifying ethical requirements to others
- the possibility of rejecting skeptical doubt in the justifiability of ethical statements
- the possibility of criticizing factual ethical beliefs and belief systems

The *first* advantage of ethical justifications emerges straight out of the observation that justified assumptions are a secure basis for our orientation (this applies in respect of assumptions about the ethically right just as much as for assumptions e.g. about the quality of a fridge to be bought, or the correct turnoff to take to the party). *Secondly*, sound justifications are quite obviously indispensable for the legitimization of ethical requirements to other rational beings. A *third* advantage obtained through ethical justifications is that skeptical

doubt about individual ethical requirements or even about ethical practice as a whole can be cleared up. If an ultimate justification of our ethical practice were to succeed as it e.g. is striven for by ethical objectivism, then a basis would have been gained that is immune from every skeptical doubt. But even if the justificatory possibilities in ethics are not strong enough to put every form of skepticism in its place as a matter of principle, better ethical positions can still be distinguished from worse ones on the basis of sound justifications. Anyone who asks for ethical advice in everyday life collects experiences during the course of time and after a while will at least get a feeling for which persons are good advisers and which pieces of advice are based on reasonable ethical judgments. In any event, the radical skeptical thesis that all ethical assumptions, statements or positions are equally well or badly justified and that the ethical attitude is thus ultimately arbitrary, can be rejected even when one does not have an ultimate philosophical justification of ethics. For the moment, we can leave open whether the challenge of skepticism can only be parried by ultimate justification, or can succeed on epistemically weaker bases. From the historical viewpoint, as the platonic dialogues show, the resistance to skepticism and relativism was, alongside the epistemic ideal of attaining knowledge through opinion, one of the central motifs for the project of ethical justification (cp. [IX-3]). A *fourth* positive aspect of the project of justification is its critical function. Although one can see from the historical example of Socrates (470-399 BC) that practising philosophical criticism via justifications for valid ethical beliefs does not always have to be positive for the individual demanding justification: Socrates was sentenced to death by the Athenians because his search for ethical justifications and his critical scrutiny of existing ethical views was judged by the ruling elite to be subversive and dangerous for youth and state (cp. Plato's representation (about 428-347 BC) in [IX-4]). On the one hand, the critical function of the project of ethical justification becomes clear when one elucidates its central prerequisite. A justification only becomes necessary where a critical i.e. a justification-motivated question has been asked. So in a first step, it is part of the project of justification to challenge predefined ethical requirements or claims (whoever asks for justification rescinds the unquestionability and implicitness of that for which he requests justification) On the other hand, there is an inherent critical component in the request for justifications because in the attempt to justify a particular ethical statement one must always check how well rival ethical claims are justified. So of necessity, part of the essence of the project of justification is, firstly, to ask for reasons in general and secondly, to ask about the quality of the justifications submitted.

On the one hand, the project of ethical justification is thus instructive: it takes into account the claim of rational beings autonomously, i.e. with their own insight and judgment, to adopt or reject the legitimacy of ethical requirements or claims. On the other hand, this instructive project has an antiauthoritarian direction of impact. Ethical validity cannot be justified purely by reference to conventional morality or with recourse to divine, papal or state authority. Unquestioned compliance with traditional ethical norms must, at least in the frame of the normative self-understanding of autonomous rational subjects, be replaced by the autonomous decision, reached through rational insight, to follow and accept what has proved best ethically justified by means of rational inspection.

Considering that the criticism of mere authority and the compliance with or upgrading of individual autonomy have become central parts of our modern culture, objections to this project of ethical justification seem to represent only an expression of an authoritative attitude and to have no plausibility. But the factual situation is not that simple. The motivation behind the reservations against the project of a justification of ethics becomes clear when we remind ourselves that an unavoidable part of the project of ethical justification is the assessment of existing justifications and the demand for justifications where none have been requested or given. If one wants to assess existing justifications, one needs criteria for when an argumentation can qualify as a good justification. If one asks critical questions where hitherto justifications were neither demanded nor given, for starters one will cause irritation. This is admittedly often aroused by philosophers so that they can subsequently come up with a much better or even watertight justification themselves. But what happens when such a justification is either – with skeptical intention – not intended at all, or when the proposed attempt at justification fails? The awakened doubt can no longer be placated, the previous security of the ethical self-understanding evaporates and the hitherto accepted ethical order dissolves. At least, this is the worry of those philosophers who warn against seeing the project of ethical justification as the only or primary function of philosophical ethics.

We must heed these danger warnings. There is evidence to suggest that the widespread skepticism of the possibility of rationally justifying ethical claims and acknowledging them as independent value claims must also be viewed as a product of the critical potential of ethical enlightenment and the failure of a comprehensive justification of ethics. If only the critical part of the project of justification can be executed, whilst a constructive justification of our ethical practice does not succeed, one can truly ask whether the destruction of ethical naturalness and the heritage of general ethical disorientation was (or: is) not an ethical losing

game. Since the process of enlightenment in the sense of the attempt at justification of our ethical practice has developed a far-reaching critical potential during the past centuries, on the one hand, whether the balance of this project has been advantageous for our ethical practice and self-understanding in the ethical sense. And since this project still continues in the present day, one can ask if holding on to the project of justification in ethics will lead to the destruction of currently existing ethical awareness (the ongoing dispute in Germany over the appropriate ethical handling of early forms of human life can serve as an example for this dimension of contemporary ethical developments; compare with the contributions in [IX-5]).

Due to the entrenchment of the search for justifications in the basal structure of our ethical practice, in general it is almost impossible to waive ethical justification. Given the historical experiences with the value of individual autonomy and maturity and our experiences with social systems in which individual autonomy was systematically ignored, such a waiver would also be anything but desirable. So we must ask whether dreaded negative consequences inevitably ensue from the project of ethical justification. On closer examination this does not seem to be the case. The critical function of the demand for justification will at any rate be retained and is ethically welcome. But the general skeptical consequence follows only when the bar written into the justification project is raised too high for convincing justifications. The advantages of the justification project can be retained if appropriate and realizable standards for ethical justifications can be worked out. As we saw in the context of ethical objectivism, the prospects of general rebuttal in the form of a final justification by skepticisms are probably poor (cp. chapter V). But nothing forces us to accept that ethical claims are only well justified when skeptical doubts can always be precluded. On the contrary, we can take up the standpoint that we can hold on to ethical principles or moral concepts that have proved themselves in our practice even without explicit justifications until good reasons are brought forward, which are qualified to cast doubt on the suitability of these principles (cp. [IX-6], p. 3 ff.). The yardstick for ethical principles standing the test in a given practice cannot be taken from outside that practice. Standing the test therefore means that those participating in the practice succeed in living a good life on the basis of the relevant principles. The practice thereby becomes a litmus test and the absence of critique of the principles in question a feature of their suitability (cp. [IX-7]). However, if the critic or the skeptic succeeds in making misgivings about individual ethical principles plausible to those taking part in the discussion, then a justification for the claims in question must be developed, which can refute these objections (such a justification procedure is called default-and-challenge; cp. [IX-8], p.

176 ff.).

The justification strategy of *default-and-challenge* displays two central aspects. Firstly, the conservative aspect that starts from the assumption that – in our case – ethical practice stands the test and thus the elements that are not the object of controversial disputes or are no longer observed in practice, can qualify *prima facie* as well justified. This is why it does not demand that every possible or thinkable skeptical objection be refuted offensively. On the contrary, the burden of proof is imposed on the critic to first make his objection plausible. If this succeeds, however, the problematic part of the ethical practice must then be justified. This justification of controversial ethical principles or value judgments is then effected in such a way that only the objections recognized as justified have to be rejected. Moreover – and this is the second central aspect of *default-and-challenge* – there is no requirement that such a rejection rests on incontestable reasons; good reasons are enough.

Ultimately, an ethical justification does not therefore rest on an incontestable foundation. On the one hand, this has the advantage that no justification standard is established that might not be realizable and whose application might lead to the erosive effects that are feared by the critics of the project of ethical justification. On the other hand, our ethical practice therewith remains a risky business because it is basically not always possible for us to assume ethical principles and value judgments that later turn out to be unsuitable. Alongside the belief that our ethical practice could be a relativistic affair, the agitation caused by a constant threat of ethical error certainly illustrates one of the main motives for the project of justification or strong justification programs. However, in view of the chances of a philosophical final justification and the dangers accruing from this project of justification for our ethics, all in all it would seem wise to allow ethics this tried and tested, if fragile base.

b) Two differences

Before we can deal with the specter of relativism and the various conceptions of philosophical justification in ethics in the coming sections, we must introduce a new distinction and recall one already introduced: the difference between causes and reasons on the one hand and an internal and an external perspective on ethics on the other (cp. on the latter also Chapter I, 3b).

Causes versus reasons: In the history of philosophy the category of reason exhibits an ambiguity that is of great relevance for the project of ethical justification. For a start, a reason can be meant as a causal reason: The reason the windowpane was shattered was the impact of

the football. But a reason can also be meant as an argument or a justification for an assumption or conviction: My reason for the assumption that Claus won't come to work today is that he's getting married to Claudia. In the first example the reason points to a causal relation, in the second example to a rational one. The same ambiguity can also be found in our use of „because“. The windowpane shatters because the football hits it. This is a causal because. I believe that Claus won't come to work because I know he has a different appointment. This “because” does not name the cause of Claus's absence, but the rational reason for my being convinced that he won't come today, It is thus a logical because.

In view of this ambiguity, it is vital to distinguish terminologically between causal explanations and rational justifications. The project of ethical justification aims at the latter, as does the second basic ethical question, too. Whoever asks for reasons for ethical statements, is not requesting causal, but logical and sense-related reasons. If Peter asks Paula why she considers abortions to be ethically impermissible, he would probably be pretty disappointed with her causal explanation that it is the consequence of a specific socialization. Her answer lies simply beyond what Peter's question is aimed at.

The difference between causal explanation and rational justification already played a decisive role in the context of our discussion of ethical naturalism (cp. Chapter VII, 3). The finding, that causal explanations cannot replace rational justifications, was a central argument for the non-naturalizability of ethics. This finding does not preclude that one can ask, e.g. for evolutionally theoretical purposes, about the causal reasons for certain behaviour patterns.

Leaving aside the question of the compatibility of freedom and determinism, which we will discuss specifically in the next chapter, we need at this point only insist that a causal explanation cannot exhaust the specific value dimension of rational justifications (and therewith also ethical justifications). Our deliberations on the possibility of ethical naturalism and that of ethical justification thus refer reciprocally each to the other; they are mutually supportive and dependent.

Internal versus external perspectives. Alongside the distinction between causal explanation and rational justification, the difference between an internal and an external perspective is relevant for our current deliberations. On the basis of this distinction, we can keep two different projects of ethical justification apart; it thus leads to an internal distinction in the area of rational justification.

If an ethical justification is requested in the internal perspective, ethical arguments are admitted as reasons. Individual pieces of ethical advice for or evaluations of actions are

thereby undertaken from an internal ethical standpoint. If Cassandra advises Diana how she should act from an ethical standpoint in a conflict, Cassandra is allowed to make use of ethical premises when formulating and justifying her suggestion. And if Bob asks Neil what reasons support the ethical standpoint, Bob takes up the internal perspective for as long as he is prepared to acknowledge ethical justifications as the answer. The project of ethical justification, if it feels committed to the internal perspective, demands no rational justification that does not itself make use of ethical premises.

In contrast, under the prerequisite of the external perspective, Diana demands a rational justification for Cassandra's suggestion for action, which does not rest on ethical preconditions. In radicalized form, Bob's question then takes the form of asking what non-ethical, rational reason there could be for even taking up the ethical standpoint and aligning my action to ethical aspects (cp. [IX-9]). This distinction between an internal and an external standpoint is, as already intimated (cp. Chapter 1, 3b), not metaethically neutral. It only makes sense when it is not possible to translate ethical concepts and statements into non-ethical concepts and statements. So if we make use of this difference, we assume that neither the recourse of ethical claims to the enlightened self-interest of rational subjects can succeed, nor is a translation of our basic ethical concepts and statements possible in a scientific theory. In our discussion of the corresponding approaches (Chapters IV and VII), we saw that these reductive approaches have little chance of success, since essential aspects of our ethical self-understanding cannot be reduced to conditions of rationality, and scientific explications cannot embrace the sense of ethical questioning and justifying. In consequence, our ethical practice contains an ethical validity surplus compared with the explanation strategy of the sciences and the demands of rationality that can only become accessible if inquired after from within the internal perspective.

The assumption that our ethical practice can only be considered rationally justified and justifiable when it is possible to give a satisfactory answer to the question of justification from the external perspective is nevertheless one of the most important driving forces of the project of ethical justification. Due to the systematic difficulties worked out in the previous chapters, the prospects of such a project of justification are rather poor. This has contributed to a general skepticism toward the possibility of ethical justification and caused not only critics of the project of ethical justification to spring into action, but at the same time considerably intensified the need for a rational justification of our ethical practice.

On closer inspection, however, very little speaks for the assumption shared by both

factions that our ethical practice can only be viewed as rationally justified or vindicated when it can be rationally justified in the external perspective. The correct answer to this variant of the project of ethical justification is hence first to insist on the reasons that speak for its basal assumptions being named. As long as these complex preconditions cannot be justified convincingly, it is sufficient to operate the project of ethical justification in the internal perspective. Taken in the sense of the strategy of default-and-challenge, the need for ethical justification, which is deeply rooted in our ethical practice, can be satisfied without evoking the skeptical consequences that could erode our ethical practice that are dreaded by critics of the project of a justification of ethics.

2. The spectre of relativism

Ethical relativism has escorted and engaged philosophical ethics from the very beginning. Plato's dispute with the sophist Prothagoras (about 490-420 BC) can already be understood as a dispute over the relativistic interpretation of ethics (cp. {IX-1β}, from p. 172). Even if it is not historically clear whether Protagoras himself really championed relativistic theses, the position ascribed to him by Plato still has supporters and defenders today (cp. [IX-11]). As we will see in a moment, a central motive for relativism is, surprisingly, itself of an ethical nature. Ethical relativism is frequently defended in the name of tolerance and non-interference in foreign or internal affairs. From Plato right up to the present day the rejection of relativism has remained vehement. Thus Bernard Williams, for example, defines relativism as "the typical heresy of ethnologists, the most absurd conception that has ever been supported within the field of moral philosophy, which is not exactly lacking in absurdities" ([IX-12], p. 28).

a) The basic idea

The simplest and at the same time most widespread form of ethical relativism in our everyday practice is a combination of one metaethical and two normative theses, which are to be collectively supported by further extra assumptions. The *metaethical thesis* states that our everyday self-understanding of the basic ethical concepts "ethically right" and "ethically good" is elliptical, because we do not mention for whom or relative to what standard something is ethically right or good. According to this metaethical thesis, we have to e.g. analyse „ethically right“ as „ethically right for X“ or „ethically right according to standard S“. Depending on the radicality of the ethical relativism supported, X can stand for an individual,

a social group, a society or even a cultural epoch (the same applies to the definition of the S standard). Metaethical relativists are conscious of the fact that with this philosophical analysis they do not convey what we mean factually by our ethical statements in everyday life. They uphold their interpretation as a revisionary philosophical proposal for what our ethical claims should really mean (cp. [IX-13], p. 144-164). So they do not claim to convey the meaning of our basic ethical concepts correctly, but suggest orienting the sense of our basic ethical concepts to the factually recognized conditions of truth for ethical statements. Since the validity of these statements is limited to specific areas (= X) or dependent on specific standards (= S), we should accommodate this dependency explicitly in the sense of our basic ethical concepts and restrict our justificatory claims accordingly.

Generally, a *normative* relativism also appears alongside metaethical relativism. Acceptance of the thesis of metaethical relativism is solicited by pointing out the ethically advantageous consequences that arise from its recognition. These consequences can be formulated as the first thesis of normative relativism thus: Metaethical relativism implies that X has no right to interfere with the practice of Y with reference to its own ethical standards because these standards always apply only relatively to X. From metaethical relativism— as one can express this line of thought - a non-interference imperative and a demand for tolerance ensues (cp. [IX-14]). A second normative thesis that follows directly from the metaethical thesis then reads that every person should act and judge according to the moral tradition to which she herself belongs (whereby there are different variants according to what is inserted for X and S in “ethically right for X” and “ethically right according to standard S”).

Relativism is frequently supported by two complementary assumptions that refer to empirical facts. Relativism is firstly justified by reference to the following fact: A large number of deviations between ethical beliefs can be observed both between individuals and above all between different cultures and epochs, for which reason Williams also calls relativism the heresy of ethnologists (one can define this justification for relativism as the *divergence thesis*). Furthermore, as the second justification says, it can be observed that the ethical beliefs of individuals depend on the factual norm systems in which they live (one can define this justification as the *dependency thesis*). Thus we obtain five central relativistic theses in all:

- Our basic ethical concepts should be defined relative to a reference value

(metaethical relativism)

- Tolerance is imperative towards diverging ethical beliefs (*tolerance thesis* of normative relativism).
- Every individual shall keep to the norms valid for him (*conventionality thesis* of normative relativism).
- The empirically observable variety of mutually incompatible ethical beliefs speaks for relativism (*divergence thesis*).
- The empirically observable dependency of individual ethical beliefs on factual norm systems speaks for relativism (*dependency thesis*).

Beyond these arguments in favour of relativism, the range of rational argumentation is often factually restricted in ethical disputes. Metaethical relativism tries to explain these findings without giving up cognitivism entirely by limiting the scope of ethical statements and claims. For although relativism is occasionally attributed to non-cognitivism, in keeping with its basic concept it maintains that ethical beliefs are true and can claim validity. However, its strategy is to limit the scope of these beliefs i.e. restrict the universality of ethical claims.

b) Objections

Alongside the fact that relativism provides a good theoretical explication for why ethical justification is normally laborious and often fails (and thereby also provides a justification for no longer bothering to make the effort), it is above all the tolerance thesis of normative relativism that makes relativism in ethics attractive (in contrast, the *conventionality thesis* enjoys less popularity, especially when it demands that the individual accepts socially established values and norms, as it seems to invoke conservatism and conformism).

However, elegant as the tolerance argument might be at first glance, just like the conventionality thesis, it cannot stand up to closer scrutiny. This is because the theses of normative relativism are incompatible with the basic assumption of metaethical relativism. For the norms deployed therewith demand precisely that universal validity for ethical rightness that does not exist according to the metaethical thesis. If normative relativism applies its metaethical analysis to its own ethical demands, it cannot interpret them as universal instructions to deal appropriately with the factual plurality of ethical beliefs. Those who support relativism in ethics cannot defend themselves with arguments (!) that members

of other ethical belief systems do not comply with the tolerance imperative, but instead attempt to assert their own ethical standards e.g. by force. In doing so, they can even claim that the tolerance imperative is incompatible with their own ethical beliefs and therefore cannot be followed by them because then they can no longer take their own ethical beliefs seriously [IX-15]).

But even with the plausibility of the metaethical thesis itself all is not well. Since it represents an interpretation that is revisionary towards our self-understanding, it has to be supported by the extra assumptions named. However, the supportive allusion to the empirically observable heterogeneity of factually existing ethical practices and beliefs no more carries the argument - which is formulated in the thesis of metaethical relativism - than does the reminder of the dependency of our ethical beliefs on factually existing norm systems. One can illustrate this with the following example: In a society X, action a (= incinerating a human corpse) counts as ethically right, whereas in another society Y, action b (= permanently preserving a human corpse) counts as ethically right. If one suggests action b to a member of society X, he reacts with ethical indignation because he considers b to be ethically unacceptable. The same reaction follows if one prompts a member of society Y to carry out action a. At first glance this is clear evidence for the relativity of ethical concepts. X and Y are evidently ruled by perceptions of the ethically right that are incompatible with the respectively other society. However, three objections can be formulated against the interpretation of this case in the sense of the divergence thesis.

The *first* objection against the relativistic interpretation of our example points out that in this situation there are no incompatible ethical assumptions at all. The members of X consider it ethically imperative to promote the salvation of the deceased and on the basis of metaethical assumptions believe that this can only happen if the soul of the deceased is finally freed of its earthly prison, which can only be guaranteed by destroying the corpse. The members of Y also consider it ethically imperative to promote the salvation of the deceased, but on the basis of metaethical assumptions they believe that this can only happen if the body of the deceased is preserved for the moment of physical resurrection. What looks like grave ethical disagreement at first glance, turns out on closer inspection to be a variation in terms of other beliefs.

The *second* objection against the relativistic interpretation of ethical disagreement takes off from the possibility that parts of the ethical practice of X and Y are mutually exclusive. But this is compatible with the assumption that there are likewise parts of ethical practice for

which there is consensus. The relativistic interpretation then presents an impermissible generalization. It may only take a graduation from contextually specific to more general ethical principles so enable the apparent disagreement to be understood as two different interpretations of one and the same principle. (If one supports the metaethical thesis that the ethical validity of the more specific principles is owed entirely to the ethical validity of the more general ethical principles, the second objection becomes a variant of the first objection. On the other hand, if one imputes a plurality of values each with intrinsic value, the second objection is an independent argument against the relativistic interpretation of the divergence).

The *third* objections takes up the standpoint that an existing disagreement does not have to be interpreted in the direction of relativism. Instead, one can also hold on to a cognitivistic and non-relativistic interpretation of ethics and support the thesis that both assumptions cannot be right in such a case. At least one of the parties must, if it really is a case of irresolvable disagreement, be making an ethical mistake. This also provides an implicit answer to the relativistic interpretation of the dependency of ethical beliefs. If the norms on which the ethical beliefs of single individuals depend are true, no relativistic consequences follow from the dependency.

Incidentally, this answer to the relativistic proposal for interpretation leaves it open whether one tolerates the other side's imputed ethical mistake, or whether one intervenes to prevent the violation of ethical claims. Whether the intrusion is by and large ethically imperative or not depends on far-reaching assessments of the consequences of such an intervention. All in all, there are thus no compelling reasons for inferring relativism from the factual divergence of ethical beliefs and the factual dependency of these beliefs on existing norm systems.

3. Justificatory models and justificatory claims

The problem of the rational justification of our beliefs and the question of which knowledge or justificatory claims we can meaningfully raise with our beliefs belong to the basic subject areas that have occupied philosophy from the very beginning. The models of rational justification that have been developed over the course of time can also be found in the field of ethics. As a first step, we will provide ourselves with an overview of the most important justificatory models. After that and with these justificatory models the different

approaches to providing a basis for ethics that is immune to skeptical objections and relativism will be introduced.

a) Deductivism, inductivism und coherentism

In general, three justificatory models can be distinguished: deductivism, inductivism und coherentism. In *deductivism* the justification is conceived as getting from general ethical principles via empirical statements to ought or value statements or ways of action. In so doing, we will limit ourselves to the deontological version (the teleological variant can be formulated analogously by replacing deontological ought statements with value statements). In addition, we will take the ex-post perspective as a basis i.e. choose the point in time for the description when the action has already been carried out and we can refer to concrete events (cp. Chapter VIII, 2b). As a general schema, one can present the justificatory model of deductivism thus:

- | | |
|-------|--|
| (P 1) | Type X Actions are ethically prohibited. |
| (P 2) | This action h is type X. |
| (S) | It was ethically prohibited to carry out action h. |

The first premise consists of a general principle with which it is stated that all actions of a certain type are ethically prohibited. The second premise is an empirical statement through which a concrete event is subsumed under a general description. The conclusion formulates a deontological statement from which an ought statement can be deduced (action h should not have been carried out).

It is characteristic for the justificatory model of deductivism that the ethical validity of the conclusion is deduced from the ethical validity of the general principle. On the other hand, the validity of this general principle does not itself depend on the validity of the conclusion. In a monistic ethics there will only be one general principle (or general validating statement), whereas there will be several in a pluralistic ethics (cp. Chapter VIII, 4a). In a deductivistic justificatory model, the validity of the individual principles is not deduced from the validity of the other principles even in a pluralistic theory (in case of conflict, it can at the most be limited by the validity of rival principles in their effect on the individual case of conclusion)

In the deductivistic model justification is thought of as a one-way street going from the general to the specific or the individual case.

Inductivism shares with deductivism the assumption of the deductivistic model that justification is a relation going in only one direction. However, inductivism is characterized by the assumption that this justificatory one-way street graduates from the individual case to the general. In an ethics resting on inductivism, the basal factors of ethical validity are concrete actions or situations to which we can assign ethical validity in judgments. General principles should then be understood as generalizations achieved via ethical experience. However, they have no validity for individual cases. So in inductivism it is ruled out that the ethical evaluation of an individual case can appeal to a general principle. In point of fact, such general statements or principles must be treated with caution in ethics. Inductivists are more concerned with guidance and rules of thumb that in any case have to be corrected (or confirmed) by means of individual case evaluation (cp. [IX-16]).

Both deductivism and inductivism understand justification as a relation that only goes in one direction. So both justificatory models are set to the assumption that there are one or more top (or bottom) fixed-points for justifications. On the basis of these justificatory models, a central task of ethics consists of locating a special class of ethical beliefs that are first assigned ethical validity independently of our other ethical assumptions and second, whose ethical validity can serve as justificatory resource for all ethical beliefs that do not belong to this special class. We can call this concept “fundamentism” so as to avoid the connotations of the alternative label “fundamentalism” that are unwelcome in our context (this terminological suggestion refers to [IX-17], p. 84 Note 9). The difference between deductivism and inductivism and the various concrete ethics of this type lies in the kind of ethical beliefs that are respectively awarded this special substantiated status.

Coherentism rejects the concept of fundamentism and with it likewise the two models of deductivism and inductivism based thereon. In a coherentist approach, justification is not thought of as a one-way street, but can go in all directions. Individual actions and situations are evaluated by reference to general principles in which we e.g. consider a concrete action to be false because it involves the infliction of bodily injury. At the same time, the general principles can also be contextually modified through the individual case assessment that forms an essential part of our ethical practice. Thus one sees e.g. that the general rule that deliberately killing a human being is always ethically prohibited is currently on trial on our society. Cases of assisted suicide requested by patients on the basis of an autonomous

decision, are in the meantime held by many to be ethically permissible (and in some countries, such as Holland, for example, have been exempt from punishment for some years). If the adherence to general norms under the changed conditions of our agency practice (e.g. on the basis of intensive medicine and the sustainment possible with its help) often or regularly leads in specific contexts to results that those involved assess as ethically inappropriate, it is then possible in the frame of coherentism to correct the general rule through the ethical intuitions oriented to the individual case. Unlike inductivism, in which the rule is always only thought of as the result of the individual case assessment, and unlike deductivism, in which the individual case is not assigned any independent ethical significance, in a coherentist model such tensions (or changes) can be seen as conflicts between the different levels. The justification thus goes both from the general to the specific and the individual case and vice versa. Moreover, the general principles, the special rules and the individual case assessments justify one another. This means that the various regulations and evaluations must endorse and support one another by collectively facilitating a practice that is experienced as meaningful in its main features and is for the most part supported. In so doing, there is no requirement that every single conviction of one of the levels is directly related to all other beliefs that are part of our ethical theory. Coherentism only requires that there are no parts in ethical theory or in our system of ethical beliefs that are assigned ethical validity independently of their integration into the whole system of ethical beliefs. According to coherentism, ethical validity comes about when a principle, a rule or even a single case assessment stands the test in the context of the entire system of our ethical beliefs and experiences. This probation should be understood primarily as a kind of practice test resting mainly on our everyday experiences with the relevant ethical assumptions when we align our actions and ethical judgments to them (cp. [IX-7]). On the one hand, this experience is always gained in the light of ethical beliefs and thus fits into this system. On the other hand, individual experiences in which a discrepancy between ethical rules and intuitive single-case assessments comes to light, or proposals for ethical revision, when they are well-founded, can lead to a change in the whole system. Such proposals for revision are well-founded in the frame of coherentism when the criticism of existing ethical norms survives the first step on the principle of default-and-challenge and when the suggestions for improvements provide good reason to assume that the coherence of our ethical practice grows as a whole through the required changes.

So for coherentism the validity strength of individual ethical judgments depends on the performance of the whole network of our ethical beliefs. Their justification arises via the

contribution the individual ethical beliefs make to the performance of the whole ethical justificatory system. This performance consists of the possibility of achieving a stable ethical practice that is experienced as meaningful and justified by the parties concerned. In the frame of coherentism, there can thus be no external benchmark for either the evaluation of the performance or the contextual regulations of ethical practice (e.g. ethical rules, value judgments or experiences).

b) Infallible bases for ethics

Alongside the distinction between the three models of ethical justification undertaken above, the difference between two claims made on ethical theories are important for the understanding of ethical theories. Like the three justificatory models, these claims do not stem from the field of ethics, but manifest themselves in all philosophical contexts. On the one hand, one can start from the premise that a fallible base in principle only suffices to justify beliefs, theories and existing practices. Such a base is fallible when it is allowed to be proven false in the wake of new knowledge or changed framework conditions. On the other hand, there is contradictory assumption that only an infallible base is adequate for justification from the philosophical viewpoint. Infallible means that one can show that the base in question cannot prove to be false. Not only philosophers can be unsettled by the concept that our entire philosophical practice rests on bases that could turn out to be false. There are both fallibilist and infallibilist conceptions of the three different justificatory strategies just mentioned. Deductivist and inductivist forms of *fallibilism* presuppose that the fundamental assumptions to which every ethical justification must take recourse, can for their part prove to be false. The pragmatic strategy of default-and-challenge introduced in this chapter provides a fallible basis and can thus be seen as a case of fallibilistic coherentism. This strategy is called “pragmatic” on the one hand because it is ultimately oriented toward the retention of practical claims. On the other hand, it is labelled with the philosophical art term „pragmatist“ so as to avoid evoking the negative connotations of „pragmatic“ in the sense of mere usefulness or thinking aligned to practicability. This pragmatic strategy is in my view the most promising option of fallibilism in ethics; it is based on the idea that our knowledge claims in general (and therewith also our ethical beliefs) do not have to count as unjustified because they could hypothetically prove false. On the contrary, we are entitled to hold on to them as justified assumptions for as long as doubts about them cannot be substantiated plausibly. So this strategy is not fallibilist because the bases of our ethical practice are false, but because it

cannot or (need not) be shown that they cannot be false. So what is already recognized in everyday life also applies to knowledge claims and justifications from the philosophical perspective: Knowledge claims and justification do not collapse because they are supported by something that can in principle prove false.

This fallibilist reaction to the possibility of our knowledge claims being falsified has not, however, convinced many philosophers or non-philosophers. Some who allow themselves to be unsettled by the elemental possibility of ethical error have drawn skeptical or non-cognitivist conclusions. Others have come to the conclusion that one should naturalize ethics so as to steer it into an epistemologically safer haven. But in philosophy there is also a tradition of thought that is characterized by exactly the opposite reaction. Starting from the impossibility of ethical naturalism, these philosophers, also deeply unsettled by the possibility of ethical error, have searched for infallible bases or justificatory procedures through which every possibility of error can be fundamentally excluded. In other words, they have searched for an infallible basis for ethics.

It is evident that *infallibilism* best matches fundamentalism most easily. Before we look at the main forms of this fundamentalist infallibilism, we can take a look at the possibility of coherentist fallibilism. If it could be shown for a specific network of beliefs that there is no alternative and that it is resistant to change, it would be an infallible justification system. Unlike in deductivism or inductivism, infallibility is not ascribed directly to the basal elements of our system of beliefs, but has to be viewed as a feature of the whole network. Because of the claim of completeness, insularity and lack of an alternative for such a distinguished system of beliefs, a coherentist infallibilism must most certainly assume the form of an ultimate justification. But, as far as I know, presently nobody actually subscribes to such an ethical theory; the burdens of proof taken on with it would seem to be too immense from the perspective of most philosophers' self-understanding.

So fundamentalism inarguably represents the most important form of infallibilism in ethics. With respect to the epistemological and justification-theoretical foundations, it can be differentiated even further. The first variant of fundamentalist infallibilism tries to provide a rational, indisputable justification for the bases of ethics (cp. Chapter V, 3). Unlike the strategy of default-and-challenge, ultimate justifications take offensive action against skeptical doubt, which they want to rule out from the start and for good by way of a justificatory procedure. So this form of infallibilism is oriented to the paradigm of justification.

In contrast, the second variant of fundamentalist infallibilism claims that we can reach certain ethical judgments with evidence. This special quality is owed to a special human cognitive faculty that is open to postulated ethical evidence. At this point one must again distinguish between deductivist and inductivist variants. Supporters of *inductivist* infallibilism assume that our basal ethical judgments refer to concrete actions or situations. The evidence for these basal ethical judgments stems from an intuitive perception of the ethical quality of such concrete entities. In this conception, the epistemic source of ethics is thought of as being analogue to the sensory view or perception (cp. [IX-18], Chapter 3 and [IX-19]). Supporters of *deductivist* infallibilism assume that our basal ethical judgments are justified by the acquisition of ethical principles of whose ethical validity we are intuitively certain. In this conception, the epistemic source of ethical knowledge is thought of as being analogue to the intuitive show of principles, as frequently postulated in philosophy e.g. referring to mathematical or logical principles. Traits of such a conception can be found e.g. in Ross (see [IX-20], Chapter VIII).

Show of principles conceived as it is often postulated in philosophy with reference to mathematical or logical principles. Traits of such a conception can be found e.g. in Ross (see [IX-20], Chapter VIII).

Fallible base

Infallible base

Coherentism

Fundamentalism

Ultimate Justification
complete
resistant to change
no alternative
e.g. Hegel

Ultimate justification

Evidence

inductive

deductive

Reason

e.g. Kant, Apel

sensory perception

e.g. McNaughton

intuitive show
of principles
e.g. Ross

These two forms of *evidence-based* fundamentalist infallibilism differ in the way the structure of their evidence-vouching intuition is defined philosophically (this difference ultimately stems from the respectively prefixed entities to which our ethical intuitions are oriented). Their commonality toward *ultimately justified* infallibilism is that they portray the basal epistemic relation between the knowing subject and the ethically distinguished entities as evidence. Thus they are obligated to the perceptual model whereas the concept of ultimate justification aims at discursive rationality. The tension between ethical perception and practical reason, which already became noticeable in the context of our discussion of ethical objectivism and ethical realism, is thus also reflected in the context of ethical justification.

c) Conclusion: Who's afraid of relativism?

As we have seen, the reference to factual disagreements and mutually incompatible ethical claims does not suffice per se to justify ethical relativism. So is Williams right when he defines relativism as the most absurd conception to be found in the field of moral philosophy?

Considering that the spectre of relativism is probably the most central motive for the development of an infallibilist ethics, for the programmes of ultimate justification, or the postulation of a priori values in the sense of strong realism, then this absurd conception at least has enough strength to evoke vehement counter-reactions in ethical theory construction. Because relativism limits the universal validity claim and therewith the unconditionality of ethical validity, it is construed – especially before the background of the experience of ethical divergences in modernity – as a threat to ethics. This applies above all to philosophers who assign generality or even necessity to ethical claims and wish to eliminate every form of contingency from ethics.

In this and the previous chapters we saw that such a strong conception of ethics with its maximal claims on ethical justification in turn leads to implausible views in ethics. The anchorage of ethics in purely practical subjectivity or in values that are accessible quite independently of the subject and a priori, owes its attractiveness to the need to put ethical validity on a base that is neither contingent nor changeable. The philosophical programmes that must be utilized for such a conception are, however, problematic due to their preconditions, and the ethics resulting from them are in many ways rather incompatible with our ethical practice. Intuitively, the assumption that ethics is characterized in essential parts

by how we live our lives as human beings in this world seems much clearer (the dependence thesis of relativism). Here, alongside individual idiosyncrasies, social, cultural and historical framework conditions play just as formative a role as, for example, our biological constitution. Much in this area is – at least with regard to humans – factually universal (this is why neither the divergence nor dependency of ethical beliefs implies relativism). However, the foundation remains contingent and is in principle even changeable through our agency (one just has to think of the possibilities of reconstructing our biological nature that result e.g. from reproduction technologies or the long-term options of human genetics). If one ties ethics to the empirical basis of human life, one puts it on a foundation that is relative to fragile anthropological standards. Furthermore, if one takes the ontology of weak ethical realism as a base, values of varying universality and scope of validity can be postulated (depending on the universality of the subjective elements that enter into the constitution of the evaluative relation). At all events, ethics retains a contingent foundation and in this sense the relativism also persists therein. Metaphysical relativism contains the accurate insight that our ethics does not develop in a vacuum and is not completely free of empirical requirements or framework conditions. If understood correctly, this relativity in ethics has no destructive effect on our ethical self-understanding and our ethical practice. This applies at least where we do not, due to misinterpretation of this relativity or due to epistemic or other theoretical concepts, inflict exaggerated justificatory standards on ethical statements and thereby ultimately aid and abet skepticism.

4. Summary, suggestions for reading, questions and exercises

Summary

Starting from the question of the uses and disadvantages of the project of ethical justification, in this chapter the central theses of ethical relativism were introduced, whereby we distinguished between metaethical and normative relativism. Metaethical relativism claims that the validity claims of ethical statements are always relative to a specific reference group. From this finding normative relativism comes to the conclusion that no one has the right to interfere in an ethical practice that is based on ethical foundations that differ from one's own respectively. Whereas normative relativism is incompatible with metaethical relativism because it formulates a universal norm itself, the discussion has shown that the factual plurality of ethical beliefs and the divergence between various ethical systems of belief brought into play as proof by relativism, is not adequate to justify the thesis of metaethical relativism. The possibility of skeptical objections and relativistic conceptions in ethics represents one of the main motives that have led to the formulation of strong justificatory claims for ethical beliefs. On the basis of the most important models of justification (deductivism, inductivism and coherentism) the attempts to put our ethical practice on an infallible base were introduced. In view of the dangers that emerge for ethics through the adherence to overly strong justificatory claims, the option of a pragmatist and coherentist conception was developed, which waives infallible bases and considers certain relativistic features to be

acceptable. Vital for the question of the justification of ethics is thus whether an infallible (on evidence or ultimate justification) base is being sought of which one can show philosophically that it is immune to skeptical objections. In this chapter, the alternative position was developed, that our practice can be seen as justified until objections against specific principles or value assumptions of our ethical self-understanding can be made plausible. A general rejection of the possibility of skeptical doubt is just as unnecessary for ethics as a base that is not relative to the anthropological conditions of human existence.

Suggestions for reading

Important contributions to the forms of justification in philosophy can be found in [IX-21], for further literature cp. the recommendations in [IX-22]. On the problem of relativism in philosophy in general cp. the contributions in [IX-23]; especially on ethics s, the essays in [IX-24] and [IX-25] and the recommendations in [IX-26].

Questions and exercises

- Describe the advantages provided by the justification of ethical beliefs.
- Why does the claim for the justification of ethical beliefs contain a critical component?
- What are the dangers of the project of justification of an ethics?
- Explain the justificatory strategy of default-and-challenge.
- Show the difference between causes and reasons.
- What is the difference between the internal and the external perspective on ethical justifications?
- Why is the distinction between internal and external perspectives not metaethically neutral?
- Explain the basic assumptions of ethical relativism.
- Why are the theses of normative and metaethical relativism mutually incompatible?
- Explain why the factual divergence between ethical beliefs does not allow the implication of metaethical relativism.
- Which assumption common to deductivism and inductivism is not accepted by coherentism?
- What is the difference between deductivism and inductivism?
- Explain the difference between fallibilistic and infallibilistic approaches to justification in ethics.
- Explain the difference between ultimate justificatory and evidence-based fundamentalist infallibilism..
- Which types of theory can be distinguished within evidence-based fundamentalistic infallibilism? And what are the distinguishing features?
- Define the relation between the relativity, contingency and universality of ethical beliefs in the frame of a fallibilistic and pragmatist coherentism.
- According to a pragmatist conception of ethics, what comprises the probation of ethical beliefs (rules or norms)?

XI. Scope and limits of philosophical ethics

Our inquiry will be adequate if its degree of clarity is in accord with the subject matter.

The logically trained listener will only achieve as much precision in the individual area as the nature of the object permits.

(Aristotle)

In this chapter we will define the limits and scope of philosophical ethics. In this way, false expectations of philosophical ethics can be dispelled and the assumption that there could be experts in regard to ethical judgments rejected. Reflection on the scope of philosophical ethics shows that it justifies expertise in terms of the possibility of ethical argumentation and critique. Moreover, philosophical ethics provides philosophical-historical knowledge that makes it possible to record one's own standpoint in a reflective and detached way.

The role of (philosophical) ethics in society is currently characterized by two oppositional tendencies. On the one hand, at least since the mid nineteenth century and up to the present day there has been widespread, unbroken skepticism concerning ethical justifications. Nourished by the ideology-critical arguments of e.g. Karl Marx or Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and supported by evolution-critical or psychoanalytical explanatory models, for many, ethical discourses are in effect disguises for the real interests or distortions of the actual motives and driving forces of our actions. On the other hand, in recent years there has been a steadily growing need for ethical counseling in our society. The new knowledge and options for action in the life sciences (e.g. human genetics, reproductive medicine and organ transplantations), the technical development of large-scale and risk technologies (e.g. atomic energy and genetic engineering), and the increasing secularization of our society are fuelling the need for ethical orientation. And many expect philosophical ethics to satisfy this social and individual need.

In our discussion of the various justificatory claims that have been brought to philosophical ethics, we have seen how important it is to develop an appropriate conception of what one can expect and should demand of philosophical ethics (cp. Chapter IX). So it is constructive to close our introduction to ethics by reflecting on the scope and limits of philosophical ethics. During our discussion it has been shown that, in many areas, the main positions in ethics cannot be presented without a critical debate on its most important argumentative figures, premises and conclusions. In the final analysis, one can only introduce a philosophical theme

by arguing philosophically oneself, by testing proffered arguments and querying the plausibility of proposed solutions. We have seen that even the classification of ethical theories has to make use of metaethical premises and thus cannot be contextually neutral (cp. Chapter VIII). Even in this final chapter it will not be possible to reflect on the scope and limits of philosophical ethics without basically presupposing a specific conception of philosophical ethics. When one asks about the limits and scope of philosophical ethics, one must assume a theoretical interpretation of our ethical practice, and the answers one finds thereby depend crucially on the underlying ethical theory. This applies to both metaethical assumptions (such as e.g. the concept of ethical justification) and the acceptance and weighting of certain ethical values or norms.

1. Are experts in ethics?

a) Division of labour and expert knowledge

If our computer, washing machine or car breaks down, we had best turn to someone who has the necessary know-how. There are experts for all these things: car repair experts, washing machine experts and computer experts. In our collaborative society it is an everyday phenomenon that we handle technical products that we can operate superficially to a certain extent, but whose complicated inner workings we don't understand at all. If problems crop up that overtax our user competence, we turn to experts for help. Division of labour is a deeply anchored structural feature of complex societies, which can no longer be regressed (at least, not without grave social follow-up costs). Division of labour is not just limited to dealing with technical equipment, but extends to the respectively specialized action contexts in which specific rules, conventions or norms apply. So, e.g. of a lawyer we expect information on legal matters and entrust ourselves to his expert judgment because we ourselves as a rule have only rudimentary knowledge or none at all of this area of our social reality. Another example is the service of a tax advisor, of whom we expect that he will achieve an optimal result for us within the framework of legal guidelines.

Everyone in our society knows that expert knowledge exists and the practice of making use of this knowledge is socially regulated. In the meantime there are even special institutions that inform us which expert should call on in which matter (i.e. experts for the procurement of expert knowledge). So it is no wonder that we have internalized to a high degree the behaviour patterns written into this social model of interaction. They characterize our

expectations and requirements. The factual division of labour implies and the existence of expert knowledge expresses that not everyone possesses the same amount of knowledge available in a society. On the contrary, efficiency in collaborative societies is based on the wide distribution of specializations. The offer of services in which expert knowledge is placed at the disposal of those who have little or none of that expert knowledge is thus part of the functionality of such a differentiated society.

In this chapter, *expert knowledge* shall be understood as *theoretical* knowledge of complicated relationships. The example of the broken down car, the broken computer or defective washing machine mentioned above should therefore be understood in the following sense: Repairing them presumes theoretical knowledge about causal and functional relations, which one can learn and then exhibit in a special area of knowledge that is available to the appropriately trained persons. This theoretical, factual knowledge must be distinguished from practical, empirical knowledge, which is cultivated through the exercise of actions and perception schooled in practice. Thus an experienced craftsman who can handle certain tools skilfully will be able to do the job at hand in less time and with less effort than an untrained amateur. The trained and experienced eye of the car mechanic will probably find the engine defect faster than the searching look of the engineer who only has theoretical knowledge about the construction and mechanics of an engine. These two kinds of knowledge are not mutually exclusive, but can be complementary. However, they are of a different nature. Expertise is acquired reflectively. It can be expressed in statements, connecting descriptions and theoretical explanations and is conveyed discursively. Practical knowledge may be verbalizable to a certain extent and may be available reflectively to someone who has it (think e.g. of the sport coach). But it is gained (and taught) primarily through action and observation and passed on through instructions for action and in practice. It cannot normally be fully translated into a theory in which systematic relations can be established and from which explanatory models can be derived.

In view of the ubiquity of expertise in our society it is no wonder that the behaviour patterns and expectations stemming from the division of labour and utilization of apposite services also manifest themselves in our ethical practice and are ultimately also carried over into philosophical ethics. If I apply the model of expert knowledge, it could look like this on the individual level: I have an ethical problem, am unskilled at finding a sensible solution and seek the advice of an expert. I go to him, describe my case and receive a report relevant to this case, which tells me how I should decide and act.

If we turn to ethics in the social context, this expectation, which rests on the model of expert knowledge, seems to be intensified. There are expert commissions for difficult issues such as the control of transplantation medicine, human genetics and embryonic research. The current Chancellor of the German Federal Republic has even appointed an Ethics Council in which the expert knowledge of various disciplines is brought together. Complex issues sometimes require the interdisciplinary cooperation of experts from diverse fields. This applies as much to the development of an aircraft as to the formulation of a law for reproductive medicine or the development of an appropriate death criterion. So social reality seems to confirm that special institutions have been and are still being established, in which expert ethical knowledge is embodied and can be called upon (cp. [XI-1]).

b) Ethical expert knowledge?

Yet, as obvious and ubiquitous as this expectation and requirement of philosophical ethics is, in this sense there is no such thing as an expert in philosophical ethics (cp. [XI-2] and [XI-3] for a differentiated analysis). Such a view of philosophical ethics – as understandable as it might be in its genesis – contains several risk potentials that can be divided into two types.

On the one hand, due to these expectations, philosophical ethics gets into a problematic situation. Thanks to the expectation that there can be ethical experts, a certain claim is raised on the justificatory possibilities of philosophical ethics. This poses a dilemma for philosophical ethics: Either the philosophers make an effort to satisfy these expectations. For that they have to try to develop philosophical theories in which the respective justificatory claims can be honoured. But as we have seen, philosophical ethics (and ultimately even our ethical practice) is threatened with disaster by the formulation of overly strong justificatory claims. (cp. Chapter IX). Because these claims can almost certainly not be honoured in an intersubjectively acceptable way, philosophical ethics, beset as it is by disappointments and failures, provokes skepticism of the possibility of ever being able to justify ethical statements philosophically at all. Or philosophers reject claims brought to philosophical ethics as inappropriate. However, in this way they also nourish the general skepticism of the possibility of ethical justification and ethical counselling because they do not satisfy the expectations brought to them.

On the other hand, even for a society in which ethics is allowed the status of expert knowledge, two consequences can follow, both of which are ethically questionable for society. First, the indispensability of individual ethical decision is no longer seen on the

individual level. In many areas of modern medicine it can e.g. be observed that genuine value decisions that have to be made in a given situation are no longer defined as ethical decisions or delegated to the experts. If, for example, one has to decide for a terminally ill relative whether her life-span shall be curtailed by forgoing a further operation or through the termination of a medical procedure, so that her suffering will be ended, that is an ethical question. But this is frequently not posed as an ethical question, but ostensibly as the search for what is medically appropriate and then delegated to the experts responsible for that, i.e. the physicians. Even if one can see delegating the decision as an easing of the burden on the relatives, it should nevertheless be recorded that this is a case of value decisions, not just of medical facts. Ultimately the relatives waive the weighing up of the ethical aspects of the situation one against the other and leave the decision to someone else.

On the other hand, on the social level, questions that require ethical discussion are no longer understood as questions of value or norm that all of us – at least as responsible citizens in democratically constituted societies – should discuss and coordinate. Either the ethical decisions are delegated to the ethical experts who shall then find a solution for the problem together with the experts from other fields on which that problem encroaches. Or the problem itself is no longer even recognized as an ethical one, but falls into the domain of other experts. So, to take another medical example, the question of the distribution of donated organs is often seen (and portrayed) as a problem to be dealt with according to purely medical criteria (cp. [XI-4]). But, on closer scrutiny, every chosen method of distribution is based on implicit value decisions that cannot be reduced to medical facts (cp. chapter IV, 2c for the ethical implications of distribution models). The case is similar e.g. if the distribution of social resources in the health care system or the funding of means for the maintenance of social services (e.g. unemployment benefit etc.) are seen as nothing but market-based problems that are technical problems to be solved by economists as the experts responsible. This view of problems leads to decisions on these questions not being recognized as value and norm decisions to be socially legitimized, but misunderstood as factual questions the answers to which are left entirely to the competence of experts (a further example for this trend is the fact that the question of the admissibility and desirability of technical developments is mostly now only understood as risk evaluation, for whose correct assessment expert reports are responsible).

Incidental remark: Before we start discussing the basic misunderstanding on which this

maldevelopment is based, it should be noted that not only philosophical ethics is confronted by the unbecoming claim to expert knowledge in the sense outlined above. Because they are viewed as experts in the field of education and training, a child care worker, a community worker or a teacher is also frequently confronted by parents demanding that educational problems be solved in the same way as a car mechanic repairs a defective exhaust. It should also be emphasized that at least on the basis of most philosophical ethics, ethical experts are unthinkable in our sense. With this limitation we leave open the possibility of an ethics that does not regard the individual and social decisions but specific ethical facts as the ultimate justificatory instance. Ethical experts can also exist should one possess a list of absolute ethical principles from a scientific world view or on the basis of divine revelation. Their expertise does not consist in installing these ethical principles, but in interpreting them and applying them to the concrete case. The reasons for the unsatisfactory understanding of ethics have already been up for discussion in the course of our introduction. We will therefore blind this option out for the further course of our deliberations.

2. The limitations of philosophical ethics

In our culture, autonomy and the right to an individual lifestyle are central moral concepts even if they do have to be weighed against other ethical claims in many contexts (cp. [XI-5]). Our reflection on the limitations of philosophical ethics will start from the assumption that individual autonomy should be paid respect. The claim that a philosophical ethicist can raise for this contextual premise also falls within the limitations that we will place on ethical expertise as a whole (hence our contextual presumption does not have the status of expert knowledge). The question of the limits of philosophical ethics cannot be answered neutrally from a metaethical viewpoint, either, since at least constraining preconditions come into play. So in the following discussion the claim will be maintained that ethical statements are truth and justification enabled and thus represent an ethical cognitivism. So we will assume that these ethical statements cannot be transformed naturalistically and cannot be ultimately justified. Since he is an expert in the analysis of philosophical theories, the philosopher can claim to have special expertise for these metaethical preconditions. Admittedly, this does not protect him from his metaethical position proving to be inappropriate or the justified philosophical critique ultimately not holding out.

a) The first limitation

On the basis of our contextual and metaethical preconditions, the first limitation of philosophical ethics can be defined as follows:

(G 1) There is no expert knowledge in philosophical ethics in terms of concrete ethical judgments

What (G 1) says as regards content can best be illustrated by examples. Let's imagine that relatives, together with physicians and philosophical ethicists, try to find out if, due to imminent organ failure, another life-saving operation should be undertaken on a comatose patient who in all probability will never wake out of the coma, or the patient be allowed to die. In this situation it is a case of what is ethically right (let's ignore the question of legal framework conditions at this point). When the discussion has clarified which measure is ethically the right one under consideration of all ethically relevant aspects, then the competence of the physicians comes into play because they can best judge which measures are suitable for achieving the chosen target. Regarding the means of achieving ethically established targets through action, experts certainly exist, but this is not a matter of philosophical knowledge (we assume at this point that the ethical evaluation of means is already at the decision-making stage as regards the target). To determine what is ethically right in this situation it is necessary to distinguish between three levels: It should be asked whether the empirical facts that play a role in the decision (e.g. clinical picture, chances of recovery etc.) have been recorded correctly. Alongside this aspect of the decision problem, for which the philosophical obviously has no expertise, all ethically relevant aspects of the situation must also be grasped and the arguments presented in the discussion must be questioned as to their plausibility. For this aspect of the decision-making, the philosophical ethicist can be classed as the expert, since he is trained to review ethical argumentation and also has wide knowledge of which values or norms play a role in the various options for action (cp. [XI-6]). In the end and on the basis of these two areas (the provision of empirical information and the determination of the ethical aspects to be considered), a contextual decision must be reached as to what is ethically right in this situation. For this decision, the various aspects must be weighed against each other. And, according to (G 1), for this decision there is no expert knowledge that the philosophical ethicist (or anyone else for reasons of his knowledge) could make use of. However, one is thus not committed to the claim that all individual ethical decisions are equally well-founded and reputable. (G 1) claims only that the possibly existing differences regarding the quality of such contextual judgments cannot be

ascribed to the difference between expert knowledge and the amateur point of view.

As our example shows (and as we will explain in the next section), there are indeed aspects of an ethical discussion for which philosophers can rightly raise the claim of special expertise. Thus, from the recognition of (G 1) it follows, on the one hand, that if philosophers take a stand on a material question, they must make sure they discriminate between the areas for which they have expertise and those for which they have none. This can mean specifically that in the argumentation one intimates for which issues one's own evaluations and considerations come into play (just as we have divulged that the deliberations in this chapter are borne by certain contextual assumptions about the validity of individual autonomy). Moreover, the ethical and metaethical premises of the argumentation for which there is expertise must be disclosed so that the philosophical requirements and burdens of argumentative proof become visible (and can be challenged by philosophical counter-experts if necessary).

On the other hand, it follows from the recognition of (G 1) that demands and expectations brought to philosophical ethics should be rejected when they go beyond this limitation. This rejection can thereby suppress the indispensable role of each individual ethical decision, at least on the basis of our contextual requirement. This becomes particularly noticeable when one considers what would happen if there were philosophical expert knowledge that were not limited in the sense of (G 1). Let's take the example of counselling in the case of a contemplated abortion. The concept of this legally prescribed counselling is based on the idea that one clarifies the various ethical aspects for the pregnant woman and spells out the possible alternative for action or the expected consequences of an abortion. The idea is to get the pregnant woman reconsider her decision and thus increase the likelihood of a well-founded one. In doing so – and this is why the counselling must be decision-free – one assumes that the final contextual decision, under consideration of all relevant aspects, must be up to the woman. This does not mean that the advisory institution would have to remain contextually neutral. It can by all means let the weighting of its standards, values and norms flow into the conversation, but must identify them as such. In all, however, the counselling must remain decision-free and must not be guided by the concept that an expert is calculating the correct solution the woman would then be obliged to comply with.

If there were a possibility of ethical expertise in the sense contested by (G 1), these experts would in principle be capable of overruling and rejecting as faulty the individual ethical decisions of non-experts. Like the mathematics teacher who corrects a wrong calculation

result, they would not need to consider the perspective on which the individual ethical decision is based. Out of the desire for relief and orientation in ethical questions that lies behind the quest for advice, and given such expertise, the possibility of paternalism and heteronomy in ethical questions would then surface. Such a consequence is, however, neither reconcilable with the right and ideal of living a self-determined life that is widely recognized in our culture, nor is it a desirable outcome in our ethical culture if the capacity for and practice of autonomous decision-making is replaced by deputizing expert decisions. That would stifle not only the human potential for a self-determined lifestyle. There would also be a danger that the nature of ethical questions would be misunderstood and reduced to mere factual issues or degraded to purely technical problems.

b) The second limitation

Alongside this first limitation there is a second one in philosophical ethics, the awareness of which is just as important. For it also rejects a false expectation to which the authors of philosophical ethics also occasionally succumb. This limitation can be formulated as follows:

(G 2) Philosophical ethics is neither a necessary nor an adequate condition for making humans ethically better.

At first glance, this statement might seem like a matter of course. However, a frequently expressed critique of the meaningfulness of philosophical ethics reads: People are not made better by ethics and so no ethical grievances are remedied. As accurate as this observation is, it does not speak against philosophical ethics. On the contrary, this criticism only expresses the false expectations rejected by (G 2).

Philosophical ethics is not a *necessary* means of ethically reforming or improving the individual person (A is necessary for B if B without A cannot be the case). Many people can discern ethically problematic situations appropriately without great theoretical efforts and make ethically right decisions. In our everyday contexts we are usually good at recognizing what is unjust or which actions violate ethically justified claims. For special contexts such as the evaluation of new technologies (e.g. research on human embryos) or dilemmatic situations (treatment of pain with a life curtailing outcome) it can, however, transpire that in-depth information and longer reflection are needed before one is able to make a responsible and

appropriate judgment. But it does not follow from the inadequate foundation of a judgment in philosophical ethics that such an ethical judgment achieved more or less intuitively must be inappropriate. Sensibility for the ethically relevant aspects, experience of life and power of judgment can indeed replace a more theory-driven judgment.

For this reason, philosophical ethics is also not an *adequate* means for the ethical improvement of our life (if B is always the case when A is the case, A is adequate for B). The acquisition of theoretical knowledge alone cannot accomplish two things that are indispensable for ethical expertise: the acquisition of ethical experiences and the training of the power of judgment. The reason for this is that ethical knowledge is ultimately not theoretical, but practical. But one can only acquire this by being introduced – though education and practice – to an existing ethical practice, by acting therein and thereby gathering experience. For this reason, Aristotle, e.g. ([XI-7], sixth book) replaced the expert by the insightful, experienced or clever person who possesses practical knowledge and whose power of judgment has been proven in practice (cp. [XI-8], Chapter 6). Let's go back to the example of the comatose patient. Under the precondition of (G 1), it does not follow from the expertise of the persons participating in the counselling and decision-making that their concrete judgment of what is ethically right is better justified than that e.g. of the relatives. However, it can happen that not all judgments of the persons taking part in the counselling can be viewed as equally well-founded. Emotional concern might be a factor that clouds the judgment.

Lack of practice in ethical decision-making can also lead to the judgment not standing up to critical scrutiny. In addition, there are individual differences regarding the ability to put oneself in the position of other persons (borrowing the perspective) to understand the emotional state of other persons (empathy) and abstract from one's own perspective (impartiality), or just to understand the relevant information correctly. These individual capabilities are gained largely through socialization or practice, so they can be trained – at least to a large extent – through education. Since they are highly significant for ethical judgments, existing individual differences in respect of these capabilities can lead to a differing quality of judgments. In everyday life we are all rather well informed about which persons in our surroundings are good ethical advisers and whose assessments we should treat with caution or skepticism. Since these capabilities represent practical skills, they cannot be generated solely through the theoretical knowledge provided by philosophical ethics. Thus, philosophical ethics cannot, as expressed in (G 2), be adequate for improving ethical practice.

However, recognition of (G2) does not entail the claim that preoccupation with

philosophical ethics cannot be useful to improve our ethical practice (both on the individual and on the societal level). Education by way of preoccupation with ethical theories can help to broaden one's horizon, to become more considerate in discussions, argue more clearly and be more successful in taking a stand in political life. Engaging with philosophical ethics is an appropriate means for living an ethically good life in a just community, for it trains some of the skills necessary for considerate argumentation. Furthermore it is useful, because every philosophical ethical theory formulates values and norms. Acquaintance with and reflection on such standpoints that do not coincide with one's own perspective broaden one's horizon. It enables to identify differences that have to be taken into account in judgment and alternatives that at least have to be considered before making one's own judgment.

3. The scope of philosophical ethics

It is ethically significant that philosophical ethics provides information on what it can or cannot achieve and what one can or cannot rightly expect thereof. It exhibits thereby a reflective moment assigned to philosophy as a whole. We have seen that on the basis of philosophical ethics there is no philosophical expert knowledge for concrete, contextual answers. Here, the individual ethical decision remains uncircumventable, albeit with reasoned criticisable and justifiable authority. It does not, however, follow from the recognition of the two limits that we drew on the basis of our ethical and metaethical preconditions that one cannot acquire any special knowledge or expertise at all through the pursuit of philosophical ethics. As the examples we described show, philosophical ethics can certainly contribute expertise based on its expert knowledge in the discussion of a philosophical problem. This expertise can be assigned to two areas.

a) The structure of ethical argumentation and reflection

The first large area in which the pursuit of philosophical ethics can yield a kind of expertise consists in the ability to analyse ethical concepts and argumentations. In the previous chapters we got to know a variety of deliberations of this kind. We analysed the complexity of basic ethical concepts, the diverse possibilities of their argumentative use and the interaction of ethical and metaethical assumptions. The expert role a philosophical ethicist

can assume in an ethical discussion or counselling thus extends to the following functions:

- clarification of the concepts used (e.g. the differentiation of the various functionalities of „good“)
- clarification of the ways of using concepts (e.g. the differentiation of the moral and non-moral sense of „right“)
- delineation of various levels of argumentations (e.g. ethical versus metaethical assumptions)
- demarcation of internal and external justificatory issues (e.g. the differentiation between the question „Which action is right“ and the question „How shall I act ethically?“)
- exposure of argumentative errors (e.g. the exposure of naturalistic fallacies or the removal of conceptual ambiguities)

With the expertise on these points one can clarify one's own thoughts and also detect and remedy possible errors in one's own argumentation. Objections can thereby be avoided and in a discussion there is a greater chance of convincing others of one's own position. Furthermore, in the discussion of ethical issues one can apply this expertise to elicit clarifications, clarify the assumptions and burdens of proof accompanying a claim and detect argumentative errors in the justification. Such elucidation creates transparency and is not only an essential precondition for one's own reflection, but also eases the discussion of ethical issues because the philosophical ethicist can act as a kind of interpreter or mediator between the different parties (cp.[XI-9]). Finally, the expertise of philosophical ethics can be an aid to decision-making during the consideration of the various ethical alternatives because the preconditions and consequences of each position become evident.

b) The provision of philosophical-historical knowledge

Alongside these analytical skills, which should generally be viewed as preconditions for rational thought and argumentation and are therefore not limited to ethics, the pursuit of philosophical ethics can also result in specific expertise. Ethical perception, deliberation and justification are central aspects of our everyday life together. Owing to the fundamental significance of ethical orientation both for an individual lifestyle and social interaction, philosophers have pursued ethics from the very start. So it is possible to grapple with the

various projects in philosophical ethics that have been proposed in history and the different cultures. Alongside the universal philosophical aspects of theory construction, a specific ethical experience is always exposed by the respective social and historical contexts of philosophical ethics. Hence, e.g., in the various projects that we have seen, emotions take on an entirely different meaning for ethics. Or basically differing conceptions about the functions of ethics are developed and different contextual targets or criteria proposed, through which one can ethically orient oneself.

But philosophical ethics does not emerge in a vacuum, but addresses philosophical and ethical problems at hand in the respective society in equal measure; and, as Hegel once formulated for philosophy as a whole, it is always its own time captured in thought. For this reason, broad historical knowledge of the tradition of philosophical ethics permits three things:

- Alternative cultural, ethical experiences can be made fruitful for one's own orientation.
- The particularities of the individual or culturally dominant understanding of ethics become evident through deviation from alternative philosophical ethics (from other epochs or other culture groups).
- Unnoticed one-sidednesses of one's own philosophical ethics can be made visible (e.g. narrow conceptions of basic ethical concepts, unjustified restrictions on the validity areas of ethics, one-sided domination of certain aspects such as that of justification over that of perception).

The experience that distinguishes the ethical thought of other culture groups or other historical epochs of our culture group from our own ethical self-understanding considerably widens the palette of ethical suggestions and the reservoir of ethical experiences. As a result, not only can one avoid having to re-invent the wheel all the time, but the possibility of putting options up for discussion that have not hitherto come into view or have been forgotten also presents itself. Moreover, experience sharpens the awareness of the special features of one's own or the culturally dominant self-understanding of ethics. These facilitate reflective handling of one's own ethical thinking. Of course, knowledge of the particularities of one's own self-understanding does not automatically lead to one getting rid of them. But it does

force us to justify them and be conscious of the fact that ethically relevant contextual decisions can accompany these individual and cultural particularities (thus, e.g., it makes a difference in our handling of nature if it is understood as the cosmos, creation or, in the scientific sense as disenchanting, purely functional and causal contiguity). If it transpires that some of these particularities cannot be justified and should be criticized as impermissible contractions (in theory), or as the loss of ethical experiences (in practice), then the preoccupation with the historical positions of philosophical ethics can even have immediate contextual effects (cp. [XI-10]). The expert status of the philosophical ethicist cannot, however, extend to the positive justification of new ethical content, but remains limited to bringing these particularities, shortcomings and alternatives into the ethical discourse and putting them forward for discussion.

4. Conclusion

The two principle limits of philosophical ethics stem from the fact that ethical knowledge is first and foremost practical knowledge that necessitates training in the ethical practice of perception, agency and justification. This cannot be achieved theoretically, but only through – possibly theory-guided – education and through the ethical practice itself. On this basis, in our culture the ideal of a self-determined lifestyle has developed as the central and indispensable core of both our ethical and our political self-understanding as mature citizens of a democratic community. This is not compatible with the concept of an ethical expertise that permits individual ethical decision-making to become superfluous.

The practical nature of ethical knowledge finds expression in that in ethics there can be counselling and recommendations, but no binding directives. On the one hand, the intelligent and experienced advisor does not have conclusively justifiable and in theory resolvable knowledge, but only power of judgment and experience. On the other, an ethical word of advice cannot replace the respective individual decision of the person seeking advice. The ethical advisor can name good reasons and point out important aspects and consequences of possible decisions or actions, but he can no more relieve the person seeking advice of the ultimate decision than of the responsibility for his actions. In this sense - and that is the price of ethical self-understanding in which the ideal of maturity and self-determination are basal - every individual is duty bound to bear the responsibility for his own ethical decisions. The consequence to be drawn from this is, however, neither that ethical decisions would not be

reasonably criticisable and justifiable, nor does a general relativism follow from these findings, as humans share a common lifestyle. This commonality gives each respective concept of the successful life a common frame, within which there can be disagreement about sensible ethical options and with reasoning. Philosophical ethics cannot and should not relieve anyone of the responsibility for his own lifestyle. But it can clarify ethical reflection and provide an reference framework for individuals, within which they can shape their own autonomous lifestyle.

5. Summary, suggestions for reading, questions and exercises

Summary

In this chapter we defined the limits and scope of philosophical ethics. Since ethical knowledge is based on practical skills and power of judgment, there can firstly, be no philosophical expertise that replaces the individual ethical decision. Secondly, philosophical ethics alone cannot be either a necessary or an adequate instrument the ethical improvement of humans, since the central abilities for ethical judgment - borrowing perspective, empathy and impartiality - can only be acquired in practice. Nevertheless, philosophical ethics can bring about an improvement in ethical practice by training the abilities of rational argumentation and critical scrutiny on the one hand and philosophical-historical knowledge on the other. This knowledge makes it possible to perceive one's own standpoint impersonally and reflectively and to understand alternative views. In this way, philosophical ethics contributes to enlightenment and to the rationalization of ethical disputes and facilitates discriminating and better justified ethical practice.

Suggestions for reading

A helpful analysis of the different forms of knowledge is developed in the frame of an analysis of platonic philosophy, in the third chapter of [XI-11]; on the scope and limits of philosophical ethic cp. [XI-12]; an evolved theory of ethical wisdom and its theoretical bases can be found in [XI-13].

Questions and exercises

- Explain the difference between expert knowledge and practical knowledge.
- Why can there be no philosophical experts for ethical judgments?
- For which aspects of ethical debate is there philosophical expertise?
- Why is philosophical ethics neither an necessary nor an adequate means of improving one's (own) ethical practice?
- Explain how the preoccupation with metaethical analyses can contribute to an improvement of one's own ethical practice.
- Explain how the study of philosophical ethics (from various cultures and epochs) can contribute to an improvement in one's own ethical practice.
- Explain the connection between the concept of ethical expertise and the value of individual autonomy regarding ethical questions.
- What positive effects can philosophical ethics have on our ethical practice (viewed individually and socially).

