Ethical Pluralism

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Ethical pluralism is not the view that there is a plurality of comprehensive moral views in a modern society, something John Rawls calls the fact of pluralism. Ethical pluralism is a *normative theory* which deals with the structure of moral theories, that is, theories about what is morally right and wrong. And the central claim of ethical pluralism is the following:

(EP) There is a plurality of moral norms that cannot be reduced to one basic norm.

This doctrine is opposed to all monistic views of morality such as for instance utilitarianism with its principle of utility as the basic norm of morality or such as the Kantian ethics with the categorical imperative as the basic norm of morality. The idea of ethical pluralism goes back to the work of William David Ross. In his book "The Right and the Good" he distinguishes kinds of moral duties[1]: (1) Duties of fidelity and reparation; (2) Duties of gratitude; (3)

[1] Ross (1930), 21.

Duties of justice; (4) Duties of beneficence; (5) duties of self-improvement and (6) Duties of non-maleficience.

These duties are all basic duties which cannot be derived from other duties. That one should keep one's promises, that good should be distributed justly, that one should not harm other on purpose are all duties which, according to Ross, do not have to be justified, because they are self-evident for all those who have "reached sufficient mental maturity and have given sufficient attention to the proposition"[2]. In Ross' view they are in the same way self-evident as mathematical axioms are.

This is in a condensed form the idea of ethical pluralism Ross argues for. Moral norms do not have an archimedian point. There are rather different considerations which are relevant for morality: Morality is not just about maximizing well-being, not just about respecting the autonomy of others, not just about mutual benefit and other things more. Morality is, so to speak, about irreducibly different things.

This lecture is a lecture about ethical pluralism. More precisely, it is about the reasons for being an ethical pluralist. I will argue that a moral theory cannot be developed independently of what we really think about moral matters. And because of the fact that our moral thinking is irreducbly pluralistic, ethical pluralism should be accepted.

1. Ross' Ethical Pluralism

Let us first have a closer look at what Ross had in mind. Ross calls his basic duties *prima facie* duties. He introduces this term in the following way: A prima facie duty is a duty we have to fulfill, as long as it does not collide with another prima facie duty. A promise I gave has to be kept, provided there is no other

[2] Ross (1930), 29.

stronger moral duty telling me to do something else. Ross distinguishes between prima facie duty and *duty proper*.[3] A prima facie duty is a duty proper, provided it is not outweighed by another duty. The duties we have are always duties proper. This is the reason why Ross' talk of prima facie duties is misleading. It is not the case, as one might think, that one has prima facie duties and also duties proper. There are only duties proper. This is not my view, this is Ross' own view:

> "The phrase 'prima facie duty' must be apologized for, since (1) it suggests that what we are speaking of is a certain kind of duty, whereas it is in fact not a duty, but something related in a special way to duty ... What I am speaking of is an objective fact involved in the nature of the situation, or in an element of its nature, though not, as duty proper does, arising from its whole nature."[4]

Prima facie duties are not duties, they are related to duties: they play a role in determining our duties in a given situation. They are properties that contribute to the rightness or falseness of actions. Or put it this way: they are properties that make actions right and wrong, given that they are not outweighed by other morally relevant properties. Thus, we should not speak of prima facie duties, we should rather speak of right- and wrongmaking properties.

So here then is what ethical pluralism claims: There are different irreducible right- and wrongmaking properties: An action can be right, because the action is just or because it promotes the well-being of others or because it prevents others from great harm and so on. For monistic moral theories there is basically one right- and wrongmaking property: for utilitarians the property of being utility-maximizing, for Kantians the property of being a universalizable maxim.

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[3] Ross (1930), 20.

[4] Ross (1930), 20.

Why does Ross think that ethical pluralism is true? According to Ross, monistic moral theories are wrong because they favour a certain type of social relation: the Kantian theory, for instance, thinks that the only morally significant relation others stand to me is that of being a fellow human; the utilitarian sees the others only as "possible beneficaries by my actions". But to this Ross adds:

> "They do stand in this relation to me, and this relation is morally significant. But they may also stand to me in the relation of promisee to promiser, of creditor to debtor, of wife to husband, of child to parent, of friend to friend, of fellow countryman to fellow countryman, and the like; and each of these relations is the foundation of a prima facie duty, which is more or less incumbent on me accor ding to the circumstances of the case."[5]

According to Ross, monistic moral theories cannot account for the diversity of the morally relevant types of social relations. The idea that the different types of social relations are morally relevant, that prima facie duties are based on them, is for Ross not in need of a further justification. It seems to be self-evident. But this idea can be questioned. Why is the type of social relation utilitarians favour, for instance, not the only morally relevant relation?

An answer to this question can be given by another argument Ross puts forward in favour of ethical pluralism: According to this argument, ethical pluralism is true, because it fits well with the way we *really* think about moral questions. We do not think that we should always maximize the good; that we should keep our promises only if they by doing that we promote the overall well-being. On the contrary. We think that there are situations where we should keep our promises, even if breaking them would make many persons better off.[6] The duty to promote overall well-being can be outweighed by our duty to

[5] Ross (1930), 19.

[6] See Ross (1930), 18.

keep our promises. Thus, according to what we really think about moral questions, morality is not just about maximizing well-being. And this fits well with ethical pluralism. As Ross puts it:

> "I have tried to show that a system which admits only of one intuition is false to what we all really think about what makes acts right or wrong."[7]

And this for Ross a good reasons for being an ethical pluralist.

2. Hooker's Objection

But is the fact that the moral theory fits well with what we think really a good reason to be an ethical pluralist. But before I will discuss this problem, let me just deal with an objection that has been put forward quite recently by Brad Hooker.[8] Hooker argues that ethical pluralism is not the only moral theory that fits well with what we really think about moral matters. He thinks that this also applies to a certain version of rule-consequentialism. The basic principle of rule-consequentialism says: 'Act according to rules which maximize the good, given all would comply with these rules'. Hooker thinks that this is not a rule we should follow in our everyday life. We should rather follow secondary rules which are based on the mentioned principle.

> "The theory selects rules by whether their inculcation could reasonably be expected to maximise the good. The theory evaluates acts by reference to the rules thus selected. There is in the theory no overarching commitment to maximise the good."[9] (53))

Hooker also thinks that the good is not only promoted when we promote overall well-being but also when we promote fairness. We have to maximise

[7] Ros (1939), 83.

[8] Hooker (1996).

[9] Hooker (1996), 53.

over two values: well-being and fairness. And because of this the rules favoured by the rule-consequentialist principle will not be - as Hooker thinks - very different from the six types of basic prima facie duties Ross considers to be our moral duties. And due to the fact that the basic consequentialist principle is not part of the duties we have to comply with, conflicts of rules (of what Ross calls prima facie duties) do not have to be resolved by consequentialist reasoning. Thus, Hooker can agree with Ross that some promises have to kept even in cases where breaking them would make promote the overall well-being.

Hooker thinks that rule-consequentialism not only fits well with what we really think about moral matters. It has in addition to that the advantage to provide us with an idea that ties the different moral duties together: There is a basic principle capable of justifying the different moral rules. Moreover, his rule-consequentialism can solve more moral problems than Ross-style pluralism can handle. And rule-consequentialism can do so not by solving all moral conflicts by consequentialist calculation, rather by specifying the rules such that the resolution of moral conflicts becomes an easy task. For these reasons - Hokkers thinks - rule-consequentialism should be preferred over Ross-style pluralism.

Hooker's objection shows that it cannot be taken for granted that ethical pluralism is the only moral theory that fits well with what we really think about moral questions. Of course, it is not clear whether Hooker's rule-consequentialism will come up with moral duties that are more or less the same as the ones Ross proposes. But let us assume that Hooker is right, the consequentialist duties would not be very different from Ross' duties. And let us also suppose that moral conflicts, as Hooker thinks, did not have to resolved by consequentialist reasoning. Would this refute Ross' argument, according to which the harmony between what we really think and ethical pluralism speaks in favour of ethical pluralism?

I do not think so. A monistic moral theory such as Hooker's rule-consequentialism might justify the same moral duties than Ross' ethical pluralism does. This would not imply that a monistic theory would fit well with what we really think about moral questions. What Ross has in mind by saying that ethical pluralism fits well with what we really think is not the catalogue of moral duties he proposes. He rather means the properties we refer to in justifying why we think that actions are right or wrong. We call actions right, because they are just or because they promote the well-being of others and we call actions wrong, because they are cruel or because they are harmful. And Ross' point is: There is no property such as the property of utility-maximizing that dominates our moral thinking. There are irreducibly different properties that make actions right and wrong. Ethical pluralism fits well with what we really think about what makes acts right and wrong. Here ethical pluralism differs from any form of ethical monism. It is in this respect that ethical pluralism fares better than its monistic rivals.

3. The Justification of Ethical Pluralism

One can argue that the harmony between ethical pluralism and what we really think about what makes actions right and wrong is no reason to be an ethical pluralist. It would only be a reason if we could rightly assume that what we really think about makes actions right and wrong is true, that is, that we are not wrong in our everyday moral thinking. And - one could argue - this cannot be assumed. It is the task of a moral theory to develop procedures that allow us to test our everyday moral beliefs, which could lead to the conclusion that many, if not most of our moral beliefs have to be revised or abandoned. Ross himself was fully aware of this problem:

> "In what has preceded, a good deal of use has been made of 'what we really think' about moral questions; a certain theory has been rejected because it does

> not agree with what we really think. It might be said that this is in principle wrong: that we should not be content to expound what our present moral consciousness tells us but should aim at criticism of our existing moral consciousness in the light of theory."[10]

Ross thinks that a moral theory cannot be developed independently of what we really think, because we cannot give up our basic moral beliefs. Imagine that we were told that promise-keeping was wrong or torturing another person for fun was right. According to Ross, we could not seriously hold such views. We could try, but we could not succeed in doing it. Ross says that he himself could never believe that promise-keeping is right only if it promotes overall well-being, "in spite of a very genuine attempt to do so. And I venture to think that most people will find the same"[11]. In the same way it would be impossible to believe that harming others for fun would be right. And as a consequence a moral theory that would come up which such recommendations could not accepted as the right moral theory.

This should not be taken as a remark about how difficult it is for us to change our moral thinking. Such a difficulty would hardly be of philosophical interest. It is something else that Ross has in mind here. His point is the following. We cannot not seriously think that we are fundamentally wrong in moral matters. There cannot be any doubt that it is right to keep the promises one made and wrong to harm others just for fun. And a theory that told us to see things in a different way could not be considered as a proper moral theory. One would think it is a theory about something else. Thus there is no room for a fundamental scepticism with regard to our moral views.

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[10] Ross (1930), 39.

[11] Ross (1930), 40.

With respect to this ethics differs - as Ross thinks - from natural science. For natural scientist it would be wrong to base their views on what we really think about these matters:

> "For such opinions are interpretations, and often misinterpretations, of sense-experience; and the man of science must appeal from these to sense-experience itself, which furnishes his real data. In ethics no such appeal is possible. We have no more direct access to the facts about rightness and goodness and what about things are right and good, than by thinking about them."[12]

Just as the sense-perceptions are the data of a natural science, "the moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are the data of ethics".[13] Thus, ethics is based on the moral views of competent persons.

But why do these views play the role of sense-perception in ethics? One could say that a moral judgement is true if and only if it is held true by competent persons. But this is definitely not Ross' view. The consensus of competent persons is not a truth-maker for Ross. "(I)f the opinion is true, the truth of the opinion that the object is good rests on the fact that the object is good and not vice versa."[14]

But if so, why could the moral views of competent persons not also be wrong? Ross' idea seems to be the following. There are no sense-perceptions in ethics. We might sensibly say. 'I see that this action is wrong', but that does not mean that we see this in the same way as we see that a ball is round. Moral judgements are neither empirically confirmed nor empirically refuted. This is one reason why we do not have experiments in ethics, testing for instance whether torturing people is morally wrong or not (what would such an experiment look like?). But then of course moral judgements are revisable, we

[12] Ross (1930), 40.

[13] Ross (1930), 41.

[14] Ross (1930), 132.

can even abandon them. But we do so not in the face of sense-perceptions, but rather in the face of well-considered moral views. Moral theories are right, provided they are compatible with well-considered moral views; views which have been formed under reliable conditions. Now we cannot assume that all these well-considered moral views are wrong, because otherwise moral theories could not be tested at all.

Of course, one could think that moral theories cannot be tested (this is the noncognitivist view in ethcis). There are no sensible tests here, because there is no fact of the matter to be discovered in ethics. But this is not the way we talk about moral matters. A person who holds the view, for instance, that abortion is wrong, does not think that he just does not like abortion, he rather thinks that abortion *is* indeed wrong.

The point is: Our understanding of moral judgements might be wrong; but if there is truth in ethics, then our moral views cannot be completely wrong. Because they themselves play the role play the role sense-perceptions play in the natural science: They provide us with the evidence needed to test and to form our moral theories. Thus, competent persons cannot be completely wrong: The right moral theory has to be compatible with their views. And this the reason why the right moral theory has to fit well what we really think about moral questions. So far Ross' justification of ethical pluralism.

4. An Unconnected Heap of Duties?

Let me now turn to different objections that have been put forward against ethical pluralism. According to one objection we should not believe in ethical pluralism, because it provides us with an unconnected heap of moral duties and right- and wrong making properties. It does not provide us with what a satisfactory moral theory should provide us, namely with a *coherent system*. Monistic theories such as utilitarianism and the ethics of Kant succeed in doing

so: They can tell why a certain norm has to be seen as moral norm. As David Raphael puts it:

> "(Pluralism) gives a reasonably accurate picture of everyday judgement ... it does not meet the needs of a philosophical theory, which should try to show connec tions and should tie things up in a coherent system."[15]

Is this a good reason to reject Ross-style pluralism? I do not think so. First of all, it is not true that Ross is just coming up with a list of moral duties, that is to say, with a list of right- and wrong-making properties. Ross distinguishes between underived and derived duties. The duty, for instance, to comply with the law is derived from underived duties, namely the duty of gratitude, the duty of fidelity and the duty of beneficience. And the duty not to lie is derived from the underived duty of non-maleficience and the duty of fidelity. Thus Ross' catalogue of duties is in any case not just an unconnected heap of duties.

Moreover, Ross' list of underived duties is not meant to be a final, rather a provisional list. This is important, because Ross' proposal does not exclude the possibility that the given underived duties might be reduced to less than six or maybe even to one duty or one right- and wrong-making property.

> "If the objection is made, that this catalogue of the main types of duty is an un-systematic one resting on no logical principle, it may be replied, first, that it ma-kes no claim to being ultimate ... If further reflection discovers a perfect basis for this or for a better classification, so much for the better" (23).

Ross does not hold the view that there is a single principle to be discovered to would allow us to tie things up in a coherent system. According to him, there is no reason to think so. But Ross has no proof that such a principle cannot exist. But before arguing that ethical pluralism cannot a satisfactory moral theory, because it doesn't tie things up in a coherent system, we should consider the possibilty that there is no such basic principle of morality. "It might be wiser to

[15] Raphael (1981), 55.

accept this result than to assume that there must be a unity that we have not yet discovered."[16]

5. The Unity of Morality

But why are - one might ask - the duties mentioned by Ross all *moral* duties? Do they have something in common, a property which makes them all moral duties?

It might be helpful in this context to have a closer look at a proposal put forward by Thomas Scanlon in his book "What We Owe to Each Other".[17] According to Scanlon, the idea of justifiability plays a central role in morality. In his view, an action is morally wrong, if the principle which allows the action can reasonably rejected by others.

> "(T)he idea of justifiability to others can be seen to play an important role in shaping our thinking about right and wrong, and that particular moral arguments seem to establish that an action is wrong when, and just because, they show that so acting could not be justified to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject."[18]

For Scanlon there is of course no doubt that properties such as 'cruel' or 'unjust' play also an important role in justifying actions: They provide us with reasons for the belief that actions of this kind should be forbidden. But according to Scanlon, it is not these properties which make an action morally wrong. It is rather the fact that these actions cannot be justified to others that makes them wrong. "The ideal of justifiability to others is what gives rise to the categories of moral argument in this narrower sense, shapes them and gives

[16] Ross (1939), 83.

[17] Scanlon (1998).

[18] Scanlon (1998), 170.

them their importance."[19] It is the justifiability of a norm, Scanlon thinks, that makes it a moral norm. If I have a moral duty to do x, than my not doing x could not be justified to others.

The ethical pluralist cannot provide us with such a property that ties moral things up in a unified system. For the ethical pluralist an action is wrong, because the action is cruel, for instance, or unjust. But if Scanlon is right then more is to be said about moral wrongness and rightness.

I think that this question cannot be answered in a general way. The question is rather: Can the idea of justifiability play the role it is supposed to play according to Scanlon? I think that the pluralist view fits better with what we really think about moral justification. We justify moral judgements such as 'It is wrong to torture people' by referring to properties such as 'cruel' or 'harmful' ('it is wrong, because it's cruel'). We think that actions are wrong because of they have such properties. Of course, we also think that these actions cannot be justified to others. But this is just due to the fact that they have these properties and that they are therefore wrong. And we should not carry them out because they have these properties. The fact that the action cannot be justified has no independent normative weight. It does not provide us with reasons for not carrying out the actions in question. The answer to the question 'Do I have a reason not to torture John?' would be 'Yes, because it would be cruel to do so, or possibly because it would be wrong to act this way'. But certainly not: 'Yes, because it could not be justified to others'. This is also the case, but it is just a consequence of the wrongness of this kind of action.

[19] Scanlon (1998), 176.

6. Self-Evident Principles?

Let me turn to another objection against ethical pluralism which has to do with Ross' idea that the underived prima facie duties are self-evident. One can argue that there are no self-evident moral duties. There is widespread disagreement about which moral duties have to be considered as basic duties. And this shows that the justification of moral norms cannot rely on self-evidence, as Ross wants us to believe.

First of all, I think that this objection takes the term 'self-evidence' in a way it has not been taken by Ross. According to him, the fact that a norm x is self-evident does not imply that everyone holds this norm to be valid. There can be disagreement about self-evident norms, because they are not self-evident for everyone. As Ross puts it:

> "The general principles of duty are obviously not self-evident from the beginning of our lives. How do they come to be so? The answer is, that they come to be self-evident to us just as mathematical axioms do. We find by experience that this couple of matches and that couple make four matches, that this couple of balls on a wire and that couple make four balls: and by reflection on these and similar discoveries we come to see that it is of the nature of two and two to make four. In a precisely similar way, we see the prima facie rightness of an act which would be the fulfilment of a particuar promise, and of another which would be the fulfilment of another promise, and when we reached sufficient maturity to think in general terms, we apprehend prima facie rightness to belong to the nature of any fulfilment of promise."[20]

Thus, the idea of self-evident moral principles is compatible with widespread disagreements about basic moral norms. Only those who really know what it means to break a promise, will grasp that the corresponding principle which tells us to keep our promises is self-evident.Only those who know what the

[20] Ross (1930), 32pp.

principles mean will agree on the basic moral norms. The idea of self-evident moral principles could be defended this way.[21]

But then on the other hand, there is no need to do so. Ethical pluralism is also compatible with a coherentist epistemology. The basic moral principles could also be justified by appeal to reflective equilibrium. Thus the duty to keep one's promises could be justified by showing that it fits well with our well-considered beliefs concerning particular cases. The principle is also compatible with the other principles we hold to be true. That does not mean that it is derived from other principles or even from one single principle. It just menas that it fits well into our web of moral beliefs and principles. Ross himself seems to have something similar in mind when he writes:

> "The verdicts of the moral consciousness of the best people are the foundation on which the theorist must build; tough he must compare them with one another and eliminate any contradictions they may contain."[22] (41).

This might be the start on the way to reach a reflective equilibrium. I want to stay neutral with regard to this debate in epistemology between foundationalist and coherentist views. My point is just this: Ethical pluralism is compatible with both strategies: With foundationalist as well as with coherentist views of justification.

7. Moral Conflicts

Another objection against ethical pluralism is related to its capacity to solve moral problems. Ross thinks that there are no general rules for solving conflicts of prima facie duties. In solving moral conflicts we have to rely on judgement.

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[21] See also Shafer-Landau (2003), 247pp.

[22] Ross (1930), 41.

> "(T)here is no principle by which we can draw the conclusion that it is on the whole right or on the whole wrong. In this respect the judgement as to the right-ness of a particular act is just like the judgement as to the beauty of a particular natural object or work of art ... our judgement is ... reached by ... the apprehensi on of ist particular beauties or particular defects."[23] (31).

But then, we can never be sure that we are right. We just have "more or less probable opinions"[24] with regard to the right solution of conflicts between prima facie duties (or conflicting right- and wrong making aspects of the situation).

One could think that there is something wrong with such a conception of conflict-resolution. Rawls holds such a view. "If we cannot explain how these weights are to be determined by reasonable ethical criteria, the means of rational discussion have come to an end ... We should do what we can to formulate explicit principles for the priority problem ..."[25] Rawls suggests that this is what a moral theory has to aim at, because we want justified solutions of our moral problems.

Ross discusses this problem: He thinks that other moral theories do not fare any better with regard to their capacity to solve moral conflicts.

Moore's ideal utilitarianism, for instance, has no rule to solve a conflict between "the production of two heterogenous goods, say pleasure and know-ledge, the ideal utilitarian theory can only fall back on an opinion, for which no logical basis can be offered, that one of the goods is greater; and this is no better than a similar opinion that one of the effects of our actions is more urgent"[26]. The lack of rules for the solution of moral conflicts is not a special problem of ethical pluralism.

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[23] Ross (1930), 31.

[24] Ross (1930), 31.

[25] Rawls (1971), 37.

[26] Ross (1930), 23.

But, more importantly, it is not clear whether an ethical pluralist is faced with a real difficulty here. If there is a irreducible plurality of basic prima facie duties and if there is no general rule for solving moral conflicts, then we might indeed have to rely on our judgement. And if our judgement does not provide us with solutions that are definitely right, rather with as Ross puts it with "more or less probable opinions"[27], then it is exactly what a moral theory can provide us with. Again Ross:

> "(The) sense of our particular duty in particular circumstances, preceded and informed by the fullest reflection we can bestow on the act in all its bearings, is highly fallible, but it is the only guide we have to our duty."[28]

It might well be the case that monistic moral theories do also have limits with respect to their capacity to provide us with clear-cut answers to moral questions. But even if this were not the case, and monistic theories were able to provide us with clear-cut answers to all moral questions, this would not necessarily be a reason that would speak in favour of them. To provide us with clear-cut answers is not part of the adequacy-conditions a moral theory has to fulfil. It is true, we are looking for the solutions of our moral problems; but we do not want to have just any solutions, we want the right solutions. And there is no reason to assume that a clear-cut solution is per se the right one. Some problems might just have no solution. If so, it is the task of an adequate moral theory just to tell that there is no solution.

8. Conclusion

Let me summarize. If ethical pluralism is true, there is no single principle that ties moral matters up in a coherent system. This does not mean that the list of

[27] Ross (1930), 31.

[28] Ross (1930), 42.

moral duties is an unconnected heap. There are duties which are derive from other duties. But there different properties which play a role in determining the rightness and wrongness of actions. This makes it certainly more difficult to deal with moral issues. Moral matters appear to more complicated, less clear-cut. And the desire to develop a simple procedure of solving our moral problems might be a desire that cannot be fulfilled. Sure, it would be good to have a simple procedure to solve our moral problems. This is the reasons why we tend to favour moral theories that tie things up in a coherent system.

But there is a danger here we have to be aware of: Simple procedures might provide us with solutions, but maybe not with the right ones. A moral theory such as for instance utilitarianism might answer all the moral questions we have. But that does not mean that utilitarianism is true. A moral theory can be as systematic as its object, morality, allows it to be.

> "It is ... a mistake in principle to think that there is any presumption in favour of a truth of a monistic against a pluralistic theory in morals, or, for that matter, in metaphysics either .... There is no reason why all the substances in the world should be modifications of a single pattern."[29]

I think that we have good reasons to agree with Ross.

[29] Ross (1939), 83.

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