

PERSPECTIVES ON ETHICS

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Summary

After stating that only human beings are subject to ethics the article questions the source and construction of ethical obligations. It defends the thesis that only other entities can be this source. But what are these entities? Some think only humans, some only animals, some all living beings, some the whole earth. In this article a biocentric position, that means that all living beings are ethical considerable entities, is defended. Later, questions of the good life are distinguished from questions of pure ethics and it is shown that communal actions include both. The most important part of communal action is political action. To understand its content and structure a so-called ‘theory of three zones of political justice’ is established. There is an individual, a political and a relative zone within which the aggregation of the individual interests is different. Finally the overarching aim of environmental politics, sustainable development, is explained and criticized from this ethical perspective. The consequences for individual, social, professional and global ethics are considered.

1. Introduction

Only human beings are ethically responsible agents, because only they can take moral rules and duties into consideration and act according to them or refuse to obey them. Nonhuman animals follow exclusively their instincts and training. The acts of ethically

responsible human agents can be divided into two fundamentally different classes: actions by individuals and actions by communities or institutions. The latter are joint actions of individuals as representatives of a community, that is actions governed by commonly accepted communal or institutional rules or laws interpreting the actions as community actions. The boundary between these two classes of ethically responsible agents is theoretically sharp and clear, but practically it remains uncertain if the acts of their members are actions on behalf of the group or not. Acting as an individual is subject to individual or personal ethics; acting in a community is subject to social, institutional or political ethics. Regarding the problem of global sustainable development each of the two different classes of ethically responsible actions has a major subdivision. Individuals act with great impact on the natural and social environment if they act as professionals, subject to professional ethics. Communities act with great impact on the natural and social environment if they act globally, subject to global ethics.

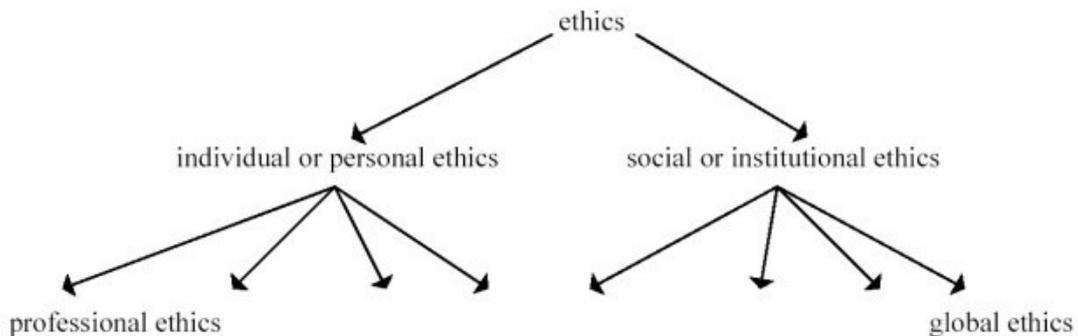


Figure 1. The Different Fields of Ethics

Within social or institutional ethics we can distinguish actions of the political community (political ethics), actions of enterprises (economic ethics), actions of families (family ethics) etc. Each ethical theory has to answer at least two fundamental questions:

1. Which individual or communal actions are subject to ethical obligations?
2. What is the source and construction of these ethical obligations?

2. Human Actions as Subject to Ethical Obligation

Human actions are complex successions of different elements. These elements can include the:

1. personal dispositions of the agent, e.g. virtues, subjective values, inclinations, and impersonal circumstances of the action, e.g. physical possibilities or objective values
2. deliberation-process of the agent
3. aim of the action
4. instrumental reasoning to find the means to achieve the aim
5. will to realize these means as a result of this reasoning process
6. action as realization of the will
7. consequences of the action

Omissions include the same elements except the element 6.

The main ethical positions propose to single out or at least emphasize one or more of these elements:

1. *Virtue ethics* proposes to emphasize the virtues of the agent. A virtuous agent will act rightly—so the assumption of the adherents of this position—without rules and force.
2. *Value ethics* proposes to emphasize the value experience of the agent. Values should be the normative source of obligation. The values can be held to be subjective or objective.
3. *Kantian ethics* singles out the elements (2) – (5). Dispositions, inclinations (element 1) and the consequences of actions (element 7) cannot be subject to a rational ethical decision because they are arbitrary and not subject to total control by the agent. If other people interfere, a blameless will of an agent might result in bad consequences.
4. *Utilitarian or consequentialist ethics* emphasizes the consequences (element 7) or more precisely the consequences that are willed or aimed at. The community and other people are not so much interested in the internal deliberation-process of an agent, but in the external outcome of his or her actions.

These different proposals to single out one or several of the elements of the action are influenced by the answer to the second main question of ethical theory: the question at to what the source and nature of ethical obligation is.

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Biographical Sketch

Dietmar von der Pfordten has been a full professor for philosophy of law and social philosophy at the University of Erfurt since 1999. His prior appointments include: assistant professor at the University of Göttingen 1993-1999, visiting scholar at Harvard University 1996/97, member of the Thuringian Academy of Sciences, and Scholarship of the Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes (German National Merit Foundation). Professor von der Pfordten has a PhD in Philosophy, a PhD in Jurisprudence/Law, and has studied philosophy, law and political science at the Universities of Munich, Tübingen and London (London School of Economics). He has published a number of works in the fields of Ethics, Law and Ecological Ethics including: *Description, Evaluation, Prescription – Triparticism and Trifunctionalism as Linguistic Basis of Ethics and Law* (1993), *Ecological Ethics. A Defence of Human Conduct Towards Nature* (1996), *Ecological Ethics and Legal Theory* (1995), and *Ethical and Structural Challenges of Law* (1997).