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Chapter II

Ethics and Morality

Academic texts have to conform to certain standards, and one of these is to define the concepts they use. Texts dealing with ethics or morality therefore have to define what these concepts mean. In the case of English text about computer ethics, the definitions are usually done by contrasting the teleological and the deontological tradition. Another possibility is to talk about absolutist versus relativist ethical theories. Frequently, the terms ethics and morality are treated as equal. Arguably, texts on computer ethics are not meant to be expertises in ethics and many readers of these texts tend to be practically oriented. It is often argued that an introduction into the depth of ethical theory will do more to confuse these readers than help them. However, such arguments can be used to blend out problematic aspects of ethics and pretend that there are clear solutions to these problems when these are in fact contentious. This book chooses another route and will spend some time giving an introduction to normative terms that may be unfamiliar to many native English speakers. Furthermore, it will emphasise that the complexity of the problems warrants a more fine-grained use of the terms, and that it is useful to distinguish between ethics and morality.

The terms "ethics" and "morality" have been used to describe philosophical questions of norms and behaviour since the time of Socrates. This section will present two theories concerning the relationship between the two terms. The two approaches will be called "French tradition" and "German tradition,"

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according to the nationalities of the philosophers whose theories are used to demonstrate them. The etymology of the notions does not demand any particular distinction between them. "Ethics" is derived from Greek, "morality" from Latin. Both words refer to the idea of custom and have originally the same content (Ricoeur, 1991a, p. 256). This is why in English texts one can often find the two terms used synonymously.

In contemporary continental European philosophy, one can nevertheless find more than one tradition of distinguishing between the two notions. They will be called the French and the German tradition, despite the fact that neither all German nor all French authors adhere to the German and French traditions respectively. Both of the traditions will be analysed by taking a look at one classical and one contemporary example. For the German tradition we will introduce as representatives Kant and Habermas; the exponents for the French tradition will be Montaigne and Ricoeur.

The purpose of this chapter is to lay the groundwork on which the term responsibility can be developed. Responsibility deals with normative problems, with the responses to ethical, moral, legal, and other challenges. In order to be able to develop a convincing account of responsibility, it is necessary to give a good description of normative theories. For that it is important to avoid simplistic solutions or models. The following account of ethics and morality attempts to show the intricacy of the concepts by contrasting the French and German tradition. This will allow us to observe a great number of aspects and nuances that will later play a role in our theory of responsibility.

THE GERMAN TRADITION

Most of the features that define the German tradition are a heritage of Kant's moral philosophy. The relevant aspects are: (a) the deontological foundation of ethics, (b) the distinction between theory and practice in ethics and morality, and (c) the trust in reason as the basis of ethics. The German tradition is, in other words, the continuation of the project of enlightenment. Both of the philosophers of the German tradition who will be analysed here, Kant and Habermas, believe that the moral quality of an action can be verified. For Kant the instance of this verification is reason itself. Habermas develops the idea further and arrives at a kind of cumulative reason in the form of discourse. Neither of the two sees the task of moral philosophy in the judging of everyday actions but in the provision of a theoretical model, which allows the specification of rules and procedures to judge the moral quality of events or actions.

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