

An Interview with Jaakko Hintikka

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1) *The new biogenetic researches, for example cloning, present once again the ticklish question of the relationship between 'science and ethics'. What is your opinion about this? And what part, do you think, 'philosophy' plays in this debate?*

I am not sure I have much to say directly about the relationship of ethics and philosophy. However, I do have some general remarks on ethics: how it has been done and how it should be done. I'd like to make two points. One of them is that ethics began in ancient Greece as a study of moral and social excellence. The different virtues were different forms of excellence: a virtuous man was literally a virtuoso performer on the stage of social life. But on the way to Victorian morality, a funny or perhaps sad thing happened in society: ethics was watered down from the study of moral and social excellence to the study of how to avoid moral mistakes, to preserve one's virtue, so to speak.

This was a very unfortunate development, and for this reason I think what we should be doing in contemporary ethics is to look at the positive side of things, at ethics as a quest of moral excellence. I am afraid that this is not happening: if I drop in on your conversation on business ethics, for instance, I know you have in your mind some business malpractices and how to avoid them. You are not thinking of a picture of an ideal business executive or what an ideal industrialist would look like. I think this is the main thing that should be changed before philosophy can be really as good a guide to ethics as it could be. We must aim at excellence and not just at avoiding mistakes. This is very difficult because you can't find it worked out systematically yet, but I think this is still the side of ethics that should be emphasized.

The other general remark I would like to make concerns the best service philosophy can make in ethics: professorial teachers in philosophy can re-examine and deepen our understanding of people's actual ethical reasoning. This operates on all levels. It is the best ethics that can go into these introductory ethics courses. My late wife Merrill Hintikka used to give a course called 'Moral choices and life principles'. This was basically a course in ethical and moral reasoning and it was said, by people and by the students, to be an immense help also on the level of personal life.

I think there is a lot to be said for changing the practice of how we look at ethical reasoning. It is still being looked upon as a series of inferences from ethical principles. What is, I think, the right approach to ethical reasoning should be something like a new version of the Socratic method of questioning. You don't accept the answers you get from the different moral authorities as being automatically true and trust them implicitly. You don't use them only as premises of deductions. You compare and test them critically against each other. We should be thinking of ethical systems, not as axioms in a deductive

system, but as sources of answers to questions. We don't have to accept all the answers. We can also test the particular answers against each other and thereby find an answer acceptable or rejectable. But, first of all, we can use that same questioning technique in comparing them, in choosing between them, and in critically examining them.

2) *Do you think it is possible to speak of 'philosophizing ethics'?*

Ethics is traditionally a part of philosophy, the part which decides what else we should do. However, an interesting question here concerns the relationship between our own difficult decisions and philosophical principles. I think most ethical questions are very difficult and perhaps so personal that they are not easy to ask. However, I think there can be, or at least there should be, a possibility of integrating one's own personal experience, and the ethical conclusions that have been brought by it, with philosophical ideas and philosophical insights. I'm not an existentialist, but I think it's really very interesting to think of Sartre's ethics as reflecting the experiences of people in his position during the occupation of France during World War II. And I've seen close friends using something like philosophical ideas as a means of integrating a person's own experiences and theorizing about them so as to find philosophical aspects and philosophical morals in their own personal stories.

3) *In your paper, you mention the teaching of logic and the important part that logic has always played in philosophical education. Do you think there is a use of logic that is not restricted to the descriptive field, but which extends even to the normative field? I mean, it is possible to be logical about morals?*

Yes, I think all reasoning is in a certain sense logic. In one sense I believe it is true that the popular conception of logic which is called the Sherlock Holmes's conception of logic and according to which logic is the secret of the gist of all good reasoning is essentially correct. I think Sherlock Holmes is right as always!! But then we have to take logic in a very wide sense. We also have to make one very important distinction. We must distinguish two kinds of rules: definitory rules and strategic rules. For instance, in strategic games like chess, there are rules that determine what can happen during the game: how you move chessmen on a board, what winning and losing means, and so on. These rules define the game of chess, but, by themselves, they don't tell you anything about how to play chess because for that purpose you need some grasp for what would be called 'strategic' rules. You have to know something about what a good move is and what a bad move is. Perhaps you cannot find formally completely explicit rules for this purpose, but still these rules can't be merely definitory rules. Now in logic, what are called rules of logical inference are merely definitory rules of the game of logic. If you have twenty premises and you wonder which one of them you should use as a premise of a conclusion, these rules do not provide an answer. They only tell you which of these inferences you may draw without committing a mistake. They are purely permissive. They are, as a philosopher would say, neither descriptive nor normative rules but merely permissive rules.

Therefore even in teaching logic you need to deal with strategic rules. This can be generalized: one way of thinking of your question is to admit that we normally have to deal with the normative principles of inference and that is the reason of logic. But we must realize very often that the normative rules are strategic rules and not definitory rules. It is a mistake for both philosophical and often practical purposes to try to think of those definitory rules as 'rules of thought'. Among other things, thinking of rules of action as definitory rules would tend to eliminate the creative element also from thinking about norms and values.

I sometimes illustrate this distinction by an example which perhaps is, in some way, cynical: the famous anecdote about Talleyrand. He was at that time Napoleon's foreign minister and he was told about the greatest crime that Napoleon committed, by having one of his royalist opponents kidnapped across the border and executed. Somebody asked Talleyrand the appointed question: 'What do you think about this horrible crime?' According to the story, Talleyrand answered: 'It's worse than a crime. It's a mistake!' Talleyrand was not thinking in terms of the definitory rules of morality or international law that tell one what was permissible in that case, but in terms of the strategic rules in the game of power politics. Well, this is a cynical, perhaps a negative way of putting it. In a positive way, you should think, including in the field of morals, in terms of strategic rather than definitory rules.

4) *The relationship between logic and morals brings to mind Socrates. In your opinion, what 'more' does Socrates have than any other 'good' ordinary citizen?*

Well, Socrates would have answered your question with a negative. Socrates claims that he does not know anything, that he is only putting questions to other people and thereby eliciting what they know and what they don't know. However, my real answer here goes back, in a way, to my previous answer. Namely, it's true that the Platonic Socrates did not put forward any propositions, he did not put forward anything new as something that he knew. He was consistent in denying that he never put forward any thesis. But he did something: he asked the right questions, he knew the strategically right questions to be asked, the right questions to bring out in the dialogue the outcome he wanted to achieve. So Socrates did have something that his interlocutors as ordinary people did not have, he knew the strategic principles of reasoning, of examining and asking the right questions.

So, my answer is yes: Socrates did have more than ordinary citizens.

5) *Do you think philosophy is still relevant in today's technological and globalized world?*

I hope so and I think so. But a change of attitude is needed to renote this relevance. I think in many parts of philosophy, philosophers have become far too timid. For instance, in the philosophy of science, philosophers use science and the different developments in science merely as a source of traditional philosophical questions. They try to make a philosophical use of what the scientists have already found.

I think the right attitude and the right project, although very difficult, is to examine critically the basic scientific assumptions, for instance the fundamentals of different sciences.

This should happen in different fields and also in the field of ethics and morality. So in some ways, it seems to me that the task of philosophy includes trying to help to solve problems in the world outside philosophy.

But the question is to create a vision of a better world instead of trying to eliminate problems that already are not. Let's not forget the lessons from history. Plato seems to be presenting merely a utopia, a vision of the right society and his ideas of justice in the form of a blueprint for a constitution for an ideal state, which certainly seems a better city-state than what an actual one was. But was this vision merely a utopia? We should not forget that according to some historians, Plato's project was not completely what we would have called utopia because the founding of new city state and the formulation of its constitution was part of the Greek experience. This was what the Greeks did: they founded new cities-states all over the Mediterranean. So the Platonic scenario, the formulating the constitution of a new city-state, was perhaps closer to Greek realities than historians like ourselves first thought.

So yes, by analogy with the contemporary world I think philosophy is still relevant.

6) *Do you think philosophy is still in 'good health' nowadays?*

My great answer is, yes and no!

Yes, because I am an optimist. No! That's the wrong word! I am saying yes, not because I have some sort of brighter attitude, but because I am convinced that there are tremendous possibilities of new philosophical insights, certainly in the areas in which I'm working. I'm excited about these possibilities and I am tempted to say that there are revolutionary possibilities, but then you must realize that the word revolution is ambiguous: when Jefferson said that he would like to have a revolution every ten years, he did not mean that in the sense that Lenin would have used it!

I believe that a revolution, in a positive sense, is possible in many parts of philosophy, at least, in those parts I've been working on. So, in this sense philosophy has the promise of very striking things, all the ways from biological sciences to something that can help to understand problems in the foundation of sciences. In that sense my answer is yes!

But when the question is whether these possibilities are being made use of, and whether the attitudes and projects of philosophers at this moment are the right ones, I must be rather critical. I think, that a big part of philosophy is turning to the same kind of reactive and backwards looking study as the study of literature. When you are a student of English literature, your aim is not to train yourself to write the next great novel in the English language. It's merely to develop a sensitivity to understand what the great books of the past are, what the great writers of the past have done. Likewise, philosophy is often conceived of as a study of a great philosophy and of the philosophers of the past, instead of a kind of exciting adventure in finding something new. Perhaps, speaking personally, I've been in a fortunate position in this because my very first philosophical inspiration, when I was still a young man, came from a philosopher, Eino Kaila, for whom philosophy was an exciting adventurous study to attempt to understand the secrets of nature and the secrets of the human psyche. Kaila was not very interested in how we judge our knowledge. He was interested in how we acquire new knowledge, what that knowledge means

for us. In a way, this spirit of excitement and also awareness of the depth of the questions that philosophers should be asking, has stayed with me ever since. But these days it very often seems to me that philosophers are not very much excited about what is going on. This saddens me because I think there is so much we can do. So, that's the 'no' part of my answer, completing my explanation of what I mean by yes and no!