

# Introduction to Ethics

English writer Dalton TRUMBO's novel **Johnny Took a Rifle** describes a story: the young British soldier Johnny is very badly wounded in one of the battles of the First World War. He suffered a fracture of the cervical vertebra with a rupture of the anterior cords of the cervical spinal cord, lost a piece of his face, also lost his sight and hearing. In severe shock, he was brought to the field infirmary. He would certainly have died if it weren't for the doctor, into whose interior the author also gives us a glimpse. An ambitious surgeon conceived the idea of saving the life of this almost dead unfortunate. Not for the badly injured, but for himself, because he wanted to prove what he could do. The plan succeeded, Johnny survived and spent the rest of his life in a hospital bed, able to communicate with the outside world only through skin sensation. The content of the novel's description, an unusually stuffy read, is the inner life of this severely crippled person with an intact intellect. A light shines in his bleak life: everyone prefers to avoid him because they are shocked by his situation, but one nurse comes to meet him; he tries to make contact by writing written messages with his finger on his chest and the patient understands. It will take a while for him to find a way to react to it, and for those around him to get used to it. However, the narrow footbridge that was managed to be built in this way is not enough to bring Johnny back to life, so he is almost obsessed with finding its meaning. - The plot of the novel has a real model in the fate of a British officer who lived in a hidden room in a rural hospital. No one was allowed near him, especially journalists. He died fifteen years after being wounded in one of the battles in Flanders.

During reading and especially after reading a book that will leave few people indifferent, questions and even whole thoughts come to us, and we feel at a loss and unsure whether we can even afford them:

- *Did the war surgeon do any good by saving this man's life?*
- *Is it possible to doubt that a doctor is supposed to save an endangered life?*
- *In this case, however, he helped keep life so miserable that Johnny couldn't bear its burden. After all, the surgeon could and should have foreseen this...*
- *After all, a doctor is not entitled to judge the value of someone's life!*
- *It doesn't have that, but it should assess the ratio of costs and risks. In this case, he saved a life, the value of which, frankly, we have serious doubts, while at the same cost he could have saved the life of someone else, or even more people, whose prognosis would have been more promising. In addition, we learn about the motives of the surgeon's actions. And in this case, they do not inspire respect, on the contrary.*
- *Maybe, but it happened. Then the problem is something else. For example, in the fact that in Johnny's immediate surroundings, with one exception, there was no one who had the will to make his fate easier for him... etc.*

This imaginary conversation is conducted about what is the subject of **ethics**, in this case **medical**. Ethics is often judged to be a set of **norms**, i.e. ready-made statements about **what should be**, i.e. also about what should not be. It is clear from the conversation that such a clue is not available, that both interlocutors are still looking for it. And yet they move in the field of ethics. Let this situation be an opportunity for us to attempt a **preliminary definition**:

***Ethics is a deliberation or a debate about what is to be.***

How was a war surgeon supposed to act? How should the nursing staff have reacted at the hospital where Johnny was "put away"? These are legitimate questions of medical ethics, related to the story described. If we retain the necessary dose of humility, we can perhaps ask how poor Johnny should have done. Even if we leave the area of medical ethics with this question, we still remain on "ethical ground".

In addition to ethics, the same-sounding question "how to act" is also asked by **technology**: how to build a house, bake bread, give birth, seduce a woman, rob an apartment, face inflation, win an election or a war, etc. At first glance, it is obvious, that such questions are not part of ethical consideration; their motivation is the interest in achieving a goal, which is conceived here as an unproblematic end in itself, even if it deserves to be verified for its ethical validity, or the answer to the question of whether this goal is really what it "should be" in the sense of our preliminary definition. This urgency is not the same in all cases mentioned. In the case of a successfully managed birth, its ethical justification is obvious, while in the case of a successful burglary of an apartment, its ethical illegitimacy is no less evident. The intention, dictating questions such as "how to win elections", is problematic. Is the political party democratic or totalitarian?

Enough about that, at least for now. It is enough if we realize the difference between **technique (or technology)**, which is about implementation ("know-how"), not about the goal, because the latter is taken for granted, and **ethics**, which views the ambiguity of a technically conceived goal and measures it against a goal perceived as "higher", which is **goodness in itself**. That is, such a good that we no longer have to measure and justify with some higher good. Therefore, let's complete our **definition of ethics**:

***Ethics is a reflection or debate about what should be, motivated by concern for***

What is the "highest good"? Are people united in this regard? Do, for example, a Catholic religious, a member of the disbanded KGB, a Jewish settler from the Golan Heights or a member of the largest South African political party imagine them the same? Probably not. The idea of the highest good and anything at all that is conceived as a target value is co-determined by **interests**. That is why it is necessary to be able to distinguish the **ideological concept of good** (ideology always expresses some interest, which at the same time conceals it) from the **philosophical** (which is, or should be, the result of a single interest: about knowledge itself). Is the resolution easy? Never. That is why the reasoning we have called ethics is a constant search. Part of this search is also the constant cleansing of our thoughts from the influences and deposits of other interests or ideology. And also the constant sifting that **naive** thinking has to undergo in order to become **critical**.

Doesn't that reasoning, dictated by concern for the highest good, resemble a Sisyphean work? From the fictional conversation about the situation of the unfortunate Johnny, it becomes clear that it is a consideration, or a debate about what ought to be, motivated by a concern for the highest good, which had the character of a search without relying on a prior guarantee of successful finding - and yet was not meaningless. On the contrary: the absence of such consideration would be felt as an inappropriate incompleteness. One can imagine the incursion of ideologized interest if that war surgeon participated in the debate, if he only pretended to search, but in reality he only wanted to additionally justify the motivation of his former decision. Let's hope that in that debate it would be possible to recognize this ideological influence and to distance ourselves from its intrusiveness.

By its essence, ethics is not a set of norms, even though such systems of norms ("ethical codes") are sometimes called ethics: e.g. Stoic, Confucian, Christian, humanistic ethics, etc. By its essence, ethics is not even a science, even though many authors (Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant, Spencer, Brentano, Bergson, Jonas, etc.) wrote important texts that are called "ethics" and are treated as teachings. Ethics is, in its most original essence, the **concern and striving** flowing from it. Codes and doctrines are only interim (and usually partial, i.e. not definitive) results of this effort.

We said to ourselves that the motive behind that effort is **concern for the good**. And what if this motivation, i.e. this concern and effort is missing? This is not such an unusual situation. There are so-called **unethical individuals** in whom the disorder of personality maturation has caused such a defect in relationality (instincts, emotionality, empathy or empathy, autocriticism, etc.) that they are insensitive to the ethical dimension of human life. In addition to this individual pathology, however, there is also a collective pathology, which marks entire **epochs**. We witnessed this in the twentieth century, the "age of ideologies", when the concept of good was determined primarily by group interests. At the end of this century, the "big ideologies" are disintegrating, accompanied by the proliferation of all kinds of "small" ones; there are also "anti-ideological" movements, unbiased ethics, because their followers know no other than the ideological one. In our country, after the collapse of the communist regime, individual egoism has spread, which cloaks itself in an "anti-ideological" ideology and accepts the question of "how to behave" not in an ethical sense, but only in a technological sense. In the name of individual freedom, it denies any obligation other than the one individually chosen, thus silently replacing freedom with arbitrariness. - Be that as it may, where there is a lack of ethical consciousness and its internal representation, or conscience, there is only one option left: **waking them up**.

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- PŘÍHODA, Petr. *Etika : Místo úvodu and co je etika* [online]. [cit. 2011-12-06]. <<http://www.lf2.cuni.cz/ustav-lekarske-etiky-a-humanitnich-zakladu-mediciny-2-lf-uk/etika>>.