



Editorial

## What is the ethics of helping professions?

Jiří Šimek

University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Institute of the Humanities in Nursing Professions, České Budějovice, Czech Republic

It is common that some concepts are used in everyday communication without thinking about their meaning. As a normative discipline, philosophical ethics is frequently considered to be a field in which its representatives decide about the right and wrong and advice in relation to what is allowed or not in certain situations. This leads some people to unrealistic expectations that somebody will make decisions for them. Others refuse ethics as such because they do not allow anybody to decide about what is wrong or not. Such an understanding of morality dates back a hundred years, when society agreed on right and wrong behaviour. It may also be mistaken for religious ethics, which contains certain orders and prohibitions. Teachers, who base their lectures on ethical codes, support this understanding of ethics in students. In fact, the ancient ethical philosophers were humble in determining what was good and what was right – and they realised the complexity of moral decision-making. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sees the search for the means in extreme possibilities as the basis of ethics. Every person looks for their own adequate middle ground, which can change in different situations. The phronesis virtue is the ability to find suitable solutions in everyday decision-making.

How can we understand philosophical ethics and its role in society? The philosophical debate on good and right and suitable behaviour helps us to understand a person's decisions. It uses language, i.e. concepts and their meanings, as well as the contexts in which we can use them. If we understand what is at stake, the decision-making is easier. Kant's moral universalism leads to the consideration of other, less engaged people's decisions in the same situation. The morality of virtues discusses what a person should be like in order to make right (approval worthy) decisions. Values and principles, which help us in decision-making, are important parts of the morality of language. A driver who is aware of the value of human life and whose main principle is the protection of all participants in traffic will

make better decisions. In helping professions, human dignity and a client's opportunity to decide for themselves provides significant value, as well as a certain level of financial security. In health care, the greatest values are life and health.

The debates regarding philosophical ethics showed that the main problem in moral decision-making was not the definition of values and concepts but the fact that values and principles were in dispute. In some cases of terminal care, we could prolong a patient's life – in which case the patient would experience a lot of suffering. If we meet a client's needs in social care, they will not learn to solve their problems on their own. The American authors Beauchamp and Childress (2013) dealt with this issue in their ethical theory called principlism. The dispute between principles is very frequent. A doctor knows the most suitable treatment for a patient but a patient refuses it. In other cases, it is possible to understand a principle differently. One doctor assumes that an alternative course of treatment with cytostatics is suitable and another sees it as unnecessary suffering for the patient.

The dispute between principles and values is best solved in conversation. A conversation can clarify points of view and their meanings or the individual importance of the values at stake. Such conversations can include ethical consulting. The expert who conducts such consultations does not offer solutions. He or she conducts a debate and asks questions that others (who are too occupied by the issue in hand) have not even considered asking. It is a pity that there is little interest in such experts in the Czech Republic.

### References

1. Beauchamp TL, Childress JF (2013). *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. 8th ed., Oxford University Press, New York.

\* **Author for correspondence:** Jiří Šimek, University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Institute of the Humanities in Nursing Professions, J. Boreckého 27, 370 11 České Budějovice, Czech Republic; e-mail: [jsimek@zsf.jcu.cz](mailto:jsimek@zsf.jcu.cz) <http://doi.org/10.32725/kont.2020.004>

Submitted: 2020-01-20 • Accepted: 2020-01-28 • Prepublished online: 2020-01-28

KONTAKT 22/1: 1 • EISSN 1804-7122 • ISSN 1212-4117

© 2020 The Authors. Published by University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences.

This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license.