Chapter 4
The Basis of Ethical Principles

My aim in Section 1 was to locate and describe areas of ethical concern in IT-enabled globalization. Yet in doing so, I was not ethically neutral in my judgements. The reader, especially the reader who disagreed with some of those judgements, may wonder how they are justified. In this section, Section 2, I will address precisely that question. I will begin by showing that ethical judgments can be justified. Then I will state a theory of ethical development which I think allows great insight into conflicts of ethical principles. Next I will describe a method for justifying ethical principles called reflective equilibrium. Finally, the rest of Section 2 will examine ethical theories relevant to ethical problems of globalization.

RELATIVISM

Ethical relativism is the view that all ethical views are equally good. The relativist answer to the question who’s to say what’s right and wrong? is “anyone and everyone.“ For the relativist, there are no better or worse answers to ethical questions, there are merely different answers. Contrary to relativism, I think it is worthwhile to attempt to find the best answer we can to ethical questions. The obvious fact that there is disagreement about ethical questions does not show that it is pointless to try to determine the best

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answer to ethical questions. Disagreement about scientific issues--sometimes long and unsettled--does not show it’s pointless to try to resolve scientific disagreements. Disagreement about scientific issues can also be severe and can also last a long time. In the case of ethical issues, however, there is evidence of progress. Practices such as slavery and racial discrimination were condoned in the United States less than 200 years ago. These practices are now regarded as ethically outrageous. So consensus can develop over time on the answers to ethical questions.

There is a very short way of dealing with a relativist. He or she believes that the last word in ethical judgements is each of our beliefs. So my belief is that there are ethical judgements that are better justified. The relativist can have nothing to say about this belief, since according to him or her, my belief is the last word. This objection is more of a debater’s (or philosopher’s) point, so I don’t think it gets to the real issue, which is whether there is or is not a basis for the justification of ethical principles. I now turn to this question.

THE RATIONAL BASIS OF ETHICS

Ethical problems first arise because there are conflicts between different interests which cannot be resolved on the level of interests alone. Higher level principles need to be applied. The role of ethical principles of higher level is to resolve conflicts between lower-level principles which cannot be resolved on the same level as the conflicting principles. Perhaps I do best if I sell you accounting software, take the money and run and forget about support. Yet it is definitely in your interest to have support for the software. So we reach an agreement to limit our interests in a way that is fair to both of us. I agree to provide support (probably for an agreed-on fee), and you agree to pay for the support.

There might actually be no need for ethics if everyone could get everything they wanted with no conflict with other people. But we live in a world (and in societies) in which this is not true. There are conflicts of interest. These need to be resolved in a fair way. It is also to everyone’s advantage to have procedures for handling recurring conflicts which people accept. This gives rise to principles involving negotiated agreements and keeping them. Enough people see that reasons for keeping cooperative agreements have to be given higher priority than reasons of individual interest for cooperative benefits to be produced. Actually it is incorrect even to think that human beings have any alternative but to live in society. Human beings have evolved as social animals, and this means it is almost impossible for them to survive outside of a society. But there are still questions about the constitution of societies. Individuals can sometimes join a different society or consider alternative arrangements of social rules for their own society. But, just as all individuals can’t get everything they want, so no set of social rules satisfies everyone’s interests perfectly. The question is how to handle cases in which generally beneficial social rules are worse than they could be for some members of a society.

There are two conflicting considerations in these cases: First, the fact that there is a grievance against the social rules isn’t enough by itself to release people from the obligation to obey the rules. The individual can’t directly opt out of social rules. And, second, ultimately a just society is for the individual, so ultimately the individuals in the society have the right (and sometimes the obligation) to decide that some rules are no longer to be followed. John Locke, the strongest influence on the founding fathers of the United States, put this point very strongly: “Who shall be judge whether [government] act contrary to their trust?...The people shall be judge.” (Locke 1690, Chapter XIX)