Giner on the socio-genesis of morality

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ABSTRACT

I discuss the main claims in a new book on the origins of morality (Salvador Giner, *El origen de la moral. Ética y valores en la sociedad actual*, Ediciones Península, Barcelona 2012, 419 pp. ISBN 978-84-9942-153-7). These are: i) our time, far from being the twilight of morality, is the first time in human history when a universalistic and autonomous morality has emerges as a social phenomenon, not just as a philosophical theory; ii) even if thousand years of rational philosophical discussion of morality has yielded valuable insights, yet a fresh start of critical reflexion on morality qua phenomenon is first possible now, starting with a sociological understanding of morality as spontaneous emergence of codes of norms; iii) sociology is intrinsically ethical theory, since at a certain point, no empirical and technocratic processing of social data still makes sense and sociological discourse has to become reflexive, interpretive, and most of all, construed in terms of explicit valuations.

KEY-WORDS

Ethics, Sociology, Modernity, Community vs. Society

The thesis argued for in the book is that our times, far from being the time of the twilight of morality, are the times when the basic principles of citizenship have become a shared legacy, the idea of human rights has become a new universal alphabet for moral discourse, and the requirement of decency in the public life has become widely felt. Our times are no hard times for morality.

There is a basis for such widely shared moral sentiments, neither a relativist nor a supernatural one, but instead an ethical intuition shared by every decent human being. This is the claim argued in a rather bulky monograph by a sociologist who feels self-confident enough as to make a raid into the field of philosophy, Salvador Giner, Professor of Sociology at the University of Barcelona and the author of several books in theoretical sociology and sociology of religion.

I will try to follow the main line of the overall argument through the book's eleven chapters. In the introduction Giner declares that sociology is ethics for our times. Some time ago, sociology broke into the world of moral philosophy and transformed it, or at least tried to do so. This was done by Tönnies by his idea of "community", followed more or less felicitously by all the great sociological classics. Most of the twentieth-century philosophical thinking about morality yet, albeit with the remarkable exceptions of Unamuño, Santayana and Bergson, forgot the lesson of the sociological classics or never paid attention to it. The point Giner wants to make is that we have indeed a heritage of many centuries of purely philosophical reflection on the good life, which is not too bad as far as it is rational reflection, free from dogmatism and myth; besides we have something that has hold the spot in the last years, namely biological theories of morality, from Darwinian evolutionism and socio-biology to neuro-science; this is not too bad too, as far as the knowledge of the biological basis of moral reactions is an important part of the story. What is wrong yet is the resulting overall picture in present discussion on morality, a picture made of either purely philosophical considerations, be they either about language and logic or about conscience, decision and existence, and so-called *naturalization* programs, supposedly converging with materialist-biological reductionist ideologies. The main point is that there are other possible kinds or levels of "reduction" that have no reason to be ashamed when facing biological reduction and are instead the only viable candidates as accounts of a number of important phenomena – think of revolutions, a topic ignored by moral philosophers – that may hope of an account only at the sociological level, or at the level of a "macro-ethics" (something analogous to macroeconomics).

Chapter 1, Sovereignty of morality, starts with the suggestion that the very birth of morality lies at the point in history when the idea of an independent moral law, sovereign vis-à-vis earthly sovereigns and powers was formulated. This may be the point in human history which is mythically described by Antigone's story of. But troubles started very soon, as soon as philosophers began working out principles of morality while disregarding social contexts within which only such principles could arise and indeed make sense. This holds true for Plato's Republic, even if it does not for Aristotle, who was well-aware of the dual, individual and social, character of morality. And yet, some kind of Platonic twist was left in subsequent ethical reflection so that, forgetting

Aristotle's teaching, two allegedly alternative lines of inquiry established themselves, that of "ethical sovereignism" and that of "ethical sociologism".

Chapter 2, Toward a socialization of morality, outlines the history of a current at the crossroad between the history of moral thinking and the history of social science, which gradually separated itself from the "overarching" view of ethics. The current, whose seeds may be found in Aristotle, includes Montaigne, Adam Smith, Nietzsche, and comes close to, even it does not really reach it, an account of morality based on its socio-genesis.

Chapter 3, The sociological rescue of ethics, carries out an examination of the original moral interest of sociology and its following subversion, paradoxically originated by its own original assumptions. "Sociology was born as an essential part of a revolution that took place within ethics. The revolution consisted in the discovery of the historical character and the social conditioning of moral principles and rules" (p. 67). The revolutions took place at the time when an opposite, or better complementary, revolution was being carried out by Kant, namely the rationalistic re-orientation of ethics. The two opposite approaches did not severe relations with each other and "indeed they are not eventually incompatible. And this is one of the conjectures in the present work" (p. 67). The chapter starts with a parallel analysis of Marx and Comte arguing that, for both of them, the sociological theory qua moral discourse is an essential part of their intellectual enterprise, even when Marx declares morality to be mere ideology. The chapter then goes on reconstructing sociological analyses by Tönnies, Durkheim, Simmel and Weber. The point of the reconstruction is that all the four authors try to spell out, albeit in a somewhat defective way, the same basic message construed by Tönnies in terms of a tension between *community* and *society*; the core of the message is that the source of morality lies in community (p. 109), that morality outside community is like Kant's bird freed from the obstacle provided by the atmosphere and therefore unable to use its own wings for flying.

Chapter 4, The shaping of good and evil, addresses one further step undertaken by twentieth-century social theory, namely the discovery of the existence of evil and wickedness as such, leaving xix century too optimist pre-comprehension of social *evils* as originating from backwardness, power, or a disorderly economic system. The discovery is not new as such, but it is terrific as a discovery outside of a theological context, namely, as the discovery of evil without any possible theodicy. The contributors to such discovery are Schopenhauer, Freud, Elias and Arendt. The core of the discovery was that the sin of all progressive projects from the xix century was a radical kind of naiveté, namely the belief in a resurrection, albeit in a distant future, of the good savage. Not

even Marxism, the most disenchanted among such projects, is free from such lapse into a naïve view of human nature.

Chapter 5, An unsafe victory, is a discussion of the status of sociology today. Giner suggest that, on the one hand, a sociological way of thinking has deeply influenced the social sciences and politics, but also the public discourse. On the other, the positivist scientific ideology has been dominating to a wide extent, so that a massive use is made of sociological enquiries by firms and governments, which is not too bad, but of enquiries understood in the most dogmatic way as collection of data, which is bad enough. Giner's rejoinder is not an appeal to some kind of "critical sociology", which would be sheer nonsense, since sociology simply has to be critical in order to be sociology, but instead a vindication of a proper room for value judgments in sociology, against the contradictory myth of any value-free social science. His point is that value judgments are there, with no shame, in all sciences, the natural sciences included, and it is a nonsense, arising from some kind of inferiority complex vis-à-vis the so-called hard sciences, that social scientists feel it as a duty to do what no scientist ever did. Such value judgments are faithfulness to facts, objectivity, as well as a commitment to contribute in finding remedies to obvious human evils. Thus, sociology is both scientific and humanistic, it is intrinsically moral discourse without any need to fall into second-hand normative ethics or preaching and moralizing.

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the process through which, in Western liberal-democratic societies, a kind of construction of shared tables of values has taken place by way of contractarian processes. In philosophy Rawls and his school have provided a kind of model of such historical process. No doubt, such kind of public morality we enjoy now in our countries is a step forward when contrasted with totalitarian, tyrannical, feudal and tribal moralities, but this is not tantamount to saying that we have to be satisfied with it. Indeed, emptiness is its major vice. It consists not so much in some kind of convergence about moral values as in an agreement about what we are prepared to tolerate.

Chapter 8, A friendly visit to moral philosophy, argues that there is a serious problem in twentieth-century moral philosophy, namely the philosophy starting with Moore's *Principia Ethica*. The problem lies in the attempt at giving ethics a new start by isolating it completely from all the previous history of moral thinking as well as from all other disciplines. The main points are that the separation between facts and values is itself a terrible fallacy, and besides, that isolating ethics from neurology, biology, psychology, genetics is legitimate, even if it meets with serious troubles (p. 255), but establishing its autonomy vis-à-vis the study of society is even more difficult, and perhaps impossible (p. 255). Any decent social science yields a normative social science, which overlaps fairly well with part of moral philosophy. Only the non-existing chimera of technocratic value-free

social science would apparently escape from such overlapping and fit well the dichotomy between autonomous ethical theory and descriptive social science. Besides, soon after Moore established the dichotomy, it was violated by three remarkable examples of "a moral philosophy inspired by an imagination and a language overtly associated with social philosophy" (p. 242), namely the moral philosophy of Bergson, Unamuño, and Santayana.

After the interlude provided by chapters 9-10 on more usual themes such as civil society, universalism and citizenship, chapter 11, Moral genesis of human society comes back to the basic issue. The question is: "Does a morality exists today on which we could rely? That is, does a shared morality exist that we all should and could endorse? And, in case it did exist, who has the authority to speak to everybody in its name, so that also those who are not his co-parishioners would listen to him?" (p. 339). And Giner's answer is that "the social production of moral values and attitudes has reached a turning point where the latter, now more than ever in the past, are what produce society, not the other way round, as it used to be the case in the past". This answer puts Giner in a position to reach a tentative conclusion that is, after all, not devoid of hope, since those value that allow for "a moral production of society are essentially rational ones, friendly to liberty and fostering fair relationships among human beings" (p. 343). More in detail, Giner argues that the fact of cultural and moral plurality, after a phase during which it has been generating a feeling of bewilderment, has powerfully implemented a process of creation of a universal morality which has indeed social origins but whose contents are not social, but instead rooted in the ability for abstraction with which human beings are endowed. It is "a part of our ontology" (p. 393) or, in other words, it is rooted in human nature. Its main content is the golden rule, the rule that all major civilizations and religious traditions have discovered. It is from adhesion to this imperative that in our times a universal morality is emerging as a historical fact. It is true that this is a social fact originated by one given socio-historical process, and as such, heavily euro-centric. But this is just a fact, and no reason for any feeling of guilt. It is just a fact that in Europe and in its over-sea appendices the production of such social phenomenon has taken place.

And, as announced, these times are not amoral times. For the benefit of those who, from time to time, complain "with frivolous arguments of the moral void and demise of values (which one?) in contemporary society" (p. 380) Giner points at such examples as Gandhi, Martin Luther King and the Basque movement "Gesto per la Paz" that dared to denounce the terrorist band ETA as well as the Spanish government's illegal exercise of violence as examples of that "evidential ethics" which has emerged as a shared ethos in the twentieth century, and which he believes to point at the golden rule or at other analogous formulations as a summary. What they can do, constitute the kernel of the

emerging universal morality. "Evidential" means let everybody know the facts as they are, and the moral judgment will come, and will be out of question. In practice, human beings do not need to consult the theory, the quite abstract formulation of the categorical imperative, in order to exercise Aristotelian *synesis* (or, I would add, Kantian judgment or Smithian moral sentiments) and perceive immediately "whether they are doing the good or betray, steal, are true, are deceitful" (p. 396).

Let me add s few comments. I warmly agree with Giner's antipathy for multiculturalism as an ideology, which is not rejection of multi-culturality as a condition; I sympathize with his refusal of relativist communitarianism as a shabby moral philosophy; I like his liquidation of censors of the demise of values in the modern world. Besides, I appreciate his rescue of the Scots, Montesquieu and Montaigne, and his reading of Nietzsche as a failed would-be sociologist, and I would recite a *mea culpa* for having omitted in my own history of twentieth-century ethics (1) the three authors he praises for having stubbornly insisted in thinking of morality in social terms, namely Unamuño, Bergson and Santayana. This said and done, I come to discussing briefly a couple of more serious points.

The first concerns analytic ethics. I feel that the fact of discussing contemporary modern ethical theory starting with Moore and the tradition to which he has given origin is welcome by a sociologist from the European Continent. It gives the feeling that we are starting to discuss real issues. And I enjoyed the fact that Giner, a Continental and a Sociologist, does not feel subdued by the Analytic pretence of a superior logical and scientific character for their own theories. I would say that starting a re-examination of the analytic "research programme" in ethics from the point of view the analytics have always refused to take into consideration, that is, from a historical, cultural, and sociological point of view, would be a first step towards intellectual health. I would suggest that Moore's separation of facts and values, and his construal of the very category "naturalism" (a category that has always been hard to explain to any continentally educated mind, and not because of the latter's lack of power of abstraction but just because of incurable confusion in the category itself), far from being discoveries of basic truths of analytic philosophy, have been confused tactical moves by a young man who was trying desperately to find a way out of the marshes of the over-determined philosophical, moral, political, and religious controversy between Utilitarians and Intuitionists and remained with his boots trapped in the mud. That is, Moore's ethics is not analytic enough, and most of the following analytic tradition has kept up for one century discussing ill-framed questions. There is no reason why the respectable legacy of the analytic tradition, that is, logic, argument, attention paid to meaning and conceptual clarification, should go with an extremely individualistic view of morality as such, a denial of the existence of moral traditions,

ethoi, theological moral doctrines, all smashed together into a unsavoury puree named "common sense morality".

The other point is applied ethics. Giner stresses both its importance qua phenomenon, whose emergence points roughly at the same direction as the contractarian morality of co-existence whose theoretical model is Rawlsian ethics, and its ambivalence as a possible self-justification of the existing status quo or as a new and more sophisticated expression of the voluntary serfdom first theorized about by de La Boethie. I tend to be slightly more optimistic about applied ethics, as far as I believe that such approaches as the new casuistry, at least in one of its tendencies and approaches centred on deliberation stress precisely the dialogical, critical and rational/reasonable character of moral discourse, which is one of the two possible ways of understanding applied ethics. Needless to say, the other possible and dangerous outcome to which applied ethics may be bound is a technical-managerial discipline aimed at telling subject what they ought to think and feel, that is the Ethical State without the State, or the Ethical Corporation.

And I come to the main point thanks to which the book comes as an agreeable surprise. The point is the social character of ethics as a discipline. The character was there in Aristotle, and this is well known. But the social character of moral philosophy was there in Grotius, Pufendorf and other Renaissance thinkers who gave the starting signal to the social sciences, followed by Montesquieu, Adam Smith, John Millar and others. There is no problem about the fact that this has been a path going from practical philosophy to empirical social sciences. The problem is that only the value-free technocratic self-image of social science had reasons for interpreting such process in terms of transition from "lore to science". The point Giner aptly raises is that, at the end of the formula, we should add "and back", that is, that moral discourse unavoidably is born anew from within the social sciences. This indeed, not so much what it argues for about ethics in the public domain, which amounts to widely shared claims, is the main point for which the book recommends itself. The exciting novelty is the fact that, starting with present-day discussion of issues like limits to growth, right to information, citizenship, and so on, Giner, instead of naively running into normative ethics founded on "intuitions" shared by "us" (but *who* is *us*?), or founded on heavy philosophical or theological assumptions shared by virtually nobody except the speaker, goes back to the big theoretical issue of the origin of morality as a phenomenon, sketches out a plausible sociological theory, makes normative principle arise out of the sociological theory itself as its pre-conditions or conditions of possibility, or undeniable assumptions, and then has something new to say about the real world.

(1) S. Cremaschi, *L'etica del Novecento. Dopo Nietzsche* (Rome: Carocci, 2005).