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ETHICS AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

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When we ask people what they understand by ethics, many definitions and concepts are mentioned. Usually, people use the word moral as a synonym, they associate it with the things people can or cannot do, the right thing, what is allowed or forbidden, what society wants people to do, laws to follow (called “ethical code”) and so on. Are these ideas right?

In order to try to find the truth, I will tell the issues that are developed by the moral and those of ethics apart, according to what is pointed out by many and different authors that have studied this subject thoroughly (Escobar, 2000; Nohl, 1952; Pieper, 1991; Trull y Carter, 2004).

Moral deals with behavioral codes. Rules that have to be followed without omission. Therefore, the moral asks: What should I do?, Can I do this? (the answer is yes or no). It asks for those things that are allowed and those forbidden. As a consequence, moral is related to the idea of good or evil. If a person follows the codes as they are established, it is said that this person is moral. Otherwise, it is immoral.

On the other hand, even though ethics is also related to behavior, it would reflect upon the behavioral codes. Those codes are principally moral. Its question is not about what we should be or do but about the reasons for the behavior. In other words, its question would be: “Why should I do this? It does not say what is wrong and what is bad but how can we get to a judgment. In

fact, in ethics it is required to have a strict systematic argument or philosophical justification, including values and virtues. This argument, as it has been mentioned, has to be established from a previous code and taking moral as a starting point. Therefore if the law or rule does not exist, we cannot build ethics up. Finally, it is important to know that the ethics does not establish “behavioral codes” and it is not a substitute of the moral action. That is why expressions like: “ethical codes” are wrong. The acceptable expression is: “ethical principles” or “moral codes”.

“The one who does not just give moral judgments but also gets interested on what is really moral and on the sense of behaving morally and how can that behavior be fundamented and justified, the one who thinks about these issues starts harvesting the ethics” (Pieper, 1991, Pág. 20).

In this point of the present essay we should review how the experts define moral and ethics. Moral: “set of rules or laws that deserve the general recognition, and are for that reason enforced and that as obligations and prohibitions appeal to the community of people that behave”. Ethics: “Philosophical discipline that studies the men moral behavior in society” (Escobar, 2000, Pág. 23).

Even though there are many different definitions of ethics, all of them point out to a philosophical activity of and agree with the definition I have just mentioned. Ethics as a noun is clear. However, when we think in this concept as an adjective (ethical) there are still many questions without satisfactory and complete answers.

That is: What do we mean when we say that a person is ethical or that a behavior is ethical? For many people, it means “right”, “to be good”, “to do well” or that the behaviors are “good”. Is an ethical person the one who just only meditates and behaves without taking care of the assessment of the action (functional-right or dysfunctional-wrong)?

For example, does thinking about the reasons behind the traffic laws and its importance sets you free from applying them in a specific situation (situational ethics)? What are the criteria for us to examine when the same

behavior is ethical or not? Why then, is there a general recognition to the expression “this person was or not ethical” if ethics does not say what is right or wrong? In other words, how are we defining “The right” or “the good” and under what considerations?

Ethics is based upon reflections and those are philosophical issues. The subjectivity is present as well as relativism. However, there are universal demands that require general judgments so we cannot do anything we want, as the judges in Biblical times (Jue 21:25). This reality applies to individuals, groups, institutions and any type of collectivity as the countries.

In spite of all the considerations I have mentioned, my question is still alive: What is being ethical?

Let`s ask our selves: what implications does this dilemma have in psychology? What happens when psychologists do not understand the difference between ethic and moral? What is an ethical person for psychology? Who is an ethical psychologist? What is an ethical praxis?

As a result of the second meeting of national psychology faculties in Colombia, the Santo Tomás University published its memories in a book called: “Ethics in education and practice of the psychologist in Colombia” (ASCOFAPSI, 1997). There some challenges are established for a psychologist in the Colombian context, we are called to face them even tough they were developed 10 years ago they are still up-to-date.

When I explored the book something got my attention: even as psychologists we keep talking about “ethical codes” and ethical practice as the source for codes; even though, as I said before, this is a clear evidence of an insufficient understanding of moral and ethics. By the time the book was published, there were no legal regulations by law for the practice of psychology in Colombia as there are today. Why so much emphasis on codes (moral) and not on the reflection about them (ethics)? Because there were no explicit codes in Colombia to focus our attention on and because we needed to urgently punish bad practices that were being done irresponsibly. It was only

in 2006 when the 1090 law was approved as the code that would control the professional psychology practice.

As psychologists, no matter what field we work for, we have to deal every day with a decision making process that goes further than just fulfilling code requirements. What are the criteria for us to judge when a behavior is functional or dysfunctional? When and why a behavior must be modified or not?, What is the parameter that guides us to find when a behavior is rational or irrational? Where should we lead a treatment for a couple therapy? This type of questions forces us to reflect and the key answer to the questions is "Responsibility": What is an ethical praxis? And who is an ethical psychologist?

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