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Ethics: Philosophy or Science?

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Abstract

The answer to the question formulated in the title has often polarized world specialists in moral issues, most inclining to regard ethics as a field of philosophical reflection both by the tradition to which it relates, as early as Socrates and Aristotle, and especially by the nature of its discourse, which displays plainly its synthesis spirit and vocation of universality. There are thinkers – and they are not few, especially in the horizon of post-moralism – who emphasize the requirement that ethical standards be applied, bringing extra knowledge about a distinct segment of reality – the phenomenon of morality – with specific scientific means and methods.

The aim of this paper is to argue that ethics is a systematic theoretical reflection that covers the moral principles and values with a double status, philosophical and scientific, without being able to accurately distinguish which side is more important, even though, at some point, in relation to a particular issue, either the philosophical interpretation or the scientific has the power to prevail.

Keywords: ethics; metaphysics; moral principles; transparent communication; otherness; tolerance.

1. Introduction

Is it appropriate and timely to answer the invitation to reflect upon the distinction between philosophy and science so as to set more exactly the role and significance of ethics in the contemporary world? We think it is. First, because it is likely to draw attention to the fact that there are issues in the sphere of morality that do not appear to possess any meaning on the horizon of scientific investigation, imposing a clearly philosophical view, while there

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are problems that can be solved more appropriately by means and rigorously systematic methods of science. Secondly, the question in the title is open to a discourse about ethics – pertaining to moral philosophy, as meta-ethics – rather than to an ethical one. This specification is important in terms of our interpretation of the current theory of moral discourse.

2. Ethics, philosophy and science

In our point of view, ethics is a systematic reflection on the principles and moral values as well as on real life and the spiritual practice of individuals and the community, in relation to Good and Evil. As a theory about morals, ethics has a double status, both philosophical and scientific, with no possibility to clearly distinguish which side is more important even though, at a given time, the philosophical or scientific interpretation could prevail in relation to a particular issue. Furthermore, this dual status was supported with consistent arguments by Romanian ethicist Tudor Cătineanu (1982) too, who stated that the social tasks that represent a social command allow us to locate the place and role that ethics plays among the social sciences, on the one hand, but also as philosophy, on the other hand (p. 24 and following).

Resuming some of the arguments that have become classic, which add to our own analysis, we aim to emphasize where and how philosophical speculation decisively meets the scientific spirit in investigating morality.

2.1. Ethics is a philosophical discipline inaugurated in European culture through Socratic meditation. Great moral theoretical constructions are so closely related to philosophical developments that we can estimate that the true history of philosophy is the history of moral doctrines as well. On the one hand, ethics is a philosophical discipline in that the genuine thinker on moral issues cannot be an “ethicist”, as if ethics was something different from philosophy, but only a “metaphysicist”. One of the greatest moralists of the past century, Emmanuel Levinas (1982), noted in a famous work, Ethics and Infinity, that metaphysics plays a part in ethical relations, estimating that in the absence of ethical significance, even philosophical concepts remain empty formal frameworks. Consequently, “ethics is prime philosophy, the one by which the other branches of metaphysics acquire meaning” (p. 7, translation mine). On the other hand, any genuine philosophy is also ethics. Great thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, and Kant left us works of exclusively ethical literature. Moreover, if we have in mind the Stagirite's thinking, the ethic conception influences the entire philosophical construction; Spinoza entitles his fundamental work nothing less than Ethics; one of the three parts of Kant's criticism, Critique of Practical Reason is an ethics, to call to mind only its most significantly explicit moral concerns.

Thinkers no less remarkable left us important contributions on morals without being able to distinguish between the timing of the actual philosophical and the ethic moment: Discourse on the Method, in which Descartes enunciates the rules of clear and concrete thinking, is also a moral; equally and similarly, Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit, which describes the path of consciousness becoming, is not only a philosophy but an ethics too.

2.2. Ethic meditation displays as its central concern the theme of Good, but this analysis of Good can only be made by investigating the practical moral life, without recourse to philosophical speculation. Analyses on the moral conscience, on the complex relations between ideal and reality, immanent and transcendent, norm and responsibility, freedom and responsibility, I and Other, moral autonomy and heteronomy, or on the nature of principles governing morality, all possess a clear philosophical significance.

Ethics belongs to the philosophical perspective in that it specifically bears in its approach the spirit of synthesis characteristic of philosophical thinking. In fact, no matter how close ethical meditation may link to various particular social sciences (psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology), the ethical approach aims at the world as a whole, being a synthetic conceptualized theoretical discourse.

2.3. We have to accept that the clarification of the nature and essence of Good, as the central category of ethics, can not be made in a purely speculative manner without prior investigation on the real moral life of individuals and communities in all its richness and complexity. Although the ethical approach is philosophical, it has a marked scientific dimension.

For a theoretical expression of the human spirit to be able to be characterized as a science, it must meet several essential requirements. First it needs to have its own object of study, i.e. a particular reality field on which to reflect. For ethics, regarded as moral theory, this stands for the moral spiritual practice of individuals and communities and
the moral fact. Since this “moral fact” is just a hypostasis of the social fact in general, it is understandable that ethics finds itself in a necessary interdisciplinary relation with various social sciences, with which it shares direct connections also in terms of commonly used research methodology, a second requirement of a scientific approach.

Thirdly, for a science to justify this claim it must operate with its own concepts that express the essence of the phenomena under investigation. Good and Evil, moral duty, moral responsibility, honesty, virtue etc. are such concepts, specific to ethics, even if they are used by other social sciences as well.

Finally, a science cannot support its status as such if it does not highlight laws, i.e. essential links, which are necessary, objective, relatively stable and repeatable with regard to the phenomena investigated.

These laws, in the field of social sciences, are often understood as principles. Or, it is precisely in their formulation and theorizing of the moral principles that should govern and substantiate humanity's life and spiritual practice that philosophy and science meet decisively and unavoidably in the ethical discourse. This is because, on the one hand, a principle with no claim of universality is not justified morally (since the vocation for universality is exclusively philosophical) and, on the other hand, if these principles are not derived from the analysis of the realities of moral life, then they are unlikely to impose themselves, as foundation and constitutive basis with universality character for the ethical conduct.

From such a philosophical and scientific perspective, contemporary ethic research can and must aim at identifying new moral principles, in accordance with the requirements and necessities of the world we live in.

3. Three moral principles for a global world

The starting point that should guide ethics in a global world is the concern to formulate new principles in keeping with the realities that humanity as a whole faces and people's chance to assert themselves in the future.

3.1. The principle of communicative rationality can be considered first and foremost, not because it was more important but because it expresses the minimal understanding condition among the subjects. Habermas (1986) associates ethics with the principle of transparent communication as transparent communication furnishes a model of morality careful to come first through reciprocity and in the absence of violence. This emphasis is particularly relevant in establishing the importance of ethics in a world that, despite the positive effects of globalization, risks globalizing the phenomenon of violence as well.

It is intersubjectivity that, through communication, invites closeness, mutual knowledge and responsibility. This view of intersubjectivity, which allows direct contact between individuals and communities and generates empathy, in-depth understanding for different interests and lifestyles, starts from communicative activity, proposing a non-prescriptive morality whose principles are not related to any imposition of rules and regulations but only to the guarantee of inter-understanding.

A new interpretation of “practical reason” is thus offered, starting from the accountability of human action through communicative activity. “In the very process of its establishment, responsibility is a response to the Other, at the same time with self-assertion; and, as Levinas emphasized, this intersubjectivity is already found in a sphere that exceeds the threshold of dialogic and reflexive registers, finding its roots in the infra-verbal communication, such is the look, for example” (Genard, 1992, p. 83, translation mine). This remark is essential: responsibility is not solely the result of reason; feelings, gestures are also specific manifestations of responsibility, carrying a communicational dimension, but not exclusively related to any logic of reason.

Consequently, Habermas (2000) developed a concept of moral consciousness, starting from the communicative activity in contemporary society, a theory that does not deny anything in its philosophical character, while renewing an effective and heuristic dialogue with science, in his case, with Kohlberg's social psychology.

3.2. The principle of privileged otherness is absolutely new in the field of ethical meditation; whereas the term of otherness can create ambiguity, perhaps it would be preferable to use the formula: the Other's privilege in relation to One's self. Starting from Plato, otherness has been used as a synonym for diversity in opposition to identity or for multiplicity in opposition to unity. With modernity, the category of otherness has grown significantly and even changed direction. In its new understanding, otherness is called the Other, when it is maintained as a pure neutral find, or the other one, when it is recognized as a core of intentional life, irreducible to self-determination.
The moral philosophy of otherness was developed by E. Levinas, who emphasizes the ethic as a break with what he calls ontological egoism. Elements of this concept, truly revolutionary in contemporary ethics, can be summarized as follows: assuming one's own destiny is a fact of life and as such, the theorizing of this issue belongs to the ontological; assuming the Other's destiny belongs to ethics; however, for this to happen, moral theory must investigate the depth of the inter-subjective relationship, discovering that in this way, it outlines the milestones that indicate the privileging of the Other in relation to the self.1

Exceeding the Christian moral principle of neighborly love, which requires to consider the other "as yourself", the principle of privileged otherness is based on ascertaining, obviously valid only within ethical horizon, the asymmetry of the relationship I-Other: the Other is not equal to me but has all the privileges in relation to myself. In fact, to be deeply human means being-for-another. This is the essence of human nature – Man understood as a moral being – the primeval origin and foundation: once I discovered the other as more important than myself, I am no longer responsible for my acts only; to a great extent I am responsible for the Other's own responsibility.

To put it differently, at least ethically, we can never claim that the Other does not concern us. Moral responsibility is always a responsibility-for-another. In a globalized world, it is what must be taken into account in humanity as a whole, in order to give our common future a chance.

3.3. As we have seen, the contemporary era is facing problems whose solution can be hardly found appealing to the wisdom of the classics. It's time to think a new ethics based on the principle of tolerance as a solution that resonates with a social reality less willing to take moral support in the idea of absolute duty and pure obligation.

Moreover, an ethics based on the principle of tolerance, whose supreme requirement is the obligation to the common future of humanity, may be the solution to smooth the asperities of the globalization process and, consequently, the solution to survive together in a global world, united in diversity.

Until recently, man's moral problems aimed his immediate relations with peers. Today, the danger of extinction facing humanity as a species, because of global risk of conflict, human irresponsibility to the natural environment, the excesses of technology, supports the idea that not only today's humanity, but especially the future one, near or far, is entrusted to our moral attitude.

The call for tolerance – as the only way to avoid conflicts between peoples, cultures and civilizations, that may endanger the existence of mankind, and as booster for the possibility of building the world of “together” – becomes thus the premise of building a new moral paradigm that current reality requires.

Our age – an era otherwise dominated by relativism – almost entirely subservient to the logic of economic efficiency, often ignores the human dimension in favor of efficacy criteria. It also ignores the fact that the process of solving the numerous and serious problems it faces never has one solution, but solutions. Tolerance is able to harmonize contradictory tendencies of thought and action, granting unconditional respect for others the rank of principle, thus finding its universality substance2, seemingly diluted by accepting the plurality of opinions, attitudes and assumed lifestyles.

Heralded today as a moral principle, tolerance has nothing to do with ethical relativism, it does not signify the dissolution of moral values as it has its own character of universality itself; it only restructures moral values in a new way, systematizes and orders them around some eternal virtues, which become central: measure and balance, empathy, personal positive initiative3, and the favoring of otherness without harming the Ego's dignity.

One of the most outstanding Italian politicians in the first half of the twentieth century, Luigi Sturzo, lucidly summarized the moral value of tolerance: “... even in the most heated battles, opponents maintain themselves in a sphere of balance, serenity and justice that makes the struggle more humane and contrasts more serious; it restrains excessive passions; it better highlights one’s own mistakes. Tolerance does not mean approval of Evil (underlining mine)” (Sturzo, 2001, p. 133).

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1 These theses are formulated mainly in Totalité et Infini; Antrement qu’être ou au-dela de l’essence and especially in Entre nous. Essais sur le penser-a-l’autre, Grasset, Paris, 1991
2 An ethics that is not based on a universality principle can hardly be thought of or acknowledged.
3 Understood as a right to opinion and action, to the assertion of different lifestyles, but no less human
4. Conclusions

Representing the minimal condition of human coexistence, tolerance is based on the assumption that no one is infallible. It ceases to exist where the respect for any person is no longer guaranteed. In politics, tolerance is the expression of that spirit which refrains from verdicts and does not seek ideological justification, but tries to explain and accept the reasons and motives of all participants in social life. It is obvious that such an attitude is possible only in democratic societies. On the contrary, totalitarian societies always reveal themselves as intolerant.

One fact remains: at least politically, to say about a society that it is tolerant is equal to recognize it as superior to the intolerant others. And in a globalized world, to accept the escalation and generalization of intolerance is the same as to enable the globalization of totalitarianism.

References