

Ethics and Morality - an Overview of the Main Conceptual Approaches

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Abstract: *Normally, the terms ethics and morality have similar meanings, but their appropriate usage requires certain semantic distinctions.*

Morality concerns people's real life, their daily behaviour, thus being a real phenomenon, while ethics is the science or theory of morality. "Ethos" is a word of Greek origin that refers to the notions of character, habit, customs, while "mores" is a synonym for such terms as morals or habits.

Ethics can be seen both as a philosophical and as a scientific discipline. The nature of philosophical discipline is stressed all along its history, which includes the genesis, the evolution, as well as the philosophical support, as it has been configured in its various evolution stages; we can add here the formulation and problem solving method. Thus, every significant thought system included, besides ontology issues, the theory of knowledge and logics, as well as aspects related to man and society, and thus to morality and ethics.

Systematising part of the thinkers' contributions, which give the deserved consistency and depth to the endurance in time of the two concepts that accompanied human society, this article brings to attention the way in which the analysis of the relationship man-behaviour-collective has been reflected in the consciousness of ancient and modern philosophy. The approach is justified by the presence of a tendency for the interest in moral and ethical issues to come back and grow, which can be identified starting with the 90's. The resurgence of ethics, of the interest for ethical problems and moral life, is determined by the deep changes that occurred worldwide, more specifically the crisis that humankind faces at this start of millennium.

Keywords: *behaviour, morality, ethics, values, man-society*

Introduction

Life in common and the experience accumulated by the members of a community are the source of the various behaviour and action rules, of the values that animate the respective community. The nature of man as a social being, noted by Aristotle by the phrase "Zoon politikon", defines the essence of the man as being capable and of having to comply with the rules and values required by society. Facts and behaviours are considered moral if they meet the norms and the value system of society. The importance of norms, values, and principles that form the morale of a society consists in the idea that, through them, society ensures its own stability and normal functioning.

In spite of the fact that each community or society creates its own norms and values, expressed through habits and traditions, meaning a moral life with certain cultural peculiarities, morality in general mirrors the essential characteristics of people living together, with an accent on the positive experience of the community.

In this order of ideas, the customs and habits are rules and values that need to be complied with, their authority being given by the validity obtained by repeating their application in various situations, constantly. Actually, from an etymologic perspective, the term of morale comes from the Latin "mos", "mores", meaning "custom", respectively "morals", "traditions", or habits. We must also mention that the term "custom" usually has a collective meaning, while "habit" has a restricted meaning, limited to an individual. Another meaning of the word mos-mores is "rule", prescription, action manner, behaviour, nature, a meaning in tight correlation with that of morality as a specific form of social normativity. [1, 23]

Essentially, morality is a system of ideas, feelings, and representations, of principles and values, which are the result of people living together, and which manifest itself through the consciousness of what an individual must comply with within the community.

Being concerned with ethics means an interest or attention to those around. It is a new and realistic horizon.

As a philosophical discipline, ethics refers to the historical, systematic, and methodological dimension. In general, the aspects subject to philosophical reflection focused on major life issues of human and social existence, all seen and perceived by the consciousness of the respective times. One of the main philosophical ethics components is the manifestation of the value of the human subject, of judging what is good and respectively bad in society and in the world.

Ethics analyses the world of morality, trying to grasp what is general, defining human existence in its landed subjectivity. Referring to this aspect, G. W. F. Hegel notices that “Etymologically, morality and ethics have the same meaning but are different concepts: morality is subjective morale, ethics is objective morale as family, civil society, and state. When the state is good, man can have what he ought.” [2, 25]

The various periods in the history of thought have configured the different ethical methods, corresponding to the cultural conception of time.

The modern era considerably extends the area of ethical reflection through the disputes between rationalism and empiricism, when two perspectives on morale are configured: a temporary one, influenced by stoic philosophy, and one based on knowing the truth, based on what is general in the human being, its concern for the others, meaning its nature of social being, with a penchant for generosity.

Seen as a scientific discipline, ethics analyses morality and the universe of morality, starting from the rules of scientific knowledge. In this sense, we can mention the approaches of moral processes, using means provided by other disciplines, such as: sociology, psychology, linguistics, and other social sciences. As a result, the scientific status of ethics is nowadays consolidated in the area of inter-discipline collaborations, a phenomenon equally determined by theoretical and practical reasons.

1. Interdependence between Ethics and Morality, a Vector of Ancient Philosophical Thinking

A constant topic for reflection, the way in which man behaves in a social context gains importance as attention focuses on human subjectivity, a moment marked in Western thinking by the philosophy of Socrates, whose essence is expressed through the famous statement “Know yourself” written on the fronton of the temple of Delphi.

Without questioning the objective existence of the surrounding world, consciousness has been the main focus of concern for the ancient philosopher, in whose opinion *knowing* translates into the practical and moral usefulness of the respective knowledge: “Socrates thinks that the purpose and value of things should be appreciated according to the idea of “better”, giving this concept a practical and moral meaning; in this case, if the scientific research applies the indications of experience instead of being used *a priori*, it represents the highest and most appropriate ideals.”[3, 71] Consequently, the knowledge of man is the most useful and dignified scientific approach that reason can adopt, and the object of this knowledge reasons with researching nature in relation to the function of man.

In ancient philosophical thought, the idea appears that a moral man is a rational man, therefore a being whose actions are subject to the principles of reason. Sourcing from reflexive consciousness, moral world in Socrates’ view tends towards applying wisdom in practical life, where man can become the master of his own nature. On this same idea, ethical knowledge deciphers the bases of morality, which is the result of selfless, impersonal reflection, which aims to grasps the aspects related to human

nature, which are the basis of the moral unity of man. This is the perspective from which man, who has reached a stage of reflexive wisdom, acquires unity between reason and will, between knowledge and action.

All in all, the fruit of Socrates' concerns is the basis of morale, considered to be a real and useful science, whose object is to study moral life, and the action to educate virtue. The Socratic method – maieutic – in the vision of the Greek thinker, is the science and art to bring the truth to light, which can be accomplished through the technique of dialogue. From a logical perspective, dialogue was based on the process of induction, which is normally used to research natural phenomena. Socrates is the philosopher who applies this process to analysing the practical and moral universe of man, starting from concrete, particular cases and then building definitions that persist due to their objective and universal value.

According to Socrates, “The possibility of moral science is thus based on the fact that the human soul is Reason, a principle of universality; a free conscience that acts according to certain purposes, ideas, and first and foremost according to the idea of Good, which is the supreme purpose of Reason.” [3, 80]

Good, which is the object of moral science, is defined in the sense of the relationship between the means and the purpose of a real being, in a given situation. Good should not be mistaken for pleasure; it has a useful nature but does not identify in any way with selfish interest.

In Socrates' view, temperance is the foundation of virtue, which means man's ability to refrain his passions and wishes, placing them under the control of reason. However, doing GOOD must imply, besides temperance, other virtues such as justice, friendship, courage, etc.

In the classical period of Greek philosophy, “ethics is considered to be the science of state organisation and of the virtues of social categories as parts of the social whole (Plato) or as “politics” or science of the way in which an individual may become a socially useful being.” [1, 47]

In the edification of ethics as a philosophical discipline, Plato brought a significant contribution, taking a series of ideas from previous thinkers and, at the same time, giving an individual form to the whole thinking system. Socrates' influence on Plato's philosophical view was considerable. The basic idea, taken from his master, is that “morality is a science of theoretical as well as practical importance, since man acts rightfully when his will is enlightened. From this perspective, science appears as a set of general propositions, which reflect the unwritten and imperative laws of universal order.” [3, 83]

In the plane of ideas, in Plato's philosophical perspective, there is a real hierarchy, with the highest position being occupied by the idea of Good, as the primary cause of all forms of existence, embodying supreme unity and perfection. Good is “...the reason for any existence and any science, for moral science first of all, and thus a principle of knowledge and a norm for moral behaviour.” [3, 84]

In the Greek philosopher's opinion, this universe of morality, whose supreme centre of reference is the idea of Good, is a universe of transcendence, of the ascension of the soul in the world of perfection and eternity where, together with the idea of Good and in tight correlation with it, there lives the idea of truth and beauty.

Starting from the intelligible world and not from that of phenomena, Plato has attempted to provide a foundation for moral order, as well as for its norms and values. The forms taken by virtue in the platonic moral philosophy are: wisdom, sparingness, piety, courage, and justice. Following the path of virtue, the citizens find their purpose by participating to the life of the city, and the city can thus reflect the order of the world.

In Plato's view, moral Good refers to the most dignified feature of a human being, which the latter must apply; it is different from pleasure and is the essence of all virtues. Good is based on reason. Morality is possible because of reason, and allows human beings to open towards the community and

society. Morality means the requirement for man to live and act according to the Idea of Good. The world of Good, Plato shows can manifest itself in an individual's life, in the social area, and the state can insure the order and wellbeing of the entire city. Since achieving the idea of justice is the wellbeing and happiness of a city, the purpose of the state must resonate with achieving this idea. In comparison with the other virtues, "Plato considers justice to be the crown of all virtues, but almost never an individual moral feature, but one that is specific to social order: it consists in the correct distribution of the virtues, rights, and duties of all social categories. For Plato, justice is harmony and social balance." [3, 84]

For Plato, the ideal state is a moral person. Just as a wise soul is characterised by unity and harmony, the same attributes must characterise the justice accomplished by the state. Nevertheless, real justice is when "every citizen fulfils in the state the function for which he was born." [4] A well-organised state will include all virtues, which are: justice, prudence, temperance, and courage. Certainly, the state imagined by Plato idealises the dominance of aristocracy, with the purpose to exclusively defend the interests of this class.

Aristotle's philosophical view is due to a considerable extent to Plato's work.

In the Greece of his time, the fundamental virtues were considered to be: wisdom, sparingness, courage, and justice. In the Aristotelian approach, justice refers to the relationships between people, as well as to the relationships between people and society. However, the other virtues have their correspondent in the relationships of the individual with himself.

Morality is related to people's practical life and its specificity consists in the fact that it is linked to a series of requirements, to complying with certain norms; this behaviour must also have a conscious, rational motivation. The choice of an individual's actions depends on the purpose he aims at and on his freedom of will, all to the extent to which society allows or nor certain human behaviours.

He considers that ethics is, in essence, the moral constitution that organises the relationships between people, within society. Aristotle's moral view opens the door towards the topic of law in general and of the laws that must govern a city. A well-lead city is one where the laws imposed by the state must be supported morally, an idea that we can also meet among the jurists in modern and contemporary times.

When analysing the issue of justice, the famous philosopher notes that some rules are rather natural and universal, referring, in absolute, to certain actions, while those with a more restrained applicability have a rather local nature. Hence the distinction between two types of justice: a natural, universal one, and a local, conventional one. To act justly means to appreciate everyone according to their own merits. In an Aristotelian view, "for the virtue of justice to flourish inside a community, there must be rational criteria for merits and an established social consensus with regards to which these criteria are." [3, 166]

Nevertheless, morality and laws aim towards a general wellbeing of man and society, but the reality includes concrete particular cases in which it is not easy to insure justice. The Aristotelian solution for such situations is action "according to just reason (Kata ton Orthon Logon)." [5] This "... means indeed judging more or less, and Aristotle tries to use the notion of average between more or less to characterise virtues in general: courage between boldness and shyness, justice between doing an injustice and suffering an injustice, generosity between waste and pettiness. To each virtue there correspond thus two vices. It is impossible to correctly understand giving into vice unless we take the circumstances into account: the same action may be generous in one situation and prodigal or ungenerous in another." [6, 167]

In the ethical view on time, we can also find the concept of "phronesis", which, in the Aristotelian interpretation, means that someone knows what (s)he deserves and takes honour from it; in time, this term acquired the meaning of *ability to master the exercise of judgment in particular situations*. [6,

168] Phronesis is an intellectual virtue, which can be acquired by learning, and it is different from virtue of character, which starts from intellectual virtue, but it can only become concrete through exercise. From this perspective, moral education is unitary, combining in tight interaction the two types of education: intellectual and character.

In the series of virtues, Aristotle gives importance to friendship, according to which the relationships between the members of a city allow pursuing a common good for the entire community, by reaching an agreement on the goods and virtues. Real friendship, however, as Aristotle shows, “comes from a shared care towards the goods that belong to both and do not exclusively belong to either.”[6, 171] He articulates the idea that “Virtue is not indifference towards pleasure and pain; but in relation to these, it consists in a disposition that makes us adopt the best possible behaviour”. [3, 95]

The moral behaviour of an individual is important in the life of the city, this problem being approached by the Greek philosopher in politics, or the science of the state. Thus, the purpose and means of moral behaviour, according to this science, must consider the general good of the whole city. The object of morality is to achieve good, which is only possible through action.

2. Subsequent Stages in the Evolution of the Concept of Morality

In Hellenistic monarchy, the decline of the Greek polis triggers a wave of disappointment and uncertainties, which will directly reflect on spiritual life, and especially on philosophical concerns.

The stoic school represented by Zeno of Citium (336-264), Cleanthes (332-232), and Chrysippus (277-210) [7] promote conformity with nature as a basic principle of behaviour. Acquiring virtue implies three conditions and a series of specific characteristics, which are: “1) knowing the particular things given in experience; 2) voluntary agreement of reason with the outside events and with the rules resulting from the experience of life; 3) energetic tension of will, needed to suppress the influence of passions and emotions, be they pleasant or painful, so that will can be master of itself.” [7, 106]

In essence, the purpose of ethics is to build human personality, including benchmarks of value that are validated by knowledge and experience, and which help us choose the best way from a rational perspective. In the process of building personality, knowledge takes on an important place since, in the stoic view, man gradually grows to understand that he is part of the entire universe and to act in agreement with nature. Freedom, from the viewpoint of stoic philosophy, can manifest itself to the extent to which man’s action follows the universal law that governs the whole world.

Epicureanism is another important school that functioned during the Hellenistic period. Its founder, Epicurus, was born in 341 BC in Samos, and in 307 he moves to Athens where he will consecrate his life to philosophical issues.

Wisdom is the most precious good, since it is the source of all the other virtues: temperance, justice, courage, and friendship. Temperance or moderation refer to the fact that man should keep a certain measure and avoid excesses, especially with regards to physical pleasures. Natural justice expresses, in itself, what reason enhances in human nature, an aspect that manifests itself through respect and trust between people, through the commitment not to harm one another. Courage, in Epicurus’ view, is a virtue obtained through reason, which consists in not knowing fear towards the gods, who are indifferent to the fate people, and nor towards death.

Epicurean moral philosophy highlights a significant hypostasis of philosophical meditation, in a relatively complex historical moment, in an attempt to find a solution that would save man and human condition.

Medieval thinking covers a rather lengthy period, of approximately a thousand years, and is characterised by very diverse and complex social and spiritual peculiar phenomena. In what concerns reflections on ethics, the passage from Greek antiquity to the Middle Ages occurs with an accent on a different method of understanding the concept of human nature.

The message of the new morality is to preserve, in the consciousness of the individual, a feeling of helplessness, of guilt, of impermanence, and of resignation. Medieval ethics tries to explain that the source of the true moral life is the action of the supernatural power on human consciousness, referring to the action of divine grace. The Christian ideal of life, for the resigned and the oppressed in this world, was the perspective of a happy life “beyond” this world, of salvation in an “afterlife”.

Renaissance philosophy articulates a new understanding of reality, where the free expression of reason is a fundamental principle. In the process of configuring new horizons of thought and action, we can speak of an era when man is seen in the context of his manifestations, integrated in the universe of the community and the surrounding existence. The fight against authority of any kind is an intimate wish of Renaissance humanism; freedom of reason and belief was an ideal that started to work in the consciousness of time.

The moral philosophy of Renaissance acquires, from the perspective of ontological support, a much more solid foundation, through the affirmation of a new concept of nature. Thus, returning to nature, knowing it, means both the way towards building a science of nature and the possibility for man to have an effective means of agreeing with the laws of nature. The new conception on nature became apparent, in essence, in the new significance that nature acquired, as well as in the methods of analysing it.

3. Moral Reflection in Modern Times

Born in the town of La Haye in the province of Touraine, France, in 1596, René Descartes will continue to develop the ideas configured in the evolution of society, which are in tight correlation with the issue of morality. Besides complying with the logical rules that govern the intellect in reaching the truth, a series of moral virtues are also required, such as: prudence, boldness, perseverance, and love for truth.

In defining moral norms, Descartes considers two plans: a theoretical, rational one, which is subject to the principle of evidence, of theoretical certainty. At this level, truth is the product of a methodical exercise of analysis and synthesis, and the result of the knowledge process is given by incontestable evidence; the second plan is that of action, whose purpose is practical success, and has no scientific criteria, but the role to adapt effort to the situations that occur in the various life circumstances. In this sense, Descartes speaks of intellectual certainty, characteristic to the theoretical plan; the action plan, however, is based on moral certainty.

In opposition with theological morality, Descartes is convinced that human spirit can reach the truth through its own resources, and the free exercise of reason is the basic condition of the authority of truth. Wisdom, in Descartes’ ethical view, is a fundamental virtue acquired with the means of philosophical thinking. This virtue is the expression of the tight connections between all human knowledge; at a moral level, the virtue of wisdom reflects the connections between morality and the system of positive sciences.

“At the origin and at the centre of Descartes’ moral philosophy, of his conception on the relationship between man and the world, there lies the firm conviction about the need to scientifically support morality; this is actually understood as a technique for happiness, which does not accept applying empirical procedures and traditional beliefs except as a transitory necessity, preceding definitive morality based the combination of all scientific disciplines, among which, first and foremost, medicine and mechanics.” [3, 169]

In Spinoza’s opinion, free is the man who acts according to Reason, who has clear and distinct ideas and who therefore acts on the basis of what he thinks. Moral freedom implies the existence of an appropriate view of natural order, in which no matter what happens must be regarded as a necessary phenomenon. According to this vision, understanding and moderation are important virtues of moral life. The measure of good and bad is given by the requirements of Reason. Thus, all that helps understanding represents good and, on the contrary, bad opposes understanding. According to Spinoza, the supreme Good to which the human being aspires knows the substance, which is identical

to divinity or nature. In the Treaty on the Reform of Intellect (*De intellectus emendatione*), the concerns in analysing this method focus on deciphering the ways in which morality may contribute to achieving the happiness and spiritual salvation of the human being.

The problematic of existence in tight connection with the world of normality will form the contents of Ethics, the work that exposes most convincingly Baruch Spinoza's philosophical vision, which was published after the author's death in 1677.

In Spinoza's view, the freedom of will and the existence of the notion of moral good are the basic conditions that make the world of morality possible. In practical terms, a question is asked on how man should act in order to comply with moral good. According to Spinoza's philosophy, man enters the area of morality if he follows his purpose, acting in agreement with Reason; eventually, Reason is the factor responsible for the progress of the human being.

The construction of Kantian morality starts from the observation that it is extremely difficult to design a moral theory that complies with the strict rules and principles that stem from the requirements of reason. For the choice not to be arbitrary, the human being must conform to the legislation imposed by reason. The real moral life is one where all man's actions are rationally motivated. Thus, true morality comes from meeting the strict, unconditional imperative based on the authority of autonomous reason.

The Kantian moral view, as it is configured in the Critique of Pure Reason, highlights both its formal rigour and its deeply humanistic vision; "its meanings are articulated on two complementary levels: one taking into account the formal side of categorical imperative, and the other, the presence of truths and content requirements that establish the value of the human being, certifying the philosopher's moral disquietude, the passion with which he chose to defend, throughout his work, the belief that "man must be always treated as a purpose, and never as means..." [3,169]

Immanuel Kant sees the possibility to institute the absolute in the sphere of consciousness, in the categorical imperative, respectively in the absolute of duty. People act according to their interests or following a general interest, but the value of the rules they follow is relative; this is the case of the morale resulting from J.J. Rousseau's Social Contract, or from the English utilitarianism. In Kant's opinion, only reason can exceed this relativism, since human reason, surpassing the "de facto" generality, opens the possibility for the *a priori* affirmation of the "de jure" universality.

Kantian criticism configures a morality that places the decision of reason above anything, a morality beyond the natural instincts of the human being, starting from the teachings of moral experience.

Conclusions

The experience accumulated in the history of mankind with regards to the science of living together is the very history of society. The whole becoming of society starts from the rules and principles that support its foundation and which have known, in time, many transitions and updates in relation to adaptation, survival, as well as progress. Society as a whole is the world of man, and for this reason, it is just as contradictory as the human being is.

The reason to be of morality must be searched in the specificity of human, existence. The myth of ethical origin in Western culture can be traced back to the Greek antiquity, which shows that ethics has appeared out of the need to temper human egoism, which is susceptible to generate conflicts.

The fundamental values of the human being, validated by the history of humanity, and especially ethical values, are the most intensely debated and stressed issue, since they are linked to the fate and dignity of the human being in a context where the national and European social organisation moved away from the legitimate criticism of civil society, because of weak coordination and firmness. As Vasile Boari mentions, "We can say that the times we live force us, in some way, to go back to the basis. A basis that nowadays people are trying to rediscover on a spiritual and moral level." [8, 15]

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