**What’s Good about the Good Life? Action Theory, Virtue Ethics and Modern Morality**

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**Abstract**

The article explores the scope and the limits of virtue ethics from the perspective of critical theory (Habermas) and critical realism (Bhaskar). Based on new research in moral sociology and anthropology, it ponders how the self-realization of each can be combined with the self-determination of all. The article adopts an action theoretical perspective on morality and defends the priority of the right over the good. It suggests that in plural and polarized societies, there no longer exists a consensus on any version of the good life. It therefore limits the scope of virtue ethics to personal life and pleads for a *minima moralia* at the social and political level.

**Keywords**

Action Theory - Virtue ethics – Human Flourishing – Critical Theory – Critical Realism

Wouldn’t it be nice if, like a summer blossom, we could all be fully flourishing?[[1]](#endnote-1) That would be nice indeed. The question I want to raise in this article is, however, a slightly different one. I want to inquire what remains of virtue ethics in modern times and ponder if the perspective of the good life can be imposed on everybody, almost like a moral imperative. My answer will be a negative one. I will argue that everybody should indeed try to lead a virtuous life and aspire to excellence, but that one can no longer assume that one’s own version of the good life is the right one. It may be valid for me and for those who share my vision of life, inside or outside my community, but not for everybody. While the self-realization of each is commendable, in contemporary plural and polarized societies no particular version of authenticity can aspire to universality. The attempt to impose one’s own vision of the good life onto all leads, in good times, to benevolent paternalism or, in bad times, to authoritarian populism (tyranny of the majority).

Working at the intersection of moral sociology, moral anthropology and moral philosophy, I want to bypass the debate in political philosophy that once opposed communitarians and liberals (Forst, 1993). While I would agree with liberals (like Habermas) and socialists (like Bhaskar) that the just has priority over the good, I do not want to give up the quest for eudemonia (human flourishing) altogether. If I ask the question “What’s so good about the good life?” it is because I want to limit its scope and restrict it to personal life. Taking my cues from Jürgen Habermas’ critical theory and Roy Bhaskar’s critical realism, I don’t want to oppose the just to the good, but to explore how the “self-realization of each” can be combined with the “self-determination of all”. From this social perspective on normative perfectionism, the free and full development of the human potential of each presupposes a just social order – a “basic structure of society” (Rawls) - that gives access to all to the material preconditions of human development that allow everyone to develop and exercise their human capabilities (Ferdman, 2019).

The article is divided in two parts. In the first part, I will adopt an action-theoretical standpoint and investigate the properties of the ‘ethical stance’. I will spell out some basic characteristics of the ethical point of view (freedom, reflexivity, disinterestedness and alterity) and present the dialectics of the stances as an ascent from the self via the other(s) to an unlimited community of communication that coincides with a self-conscious humanity. In the second part, I will look at Aristotle’s virtue ethics, which I read as a theory of action, and defend the priority of self-determination (autonomy) over self-realization (authenticity). I will suggest that, due to lack of a consensus on values in pluralist societies, the project of self-realization has henceforth to be a personal one. Politically, however, we have to be wary of populist forces that want to impose their vision of the good life for some onto all.

**I. The Ethical Stance**

*An Action Theoretical Approach*

Social scientists have a fixation on the social. Even when they focus on the individual, they privilege the social. Unlike psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists do not separate the individual from the social. Nor do they separate the social from the individual. Rather, they conceive of the self that creates, reproduces and transforms society as a social self and typically explore the relation between agency, culture and structure as a dialectical process of reinforcing morphogenetic loops. To the extent that the focus on ethics forces them to adopt an action theoretical approach and to analyze principles, norms and values from the performative perspective of the participants of social life, the dialectics of structure and agency necessarily takes on a practical inflection. While it is granted that the individuals are social products, the individuals who produce, reproduce or transform society also have to produce themselves as actors of their own lives in conditions that they have not freely chosen.

If the opposition between social morality and personal ethics seems to replay the structure-agency debate, it actually dislocates it, because even when morality systems seem to prescribe, regulate and impose actions from without, it is still the case that they presuppose the historical agency of the individuals they appeal to. Their capacity to follow their injunctions by consent may be implicit, it is nevertheless real. Even when they appear to follow a moral code imposed by a community or religion, human beings are supposedly free ethical subjects. The ethical perspective presupposes and demands from the individuals a basic capacity to judge, evaluate and decide on a course of action and, oftentimes, even a whole way of life. If they make a choice, however faintly, it is because they have a choice. When they decide to “promote” a moral code, whether “within a life or across lives”, or when they opt to “honor” it “on any particular occasion”, presumably, they do so because and to the extent that they are agents (Brink, 2019).

Sociologists too often neglect the anthropology of freedom (Laidlaw, 2014: 4-6). Conflating the question of freedom with that of transformative efficacy, they significantly reduce the margin of action to actions that transform social structures that limit the actors’ capabilities. The problem is that in sociology agency essentially reflects the point of view of the observer. In spite of the fact that interpretative sociology assumes the point of view of the actor, by tying agency to structure it only considers actions that are structurally significant. What is true for politics, namely that the political is personal, holds *a fortiori* for ethics, because ethics always presupposes a basic capacity of agency, understood here with Giddens (1984: 14) as the “capacity to act otherwise and make a difference”.

Although the remit of ethics should in no way be restricted to the question of autonomy and freedom, no ethics is possible without freedom. That holds not only for the main streams in contemporary moral philosophy (virtue ethics, utilitarianism, deontology, communitarianism, ethics of care), but also for heteronomous ethics that are anchored in the main world religions. Whether one defines the normative with reference to social morality (following of general principles, norms, obligations, rules, etc.) or personal ethics (choosing virtues, values and examples), there is always the assumption that people are reflexive and that their actions are oriented to norms, values and ends they subscribe and assent to, explicitly or implicitly, and that these cannot in turn be defined as the means to some further ends.

If actors were to be asked for a justification for their conduct, by their fellows or by a visiting social scientist, they would give an account of themselves. To do so, they would refer to a widely shared “moral repertoire” that transcends the occasion and use a “vocabulary of motives” that is acceptable to their fellows (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000). This is, definitely, a “rationalization”, in all senses of the term. It is an account that makes explicit the reasons for action. By publicly invoking the reasons of action, the actor holds them up to the others in public. Even if he or she were to make them up and invent a story that hides the real motives, he or she is nevertheless also held by the real motives and becomes thereby personally accountable. This is, no doubt, what La Rochefoucauld (and Foucault too?) meant when he defined hypocrisy as a vice that pays homage to virtue.

For ethics, actions are always looped through an ideal realm of transpersonal normative principles and values that are not an impediment to, but rather a condition of personal engagement. The orientation to norms, values and ends that are considered self-evident, justified or justifiable, makes evaluation of self, others and collectives possible. The normative evaluation of the elements that make up the situation of action (self, others, environment) in terms of good or bad, just or unjust, worthy or unworthy, and the conclusion one draws from it in a practical syllogism, are precisely what makes action ethical. It guarantees that action is not merely self-interested and restricted to a calculation of utility, but that it takes into account other criteria than expediency, efficacy and utility to orient one’s conduct and to which the actors, implicitly or explicitly, subscribe when they judge themselves and others and act accordingly. The ethical point of view, therefore, not only assumes *agency* and *reflexivity*, but also *disinterestedness* and *alterity*. Leave one of the elements out, analyze the stance of the first person from the point of view of the observer, and one falls back on a sociological view of the actor as determined from outside by structures, culture or self-interest.

*The Dialectics of Stances*

What matters in sociology and anthropology are ‘the actors themselves’. The analyses of normative action that social scientists propose are largely derivative. The actors themselves are moral actors. They judge, evaluate, criticize themselves, others, and institutions all the time. The ethical systems that social scientists derive from books are so many formalizations of ordinary ethical conduct that they encounter in the field (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991). In good pragmatic fashion, social scientists do not assume that the actors have read Aristotle, Kant or Rawls. Rather, they assume that the great authors make explicit, formalize and systematize the judgments, evaluations, justifications and critiques actors rely upon in their everyday life. The moral systems come from everyday life.

When we think about ethics and morality, we assume that the individuals are free, or at least able to change their conduct, their practices, and, ultimately, themselves too in accordance with normative standards they subscribe to. In other words, ethics presupposes the “causality of freedom” (Kant). That does not mean that we make abstraction of the historical, social and cultural preconditions of the good life and assume that the good life is possible without social welfare. To the contrary, the reference to universality and humanity that characterizes moral reflection connects the well-being of the individual to the welfare of the community.

What defines ethics is not just freedom, but also a decentering of the self and the adoption of a normative, disinterested, anti-utilitarian stand. The stance of the first person (*Ego*) is essential, but so is its opening to the other (*Alter*). With the opening towards the other in thought, but above all in and through communication and interaction, Ego and Alter form a ‘We’ (*Nos*). At first, the ‘We’ is opposed to a ‘Them’, but thanks to a further decentering and a further exchange of perspectives, which is built into language as presupposition and telos, a universalizing tendency comes into play and the subjects consider their actions from the transcendent perspective of an “unlimited community of communication” (Apel, 1973, Habermas, 1981).

Ethical life is indeed animated, as Keane (2015, 2016) has brilliantly shown in his reconstruction of the natural and social histories of ethical conduct, by a dialectics of interlocking stances – from the first to the second and the third person perspective to an all-encompassing ‘We’ that, at the limit, coincides with the perspective of a self-conscious humanity within the self. Ethics lives first and foremost in intersubjective communication and social interaction. To the extent that it presupposes a reflexive self that connects the personal to the universal, interaction is the locus where “the I that is a We” and “the We that is an I” (Hegel) meet and intersect.

While interaction and communication progressively expand the bonds of friendship between I and you to our neighbors, transforming the interpersonal bonds into a solidarity that eventually encompasses all the anonymous members of an ‘imagined community’, the internal conversation transposes this solidary community back into the self (Vandenberghe, 2014: 100-153). In this way, thanks to reflexivity and the dialogics of interlocking stances, Kant’s imperative of universality can be joined to Aristotle’s quest of the good life, but without its communitarian restrictions and with a stronger emphasis on social welfare.

The internal and mutual connection between the I and the We, the self and the community, imprints a normative call to action that breaks with the axiomatic of self-interest that marks utilitarianism (Caillé, 1994). The mere invocation of normative principles and values is enough to overcome strategic action. Rational choice is neither the basis of action nor is it the original mode of being in the world. It is what remains when action is stripped of its reference to principles, norms and values (Parsons, 1937). When action is thus stripped down to a calculative and manipulative relation with the environment, material interests can gain the upper hand. The other is no longer encountered as another subject, but as an object. Action is no longer looped through an ideal environment that configures action in accordance with values and norms. Rather, it is directly determined by the material conditions of the environment. Although rational action is usually considered as the epitome of freedom, it is, in fact, its opposite (Vandenberghe, 2009). When the material conditions are given and a goal is set, the calculation of means is automatic. A simple logarithm determines the best cause of action. Ideally, the point of view of the observer who calculates the relation between ends and means coincides with the point of view of the actor who follows his or her best interests. This is not freedom, but its exact opposite. When agency is reduced to strategic action, structure really determines action.

*Broad Spectrum Ethics*

When social scientists adopt an ethical stance, they do not look at material conditions in the first place. They take the point of view of the actor, and we investigate the social, cultural and historical conditions that make agency possible. They assume that these conditions are conducive to agency, and if they are not, they judge them, rather than the individuals who are incapacitated to act by domination (Nietzsche-Weber), alienation (Hegel-Marx) and repression (Freud-Elias). When agency is constrained by material and cultural conditions that impede the free and full development of the actor, they do not judge the actor, but try to find out what normative criteria they can use to judge his or her predicament. It is obvious that the criteria they use to judge the situation have to be accessible to the actors. The criteria may be more explicit and formal, but one way or another, they have to satisfy the “postulate of adequacy” (Schütz, 1962, I: 42). Contrary to the current infatuation with immanent critique, especially in and around Frankfurt (Stahl, 2013), the phenomenological postulate of adequacy does not imply that no transcendent critique is possible. Rather, it means that the criteria social scientists and philosophers use have to be able to be recognized and validated by the actors.

The normative criteria social scientists and philosophers use to judge and evaluate actions, persons and institutions are socially, historically and culturally variable. They are part of a moral repertoire that actors inherit from their tradition. They can take them for granted, consciously adhere to them or scrutinize, criticize and reject them. The transitions between reflexivity and habitus are fluid. In the long run, reflexivity tends to sediment in character structures, dispositions and habits, but it can also reawaken them. Upheavals in one’s social environment, political activism and existential crises can lead to the formation of a reflexive habitus. Spiritual exercises, psychoanalysis and moral vigilance can do so too.

Elsewhere, I have argued that within the Western tradition, our current moral intuitions consist of a mixture of classical teleological conceptions of eudemonia (the “good life”), Judeo-Christian ethics of love, care and solicitude (“with and for others”), and modern deontological conceptions of justice (“in just institutions”) (Vandenberghe, 2018). Drawing on Paul Ricoeur’s incredible talent to compact complex materials into a mnemonic phrase, I have characterized our moral horizon in terms of a “*visée*of the good life with and for others in just institutions” (Ricoeur, 1990: 199-236, here p. 202). To unpack that phrase, I looked at Aristotle´s eudemonian ethics, Augustine´s conception of love and the Scottish Enlightenment secular conception of benevolence, Kant´s categorical imperative and Hegel´s system of morals. This excursion into moral philosophy was not done for the sake of mere erudition, but in order to map the normative resources ordinary actors use in everyday life when they judge themselves, evaluate others and assess existing institutions. Empirical research shows that most of the time actors simultaneously call upon God, invoke virtues and values, support love and benevolence, appeal to moral norms, draw on conventions, and defend justice and human rights when they practice ethical reflection.

If I paint such a broad canvass of ethics and morality, it is because I have some reservations about human flourishing. I am not against flourishing, but I think we need a larger ethical spectrum and should not put all our eggs into a single basket. While I welcome the focus on personal ethics and the good life, I think we cannot simply rest content with personal self-realization. The dialectics of stances drives the quest for self-realization forwards, from the first to the second and the third person perspective, and back. The dialogics of reciprocity that are built into language introduce a demand for self-determination, autonomy and universality. Personal well-being and social welfare are joined in a new type of normative perfectionism that, through a principled refusal of heteronomy, puts some constraints on ancient concepts of self-realization and pushes it thereby, via the detour of the others, in the direction of a modern concept of self-determination (Brink, 2019). The good life is only good in so far as it has been achieved by the development and exercise of the reflexive capacities that make an actor a moral actor. Although the reflexive capabilities are built into human nature through language, I do not want to ground them in human nature, because the nature of reflection is to transcend nature and because the very capabilities that are to be developed are themselves socially, culturally and historically variable.

Following Bhaskar’s (1993: 663) thoughtful revision of Marx’s take on eudemonia, I’d like not only to argue that “the free development of all is a precondition for the free development of each”, but also, with Habermas, I would want to redeem “the prospect of a self-conscious practice in which the solidary self-determination of all is to be joined with the authentic self-realization of each” (Habermas, 1985: 391). Instead of opposing Kantianism to all the other strands in contemporary moral philosophy to form an ontological alliance, I will actually try to reclaim deontology and investigate the social, cultural and historical preconditions of human flourishing. While I welcome the focus on self-realization, I would like to take up some of the Kantian heritage and defend its insistence on freedom, collective self-determination and universalism without giving up, however, the perspective of personal development. Instead of opposing the Aristotelian legacy of reflections on virtue to the Kantian tradition of reflections on duty, I will try to combine them in a sociological investigation of the development of the moral self. My project to combine Kantian deontology with Aristotelian ethics is a liberal one (in the leftist sense of the word). Given my critique of utilitarianism, there’s no way I defend an egocentric “punctual self”. The concept of self I developed in the first part of this article is fully intersubjective and open to the others. It is so thoroughly dialogical that the openness to the others dialectically leads the self to, through and beyond the community it happens to belong to. In the spirit of critical theory and critical realism, I will now move to the second part of the article and explore the social preconditions that would remove the structural impediments to flourishing and thereby open the way to a critical, pluralist and social version of normative perfectionism.

**II. After Virtue**

*The Return of Virtue Ethics in Critical Theory*

Within the social sciences, we have recently noted a resurgent interest in moral sociology (e.g. Hitlin and Vaisey, 2010) and moral anthropology (e.g. Fassin, 2012). The sources for this renewed interest in ethics and morality are varied, but within the field of social theory, we can distinguish at least four currents that are consonant with the ethical turn: German critical theory (Habermas, Honneth, Forst); French pragmatism (Boltanski, Thévenot, Heinich), British critical realism (Bhaskar, Archer, Sayer) and American communitarianism (MacIntyre, Taylor, Walzer). While the theory of action I presented in the first part of the article is inspired by French pragmatism and the second-generation of the Frankfurt School, the reflections on eudemonia I will present in the second part of this article draw on critical realism and critical theory to sift through the communitarian return to virtue ethics.

Critical realism is a philosophical movement in the social sciences that is inspired by the work of Bhaskar (Archer et al., 1998). While Bhaskar’s revolutionary critique of positivism in the natural sciences has drawn most attention, I will focus here on his contributions to the philosophy of the social sciences. Bhaskar has joined an Aristotelian theory of human flourishing with a Marxian theory of human emancipation in a transformative model of social action. He has not only incorporated the idea of human flourishing into his system, especially in his later work on metareality and the realization of the “alethic self” (Bhaskar, 2002), but from the beginning, he had a strong interest in Marxism and conceived critical realism as an ontological exploration of the conditions of possibility of emancipation from generalized structures of domination and repression, exploitation and alienation. The transformative dialectics of agency and structure he proposed as an alternative to Giddens’ structuration theory, pivoted around the integration of two concepts of power – power1 as “transformative capacity intrinsic to the concept of action itself” and power2 as “generalized master-slave relations” (Bhaskar, 1993: 143, *passim*) – into a theory of transformative social action. In accordance with the emancipatory interest of the social sciences, the idea was to critically investigate the causal powers and degenerative features of social structures and find out how they function, not simply to increase our knowledge of the social word, but in order to open them up to collective praxis so that the free and full development of all could finally be realized as a necessary, but insufficient precondition of the self-realization of each.

In more Marxist terms, we could say that Bhaskar intended to analyze the structures and functions of exploitation that define capitalist systems in order to overcome the alienation, not just of labor, but also of practices more generally. As in the young Marx, the investigation of alienation presupposes both a structural analysis of its systemic causes and a normative determination of the essential capacities of actors that are real, but not realized or actualized in the present. The conjunction of a sociological analysis of the reality of a bad society was thereby premised on the normative investigation of the possibility of good life. Through an ironic inversion of Adorno’s famous dictum that “there’s no good life in a bad society” (Adorno, 1995: 44, aph. 18), we could thus say that for Bhaskar the “good life” is only possible in a “bad society”, i.e. if one has a good causal analysis of the causal powers and degenerative mechanisms of the bad society that structurally hamper human flourishing. The analysis of the social conditions of ‘unflourishing’ is, therefore, a propaedeutic to personal flourishing, understood here as the full realization or perfection of one’s essential powers and capabilities as a self-transforming being.

The concept of eudemonia is of Aristotelian origin. Since the 1950’s, there has been a steady renaissance of virtue ethics, both in continental philosophy (Arendt, Gadamer, Spaemann and Ricoeur) and analytical philosophy (Anscombe, MacIntyre, Taylor and Nussbaum). As a result, after 2000 years of abeyance, the concept of flourishing is flourishing once again. Promoted by Christian philosophers, the renaissance of Aristotle is a bit of a restoration, though. At the limit, it comes with a return to neo-Thomism. Within sociology, we find echoes of Neo-Scholasticism in Bourdieu’s theory of practice and of communitarianism in Bellah’s sociology of religion. More recently, it has also reappeared in critical realism (Archer, Sayer, C. Smith) and in critical theory (Tugendhat, Honneth, Jaeggi). While critical realists are attracted to it because of its naturalism, dispositionalism, perfectionism and spiritualism, critical theorists offer a Left Hegelian reading to develop a post-Marxist theory of action.

The conjunction of a theory of practices and a theory of values is anchored in a normative theory of the subject. To be a subject means to be reflexive about the aims of one’s life and to narratively organize one’s conduct into a coherent system of action that is regulated from within by a vision of “the good life with and for the others in just institutions” that structures one’s action in accordance with the values one believes in. Although those values are part of a historical, social and cultural heritage, they have to be internalized and justified by the actors themselves to get traction and structure their practices in situations of action and interaction with others. This sounds very much like Talcott Parsons’ general theory of action (Parsons and Shils, 1951), and, indeed, it is, provided one reads his normative functionalism from an ethical point of view and allows for a critical sifting out of normative judgments and, hence, also for a reflexive transmission of culture.

Culture implies tradition and the transmission of its contents, but in modernity, the validity claims of traditional culture have to be tested and justified in public and *in foro interno* (Habermas, 1981). In this sense, morality systems presuppose reflexive and autonomous individuals who can critically judge for themselves what is valid and what is not, in accordance with criteria of validation that are not particular to the society one happens to live in, but that transcend it and are counterfactually valid for all. Thanks to the play of the stances, which we have reconstructed in the first part of the article, the reciprocity of perspectives progressively decenters the I and the We. The tribunal of reason is detranscendentalized and comes into the world via language. It judges acts and conducts according to the meta-ethical criterion of impartiality and universality. The requirement of universality overcomes the parochialism of virtue ethics and communitarianism.

The question now is if we can maintain the promise of self-realization of each and join it with the prospect of self-determination of all in a solidary and just society. Can we integrate human flourishing, common values and universal norms in a single analytical framework? Can we combine justice with solidarity and human flourishing, or do we have to assume that justice can be had, but only at the price of happiness? Or, conversely, that self-realization of each is possible, but that we cannot impose our view of the good life on all? To answer these questions, we have to return to the source in Aristotle, investigate its promises of agency and consider its sociological limits for contemporary ethics.

*Back to Aristotle*

Aristotle´s *Nicomachean Ethics* is really a theory of action that reflexively articulates practices to a life project that is regulated by moral character (*hexis*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). It aims at the realization of a virtuous, good and happy life: Being good by doing well. Practical knowledge intervenes in this life project not as *episteme* (science or theoretical knowledge), nor as *techne* (art or technical know-how), but precisely as a rational deliberation about the relation between ends and means that directs the practices towards its final end: *eudemonia*, usually translated as happiness, but understood as human flourishing in, through and as self-realization.

For Aristotle, happiness is not transitory, but permanent; it is not a state, but a practice that implies a successful merger of moral virtue (*hexis*) and intellectual virtue (*phronesis*) in a way of life - “but we must add: in a complete life, for one swallow does not make a summer” (1098a, 10-15). Virtues, like courage, moderation, generosity and justice, are not given by nature, however, but acquired through exercise and training. It is by doing the right thing with the right motive in the right way, without excess and without deficit, that one becomes virtuous, that virtue becomes an ingrained disposition, and sediments in a state of character. Moral excellence as a state of character is the result of virtuous practices – “for we are ourselves somehow partly responsible for our state of character” (1114b 20-25). It is also a condition, however, because we become virtuous through repetition, training and habit. It is through cultivation of the moral virtues by practice, by continuously doing good and acting well, and by exercising the intellectual virtue of prudence, by deliberating well about the right ends and the means of action for the sake of becoming good that, eventually, when all is said and done, the person will be good and virtuous and, therefore, happy.

If one reads Aristotle’s virtue ethics as theory of action, it becomes immediately obvious that it is not a theory of instrumental and strategic action. In terms of Weber’s (1968: 11-13) classic typology of action, it is definitely not *Zweckrationales Handeln*. Reasonable action is not rational action. Phronesis is not rational choice. Neither are the ends given nor is calculation limited to the means. Reflexion encompasses rational determination of both the ends and the means. For Aristotle, activity is its own end. It is autotelic. The good that it seeks to realize is intrinsic to the act. When one acts well and hones one’s skills, the satisfaction comes not from the result, but from the mere pleasure of doing the job well. Excellence in the execution of the act and realization of one’s capacities are two sides of the same self-rewarding activity.

Unlike Weber’s theory of action, which features acts without duration, Aristotle’s theory of action takes as its unit not the act, but the life-long quest of the individual devoted to honorable ends pursued in accordance with virtue. The ends one chooses intermittently are inserted in a teleological pursuit of happiness that lasts a whole life. It’s only at the end, when all is said and done, that one can properly evaluate whether one has lived a true, good and beautiful life that is worthy to be remembered and emulated.

For Aristotle, action is an admixture of Weber’s traditional action and value-rational action. It is traditional, because when the virtues are regularly exercised, they become habitual and embodied. Yet, it is also reflexive and rational, because the ends one pursues are consciously chosen and reflexively pursued over the course of one’s life. It is also axiological, because the values that determine the ends and the means are not personal, but transpersonal and social. While virtuous action is self-rewarding, it is not self-interested. It has its end in itself, but is also directed to the other, either directly (as in friendship) or indirectly (as in democracy) when it aims to realize the common good in accordance with the shared values of the community. Self-realization has thus, of necessity, both a personal and communal dimension. One lives a good life with and for the others in a decent democratic society that is collectively self-determined and directed towards the realization of collectively shared values. The personal and the collective coincide in a well-ordered society.

*Twilight of the Good*

All things considered, the main problem with Aristotle’s vision of the good life is not so much that it is elitist and exclusive, but that it presupposes a harmonious order. Unlike the Ancients, we, moderns, no longer believe in the existence of a cosmic order that sustains our quest for the true, good and beautiful life. The nomic order of things has collapsed, and it collapsed well before the advent of modernity. With the collapse of the Roman Empire, Christianism became hegemonic, at least in the West. The Renaissance tried to relive the ideals of Athens and Rome, but with the advent of modernity, the principles of subjectivity and freedom were enthroned for good. As Hegel states: “The principle of the modern world is freedom and subjectivity […] The greatness of our time is the fact that freedom, the particular possession of mind whereby it is at home with itself in itself, is recognized” (quoted in Habermas, 1985: 27). The “principle of subjectivity” entails the recognition of individualism, the right to criticise one’s own culture, the autonomy of action and the reflexivity of idealist philosophy itself, which is now able to conceptually grasp its own time in thoughts and to develop its own norms out of itself. The “principle of freedom” is not merely negative (“freedom from”). Properly understood, it comprises a positive concept of freedom (“freedom to”) that is not individual, but collective and oriented towards the democratic realisation of a form of life that guarantees the material and cultural conditions of flourishing of individuals in society. If we follow Honneth’s (2011) normative reconstruction of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, we can trace the historical and conceptual deployment of the concept of freedom - from a negative concept of merely contractual freedom (Hobbes) via a reflexive concept of rights (Kant) to a positive concept of ethical life (Hegel) in a democratic society that institutionalizes freedom in such a way that the self-determination of all makes the self-realization of each possible.

There is no way back to the past with its enforced collectivism, heteronomous morality, traditionalism and lack of historicity. That does not mean that that there are no remnants of the past in the present, but with the disenchantment of the world, cosmic orders can no longer impose themselves on all, though of course they can maintain their hold on some at the individual and even at the communal level, but not at a universal level. From this point of view, the return to Aristotle is equivalent to a return to Confucius, Buddha, Mahomet or Jesus. They are still exemplars, but in spite of all appearances to the contrary, religion is no longer an absolute and collective form of the Spirit, but a subjective one. Religion has turned into religiosity and spirituality.

Our age is, indeed, a secular one (Taylor, 2007). While religion is and remains “a contemporary form of the objective spirit”, as Habermas argues in his genealogy of postmetaphysical thought (2019, I: 75-109), its remit has been progressively reduced from being a whole that structures every aspect of life to becoming a part of culture among others (like philosophy, science and art) that remains significant, but no longer has supremacy over society, culture and subjectivity. At the individual level, religion has become an option, a personal one that can be manipulated by collective forces, but an option nevertheless. Humanism on the other hand is not an option; it is the baseline that structures our societies and our existence. Of necessity, modern subjects have become pluralists; by default, worldviews have become post-metaphysical, while societies for their part are now composed of a multiplicity of communities that coexist in their midst. Nowadays, the only way to make differences of worldviews compatible is through the exchange of perspectives and the exercise of dialogue-in-tolerance. Overstating my case, I would like to suggest that “post-secular humanism” is the only “comprehensive doctrine” that remains in a pluralist, post-metaphysical world with multiple transcendences.

In modern societies, one can no longer maintain that there is only one right course of action that leads to the good life. That does not mean that nihilism prevails and that all choices are arbitrary. Only that in modernity nobody can impose his or her particular conception of the good life and the good society on anybody else without courting paternalism or authoritarianism.

The attempt to reawaken virtue ethics on a grand scale, rather than on a personal one, is problematic. MacIntyre (1984) was right when he suggested that the language of virtues, telos and moral authority are merely fragments of a once coherent conceptual scheme that we have now lost altogether. I am afraid, though, he drew the wrong conclusions from it. By forcing a stark choice between Aristotle and Nietzsche upon his readers (MacIntyre, 1984: chapter 9), he disregarded Kant, the Enlightenment, autonomy and modernity altogether. Consequently, he called for a return to Tradition. At a collective level, there’s no return to Tradition, though everyone is, of course, free to return to the open arms of the Church, cloister oneself up in monasteries, join ashrams and other small-scale voluntary communities.

Similarly, when Nussbaum (2000) tries to concentrate Aristotle and Marx’s vision of essential human powers into a list of 10 central capabilities (life, bodily health, affiliation, imagination, play, etc.) of truly human functioning as a necessary base for possible flourishing, she undoubtedly means well, but she can hardly avoid the reproach of benevolent technocratic paternalism. Instead of laying down from high up, with the finger in the air, 10 commandments (and few amendments), I wonder why she didn’t ask the women she met in India what they consider essential for their human development?

Moral philosophy needs sociology and anthropology as much as sociology and anthropology need moral philosophy. It’s only when the practical judgment of ordinary actors is taken into account that philosophers can go to higher levels of generality, without aristocracy or, perhaps better, through a radical democratisation of the powers of judgment, so that essentialist visions of the capabilities of self-realization for each are conditioned, in practice, by the possibility of self-determination of all.

Historically, the good came before the just, but with the advent of modernity and the discovery of the principles of subjectivity and freedom, the order of priority has been reversed. The change is not just historical; it is normative and has philosophical implications. Provided one does not identify freedom and subjectivity with individualism and atomism (Wellmer, 1993), but conceives of them as collective principles that structure public life and condition personal life, modernity brings the twilight of the good. Justice trumps the good, and also the bad. That does not mean that the good life disappears from the picture of morality, nor that virtues have no role to play. Rather, like the Gods, they became personal, internal and intimate. They may still be valid for me and, perhaps, for each of us who are seeking authentic self-realization, but they can no longer be imposed on all. The shift from Kant to Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas is consonant with the ethical turn in the social sciences, but if the turn is to be more than a return and a restoration, it needs to take into account the Kantian heritage with its emphasis on autonomy, universality and self-determination of all. The latter has priority over the former.

When the late Bhaskar said that the free and full development of each is a precondition for the free and full development of all, he was reintroducing the ethical perspective within moral theory. Refusing the perspective of an overdeveloped industrial-capitalist society without justice, he stressed that the happiness of each could not be paid as the price of justice. As long as there’s suffering and injustice in the world, one cannot be happy. That is a Buddhist insight, and it is deeply compassionate. With Kant and Marx, he was also saying, however, that the construction of a just society is a priority. It is only in a free society that collectively and democratically determines itself without exclusion that freedom, understood here as the self-determination of each, is possible. That is why the self-determination of all is a precondition for the self-determination of each. Note that the latter is, in turn, also a precondition for one’s own self-realization, because the pursuit of one’s happiness over a life-course only makes sense when it is not imposed, but freely chosen.

*Minima Moralia*

My critiques of MacIntyre and Nussbaum are not meant to detract from their achievements, but to indicate that in modernity one can no longer proclaim a *magna moralia* for all. What we need instead is a *minima moralia*, a moral baseline that spells out the basic principles (universalism, pluralism, individualism) and the basal procedures (democracy, dialogue and discourse) that allow for the formulation of the most elementary rules of a reasonably ordered society that makes social life together possible. More than ever, at a collective level, to forestall the descent into a civil war and the realization of the ‘common bad’, we need an agreement on the ground rules. Although it is nice to dream out utopias of planetary good life and universal human flourishing, we cannot expect a consensus about any ideal form of life that would be valid for all. What we need instead – and we need it urgently – is an agreement to avert the worst and draw institutional red lines that cannot and should not be crossed by anyone (not even by the most powerful man on earth). This is a minimal requirement to safeguard the humanity of humanity. At the present juncture, it may either seem too much (humanism smacks of humanitarianism) or too little (what about human flourishing?). In any case, a quick glance at the newspapers indicates that it also comes too late.

Modern societies are, by definition, complex societies. Structurally, they are functionally differentiated and, culturally, they are pluralist. They are at the same time “without center” (Luhmann) to steer them in their totality and “without canopy” (Berger) to integrate the truth, the good and the beautiful into a comprehensive worldview. Technically speaking, morality is only a subsystem of the cultural system, which is itself only one subsystem among the other subsystems of society, like the economy, the law, science, etc. From the point of view of systems theory, morality is a functional atavism. It belongs to another age and, like paradise, it survives within language as a reminder of a totality that has been torn asunder. The idea that ethics and morality can reunify the beautiful totality of yore expresses the nostalgia of a “lost paradigm” (Luhmann, 1990). Morality is not only marginal, it is also without societal function. Luhmann’s sociological analysis of ethics is certainly demoralizing, but he’s only radicalizing Marx’s analysis of capitalism, Weber’s analysis of rationalism and Durkheim’s analysis of the division of labour. Morality was once the glue that kept traditional societies together. In a functionally differentiated society, the subsystems follow their own “laws” (Weber) and their own “codes” (Parsons), bypassing morality and ethics to coordinate the actions of all across time and space.

It would be nice if we could change society to make it more just, equal and solidary. Unfortunately, we cannot. Everything indicates that we have left late modernity behind us and that we’re now entering a “second postmodernity”. Modern civilization is dangerously off track. This is the end of the world as we know it (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, 2016). We’re facing simultaneously something completely new (the “ecological desert” of the anthropocene) and the return of the old (the “sociological hell” of barbarism). The conclusion I want to draw from this is not necessarily a negative one, however.

Morality has lost some of its functions at the societal level. It is not a functional alternative to religion. Without possibility of a comprehensive worldview (other than the vacuous post-secular humanism mentioned above) that binds all systems, all communities and all persons together in a societal community without remainder, we can no longer rely on shared substantive values to effectuate the social synthesis. Contemporary societies are pluralist and individualist. Henceforth, we have to look for unity both at a higher level of abstraction and in the concreteness of personal life. With Habermas (1992) and Rawls (2001), we have to search for formal principles (universalism, pluralism, individualism) and procedures (democracy and discourse) that allow the formulation of a strong “overlapping consensus” that can guarantee human, social and cultural rights for all and forestall the advent of the worst. While the unity of society can only be guaranteed through the consequent institutionalization of abstract normative principles that are valid for all, in our personal life, each of us also has to look for a synthesis, coherence and unity underneath the system.

In our own way, as idiosyncratically socialized individuals, we lead our daily lives. Without much thought, we move in and out from one system to another. In our actions, we continuously interpret the world through symbols and signs, we follow rules, norms, and values, and express ourselves aesthetically as well. Practically, we recompose as a matter of course, the totality that is split asunder. We do that usually without too much thought, but thinking about it, pursuing our lives in accordance with our most personal beliefs and values is what ultimately and authentically defines us. What remains of phronesis in post-metaphysical times in pluralist societies with competing comprehensive worldviews is a narrative and normative conception of identity as an unending quest for authenticity (Ferrara, 1994).

We can no longer rely on the ‘common good’, but is it still possible to enforce institutionalized norms against ‘common bads’? I wish we could do more, and at the personal level, we definitely should; but at the collective level, we shouldn’t ask less. We cannot force people to become saints, but we should nevertheless be able, as Kant suggested in a famous passage of *Eternal Peace*, to implement norms and enforce rules that would even bind “a people of devils (if only they were rational)” (Kant, 1968: 337). Morality and ethics are not part of the system. They maintain, however, their validity for the practical conduct of life. If this is the case, we can combine Kant and Aristotle, *phronesis* and *Vernünft*, norms and values, rights and virtues in a new synthesis. We cannot prescribe how each of us should live. That would be authoritarian, paternalist or maternalist. We can, however, formulate formal criteria that are valid for all that constrain the pursuit of the good life for each and everyone. Being more audacious, overcoming the strictures on perfectionist worldviews and comprehensive docrines, we could even go further and transform the appeal to all the good souls of this world into a spirited defense of post-secular humanism as a thin form of contemporary pluriversalism.

As sociologists, we can spell out the social and cultural conditions that have to be realized if personal flourishing is to be possible in contemporary societies. In collaboration with philosophers, we can also explore the contours of a normative philosophical anthropology. Going against the strictures of post-structuralism and deconstruction, philosophers may even try to specify some essential capacities and powers that make a human being properly human and life worth living. If we ask the actors themselves to spell out their basic beliefs, their normative intuitions and the values they adhere to, we may understand their various conceptions of the good life and feed them back to philosophers to formalize them for us, so that we can properly map the normative frameworks that orient their conduct. Anticipating the results of such a survey, I guess that we will find out that actors freely mix positions that philosophers tend to consider as oppositions. Virtue ethics, deontology and consequentialism have now become an integral part of the contemporary vocabulary of motives and aspirations: “Most of the time subjects simultaneously take into account moral norms, practice ethical reflection, and consider the consequences of their acts” (Fassin, 2014: 433).

Reconnecting moral philosophy and moral sociology to critical theory and critical realism, we should perhaps try out a negative formulation. If sociologists cannot stipulate for others how they should live, they can nevertheless do two things: uncover structural injustices and social pathologies on the one hand (left hand?) and point to the dangers of authoritarian attempts that impose their vision of the good life on all on the other hand (right hand?). At a more general level, they can indicate the social conditions of exploitation, the degenerative structures of domination and other “generalized master-slave relations” that lead to alienation, repression and failed lives without freedom, meaning or solidarity. Removing the conditions of “unflourishing” automatically opens up the space for alternative forms of life that stimulate human flourishing, understood here as the realization and perfection of one’s agential powers and transformative capabilities that are made possible by the collective realization and release of society’s powers and possibilities. At the more concrete level, social scientists can join the struggle and show that the current attempts to force the self-realization of some onto all can only lead to disaster. By doing their work, they can also offer a consolation in dark times and point to the increasing solidarity worldwide among those who resist authoritarian governments that try to forcefully impose their vision of the good life without giving a damn about justice.

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