



## **THE ETHICAL DISCOURSE BETWEEN RELATIVISM, UNIVERSALISM AND GLOBALIZATION**

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### *Abstract*

*The article evaluates the stage where ethical reflection got to as a consequence of the relativism-universalism dispute. The suppositions, arguments and counterarguments of the two modalities for conceiving morality are analysed. Global ethics is interpreted as a try for solving these endless controversies, a try for attenuating the tension created by the existence of an impressive variety of ethical conceptions in the conditions where as a consequence of globalization the necessity for generalising the moral is exacerbated.*

Keywords: ethical relativism, ethical universalism, global ethics

Even since the establishment of the first schools of moral philosophy, the ethical speech had a process of continuum relativization, a process which was temporarily slowed down only by the attempts of the great figures of the moral and philosophical universalism (Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant). It is an obvious fact that each culture develops its own ethical tradition which is in a disagreement with the traditions of the other cultures. More than that, even inside of a communitarian culture irreconcilable differences appear regarding the understanding of what is good, correct or right (the best example in this situation is the modern European philosophy where the deontological theory, the utilitarian or the contractualistic one spoil their energies in disputes which

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seem endless and which only undertake the disputes from the old antiquity quarrels).

Moral relativism represents the vision according to which the moral standards are placed only in skills and social habits. The confrontation between relativism and absolutism or better said universalism (as absolutism designates the conception according to which the moral norms are absolute without any exception) starts in ancient Greece when the first version of relativism was affirmed by the sophist Protagoras, about who Plato writes in the *Theaitetos* that he would sustain the argument according to which the habit and the consensus set what is right, correct or incorrect. In fact the conclusion that *it is true what the community thinks is true* is only an acknowledgement which seems approachable for the old Greeks who by the means of navigation, wars and trade established the great variety of habits and morals. One of the first schools of moral philosophy was founded by Arristip from Cirene who applied in the ethical plan the protagoreic theory, according to which we can only know our sensations which by their nature are relative and subjective. For many histories of moral philosophy, relativism remains a controversial position which supported an ideal standard of the absolute moral. Another argument in the favor of relativism starts from the premise that the ethical beliefs of a community are useful for the community from a functional point of view. In consequence, the ethical beliefs are true for a society but they cannot be valid within another one – this is what Montaigne believes during the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Wong, 2006, p. 473). More recently the anthropologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century built new arguments for supporting the moral relativism. Consequently, W. Graham Summer expresses dramatically the idea of moral relativism: the right or the just way in his conception is the way on which our ancestors stepped and which we left behind. The notions of just and right are to be found exclusively in habits and customs, even if right can signify eating the bodies of dead relatives or strangers.

An important supporter of moral relativity is D. Wong who claims that morality is a creation of human communities which constitute themselves as an answer to the needs for solving the interpersonal conflicts based on divergent particular interests (Wong, 1984). One of the theses of his work, *Moral Relativity*, is that there is not one single true morality. In order to support the moral relativity, the author proceeds first with rejecting the set of assertions belonging to moral objectivism, indicating the diversity of beliefs

and moral convictions which pass through societies appealing the knowledge of compared ethics, sociology and anthropology. The important conclusion to which Wong reaches to, is that there are constraints regarding the form that morality could take, still continuing to serve the needs mentioned (solving of the conflicts). These constraints come from the environment, from the human nature and from the standards of reasoning, but are not enough to eliminate all the moralities excepting a single one as an answer to these needs. Moral relativity is an indicator of the human's nature complexity and mobility, of the power that different styles of live have in determining what represents a satisfactory solving of the conflicts that morality should solve (Wong, 1984, p. 175).

Richard Rorty, an ardent defendant and ideologist of relativism, rejects the main thesis of classical philosophy (Platon, Aristotle) according to which "there is an essential, intelligible order, profound and eternal, hidden from our sights" (Rorty, 2001, p. 11). The essential idea of this point of view, anti-metaphysical, is, according to the American philosopher, the one of contingency of language which starts from Nietzsche, continues with the American pragmatists and culminates with Wittgenstein. "Language" means for Rorty a categorical frame or a conceptual scheme within witch moves and develops the human knowledge (ibid, p. 12). These conceptual schemes are not discovered, as it had been thought for centuries, but, the author says, are "created", so they are contingent. Consequently, there is no universal order, whether it might belong to universe or to human nature which cannot be known. And the categorical frame is produced by humans, so knowledge is possible without a reference to a system of "imposed" norms or behaviors. Consequently, further Rorty arguments, entering in this relativist spirit promoted by Ludwig Wittgestein, we see that those categorial frames of the language, which are the prints of a human community, do not appear as a universal environment, but they are adequate, contingent. The conclusions of Rorty: 1) each conviction is as good as any other; 2) "the truth" is an ambiguous term and it has as many significations as there are procedures to justify it; 3) there is nothing to say regarding the truth outside the justification procedures that a certain society uses (Rorty, 2001, p. 104).

Indifferent if we support or reject the moral relativism it is imposed to observe that ethical reflexing is in defense as a consequence of generating it; according to some authors not only in defensive but even in an anxious

disorder. In order to illustrate in a convincing manner the degree of disorder in which the moral language is in our world, Alisdair MacIntyre appeals to a suggestive imaginary exercise. He proposes ourselves to imagine a fantastic world where the nature sciences underwent the effects of a catastrophe. The scientists and the researchers are to be blamed for ecological disasters. Insurgences take place, laboratories are set on fire, scientists are killed. The ignorants` movement gets the power, they cancel the scientific education, arrest and execute a part of the scientists. Subsequently some of the scientists who managed to escape tried to resuscitate the scientific spirit. But they succeed to recover only fragments of the knowledge. All these fragments are unified in a set of practices bearing the name of old sciences. It results a world where the language of the nature's sciences continues to be partly used though it is in a high degree of disorder. This situation of disorder of science's language from the imaginary world is found in our real world and it characterizes the language of the moral. It decreases *our capacity for defining our transactions with others in moral terms*. Consequently, according to MacIntyre, the most striking feature of the contemporary moral speech resides in the fact that it is used for expressing endless disagreements, which leads to the situation that in our culture there is not any modality for insuring the moral agreement, the actual ethical debates being formulated in the terms of some contradictory morals (MacIntyre, 1998, pp. 29-33).

The main counter arguments raised against the moral relativism draw the attention on the logical coherence problems and conceptual consistency that it raises. For example if relativism is founded we cannot state that the habits of other communities, as abominable as they seems from the perspective of standards belonging to us, are morally inferior.

The arguments of moral relativism involve many controversies. Consequently the idea according to which our conceptions about morality are in fact based on the way in which people behave and not on ideal standards, on how they should behave, leads to the conclusion that our main moral values depend on cultural variations. Relativists accentuate the variations of the values we can meet in the cultures around us (in China the abortion is used as an important instrument for population control, while in many European countries it is not accepted not only when the mother's life is endangered). Moral standards from different cultures appear as a sort of

isolated islands of values, each of it justifying itself by the social skills of particular cultures.

The arguments supporting the moral relativism are not as solid as its many supporters would like. The fact that the doctrine always recruited adepts is explained by the impressive variety of developing ethical conceptions along the evolution of history and development of human culture. The fact that the doctrine always recruited adepts is explained by the impressive variety of ethical conceptions` development along the evolution of history and development of human culture. The acknowledgement of diversity of beliefs does not suppose the elimination of possibilities for sharing moral convictions better than others, which may be considered more real and more founded than all others (Wong, 2006, p. 475). The persistence of disagreements which seems endless, according to MacIntyre, does not exclude the possibility of moral judgments to be correct or incorrect about some actions, but only this situation does not justify the firmness of the relativist conclusion that there is not a unique, universal moral, the only one justified. As Wong indicates in the already mentioned work (Wong, 1984), the discussion about relativism is best delineated around the specific types of differences in the moral conception, assuming after that these particular differences are best explained by a theory which denies the existence of a single true moral.

The dispute relativism-universalism is not however so easily to disjoint. P. Singer considers that it is much too easy to consider ethics as a discipline which since old times has constituted itself in the battle field on which the supporters of some contrary visions engaged themselves in endless disputes without any chance for solving. The author does not see in ethics a series of different things without meaning, for different people, from different times and places. Rather, on the background of some heterogeneous approaches of the questions how should we live our life, their degree of convergence increases amazingly. Human nature has its own constants and there are a limited number of modalities where human beings can coexist and progress. One of the characteristics common to human nature from different societies is common to the nature of each intelligent and social animal and it is reflected in our behavior as it is reflected in the behavior of other primates (Singer, 2006, p. 573).

Leaving apart the discussion about the problem of human nature, the conclusions of an article about the origins of the moral in which are presented

premises which are solid enough in the view of rendering universal the moral, still worth to be reminded. Among the possible characteristics which are at the basis of the moral in the case of small dimensions societies there are: sociability as a human universal feature (anthropology confirms hereby the inspiration of Aristotle to have built his ontology on the man around this idea); the reciprocity which seems to be a functional condition of durability for relationships; the respect for human life is another eligible value, although the credit and priority granted to maintaining life varies a lot.

One of the major differences between the moral of small size societies and the societies of type in which we live resides in the greater role granted for the interpersonal relationships in the case of the first one. Not only that the moral is in their case less developed, but the moral becomes a means for reaching a desired purpose, whose complexity is increased by the practice of negotiation, is constantly bowed to practical tests and to public validity (Silberbauer, 2006, p. 53).

Referring to the same problem of the rapport between natural dispositions and moral, Ch. Darwin offers in his turn a feasible argument in the favor of ethical generalization. Analyzing this problem in *The Descent of Man* (1859) he concluded that: intelligent beings would naturally try to create rules to protect them so that any animal endowed with good shaped social instincts to acquire inevitably a moral conscience or feeling, as soon as his intellectual capabilities are developed as much as or almost as much as in human's case. He was convinced that social instincts from which emanated the primordial principle of human moral constitution, together with the active intellectual forces and the effects of habits would naturally lead to the *golden rule: behave with the others as you wish they behave with you*, and this lies at the basis of each moral (Darwin, 1981, pp. 105-106).

From the fact that the origin of moral sends us towards some natural springs common to many cultures and historical times, we cannot validly extract the conclusion that there exists a set of universal rules or values. The belief in the universality of the own rules is a characteristic of each community, and the fact that the image of good and bad differ from one place to another and from one historical period to another, without the possibility of doing something for this, has been for a long time an unanimous accepted fact. Once we have acknowledged this thing, the discovery that the personal moral vision is one which activates the impulse for saving the integrity of the

personal vision. At least this is how things were in occidental modernity which connected the necessity for saving the personal ethical conception with the idea of progress, dominant in modern thinking (Bauman, 2000).

Universalist or absolutist position (in this context it is preferred the term of universalism for the reasons previously mentioned) is disrupted by the multitude of the forms for manifesting the moral experience. According to this, there is only one possibility for correctly understanding and solving a conflictual situation in which are involved persons with different moral convictions, about the subject in discussion only one single valid truth can be sustained.

The confrontation between the two modalities for developing the ethical speech, the relativism and the universalism, fills the history of ethical thinking since its beginnings and is still going on at present. As Z. Bauman shows, relativism has always been *actual*, its persistence being minimized, being seen as a simple temporary obstacle in the way of mankind's evolution which can culminate only with the realization of the ideal of universalization. The ideal refuted in the *procedural concept of universalization*, although the problems have not been solved, it was considered that once the process was in progress along the time, the differences would be reduced and finally eliminated (Bauman, 2000, p. 48). It is interesting the appreciation of the quoted author, appreciation according to which in postmodernism the modern variant of universality transformed in the perspective of globalization, meaning in a vision of global spreading of information, technology and economical interdependence, which does not include the ecumenical transformation of political, cultural and moral authorities. The idea of universal morality, if it shall survive, could be based only on inborn, pre-social moral impulses, common to all people and opposed to those resulting from social adaptation as products and waists of the enactment action, command or education or on elementary structures (Bauman, 2000, p. 49). We still believe that not only in its postmodern variant – globalization – universalization did not end and is not definitively replaced. Despite its inherent moral limits, the ethical universality shall inspire many actions and shall animate for long periods the enthusiasm.

Globalization remains one of the key terms for understanding the important aspects of current political, economical, social and moral phenomena. Ethical globalization is one of the most recent and most

significant processes which developed in the domain of moral universalization. Global ethics is in fact defined as *a field of theoretical enquiry that addresses ethical questions and problems arising out of the global interconnection and independence of the world's population* (Hutchings, 2010, p. 9). In this meaning, the global ethics investigates and evaluates the standards which should govern the behaviour of individual or collective actors as participants to actions regarding the world as a whole. The new domain of ethics interferes with subjects and themes of reflection and action such as: international relations, the problem of misery and rights, ecological problems, business relations, the problem of peace and war etc.

During the last decades many initiatives were realized, organizations and institutes were built, documents and declarations for promoting the ethics at global level were elaborated. A great echo had the initiative called the *Parliament of the World's Religions* (a group gathering members from more than 40 religions) group which in 1993 adopted an *Initial Declaration* in order to institute a new world climate based on principles which should harmonize the new global order with an appropriate behaviour. The first statement of the declaration – *the world is in agony* – denotes the dramatic spirit in which the declaration is conceived. Even since the beginning the great problems making the earth such an unfriendly place are evoked: the conflicts permanently threatening the peace, the actions destroying the earthly ecosystem, the fear reigning all over the world, the people estranged from each other, poverty and famine, social inequalities, all sort of discrimination for many people, aggressions and aggressiveness. For this agony to disappear, the reconstruction of a new ethics based on a set of core values inspired by the religious principles is necessary. These values shall be at the basis of the norms guiding all the domains of life in family and community, for races, nations and religions. Further it is declared: the interdependence of all, one to another and to the communities they belong to, the assuming of individual responsibility. It is assumed the duty for observing the golden rule (we must treat others as we wish others to treat us). Other values invoked are: generosity, non-violence, respect, justice, peace. The supporters of this declaration consider humanity as their own family and they promise not to commit: oppressions, injuries, torture, homicides and violence against anybody.



In the conditions where the world lives the experiment of a fundamental crisis, a global economical ecological, political crisis, the signatories of the document consider necessary to adopt the fundament of the global ethics, which means a minimal fundamental consensus concerning binding values, irrevocable standards and fundamental moral attitudes. For this purpose it is necessary to adopt the principles of the new global ethics. They are: I) adaptation of global ethics to the new global order. For this purpose it is assumed everybody's responsibility for a better global order in the name of the human's rights, liberty, justice, peace and protection of the earth. II) The fundamental requirement for treating with humanity each human being. The necessity of this principle is explicitly extracted from the religious substratum but also from the millenary ethical traditions of the humanity. From all, it is chosen again the golden rule and it is proposed to be the irrevocable and unconditioned norm for all the areas where human beings manifest themselves. The forth principle involves very concrete standards that we, the people, must strictly observe. They derive from four broad, ancient guidelines for human behaviour which are found in most of the religions of the world. These standards are: 1) engagement for a culture of non-violence and respect for life; 2) engagement for a culture of solidarity and just economical order; 3) engagement for a culture of equality regarding the rights and the partnership between man and woman. The last principle of the declaration prescribes the necessity for transforming the conscience. As the world cannot change into a better one unless the individuals' conscience change, the authors of the declaration express their conviction that the values and the principles of the document shall essentially contribute to the transformation of the individual and collective conscience.

Without any doubt, the intentions of the authors, signatories and adepts of the declaration are remarkable, but we cannot ignore the fact that the declaration is a good opportunity for reaffirming also those values which the churches have so far supported and which had a contribution to throwing the world into agony. On the other side, it is hard to believe that a global society based on diversity, on the affirmation of liberal values and rationalism could go back to the values it gave up on centuries earlier, no matter how brilliant their packaging might be.

There are opinions convincing enough according to which the interrogations, the problems and the challenges that global ethics raises

cannot be approached and solved on the basis of values of religious inspiration (Hutchings, 2010, p. 2). Parekh persuasively argues that the global ethics is not a continuation of old traditions (religious or philosophical), an application of these traditions to global contemporary problems. He pretends there are two factors blocking these traditions from adequately answering the challenges of globalization. First of all, in a global world where the values of pluralism are equally involved in the consequences of globalization, standards or norms in the virtue of which coercive imposing of some values against others can be justified, are not agreed to. Second of all, the range of the relevant moral players in a globalized world includes all the collective, institutionalised types of actors as well as individual persons. The rules of such a conglomerate leave behind moral traditional theories which rather address to persons and do not for serious the collective dimension of moral agents. This is enough for rejecting both to religion and as well to an important part of philosophical ethics the role of source for global ethics (Hutchings, 2010, p. 13).

Another domain where globalization of ethics has an important place is that of business ethics. Some authors (A. Sikula Sr.) consider that we stepped into a new era of global ethical management. Contrary to classical proclamations on individualism, situationalism, relativism, unicity, pluralism, multiculturalism and diversity, our new interdependent and integrated world asks us to see it as an economical, social, political entity and as a technological market. If what is desired and waited for is harmony and peace we shall have to think collectively and not competitively. In the conditions where the world is controlled at least partly by people and personalities, the resemblances between human beings are much more significant than the differences. People have similar needs, will, wishes, motivations, vices and basal ethics; in the same measure they have habits, traditions, languages, manners, expectations, priorities, preferences and very different tastes. But morality sits beyond the borders drawn by differences (Sikula, 1996, p. 126).

Finally, the efforts for constituting the global ethics are notable attempts for solving the irreconcilable conflict between relativism, which cannot be eluded in the conditions where an impressive variety of modalities for conceiving morality exists; all these moralities are legitimate and universal and they cannot be given up to, as in the conditions of irreversible

advancement of the globalization process, a code of the human interaction according to the communication at this level is more than necessary.

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