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ETHICS AND THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES: LOGIC OF THE GENERAL VS. LOGIC OF THE SINGULAR

Mariselda TESSAROLO

Scholar Senior. University of Padua, Italy

Abstract: *Always present in sociological thought has been the need to understand subjective processes by tracing them historically, following their direction and assigning them a meaning, possibly unambiguous, capable of arriving at a single solution. Weber has a strong sense (conviction) of the irreducible contingency of historical events, and thus of the possibility that even the most enduring and well-established trend lines turn out to be reversible. Simmel (1968) observes that in freedom and equality, subjects today appear as bearers of the objective spirit of culture, but also of a self-centred objective structure of spiritual values. This scholar analyses how historical and social events originate from people's lives, and also how social figures are constructed from the interaction between individuals. The adaptations caused by culture, which tend towards the ideal, at the same time also become the content of life. Weber (1948) attempts to solve the problem of the relationship between ethics and politics by distinguishing two ideal types: the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility. The former strictly follows rights understood as absolutes; the latter, on the other hand, belongs to those whose virtues include a sense of responsibility and foresight (therefore the individual always assesses the consequences of his or her actions). The adaptations that have taken place in sociological theories since the last decades of the twentieth century will be considered. Among others: Elster (1985), for whom there are no societies, only individuals. The individual in today's societies relies on a particular and unrepeatable mixture of individual motivations.*

Keywords*: ethics and politics; ethics of conviction; individual motivations*

1. FOREWORD

Ethics is not only a branch of philosophy, it is also something that enables the ethical behavior of society, which has always existed despite turmoil and wars, to be constructed. Ethical behavior may be considered a 'way of life', i.e. a way of defending life. Mistakenly, the terms 'ethics' and 'morals' are used as synonyms. The word 'ethics' comes from the Greek word *èthos*, identifying the branch of philosophy that analyses the behavior that is considered correct (honest, transparent, responsible), in the sense of following values that are suitable for all circumstances. For the politician, for example, it is about making decisions that promote the common good while avoiding conflicts of interest and forms of corruption. The focus of ethics is on the norms that individuals should use in their daily lives. In addition, ethics, having as its object the moral values that determine the individual's behavior, is also understood as the search for one or more criteria enabling the individual to manage his or her freedom in a fitting and appropriate manner. It concerns man's sense of existence and defines the common morality that the individual should in any case follow[1]. In this sense, morals is the object of study of ethics. Regardless of the origin ascribed to it – from God or Man – it exists because moral norms, which are based on the nature of man, exist in any case. Ethics, therefore, can be understood as a 'normative institution'[2] and as a social one at the same time, because the term 'institution' means something unrelated to the individual. As a 'historical reservoir of meaning', in fact, it exists independently of the subjects who refer to it and it fulfils a social function. Moreover, its normativity pushes individuals to act and to experience positive or negative feelings based on the norms themselves.

[1] The adjective 'moral' comes from the Latin word *moràlia* meaning 'norms of conduct'. Morals focuses on the relationship between behavior, values and, therefore, the community.

[2] Institutions refer to organised groups or apparatuses that pursue particular goals in a systematic way, following certain rules and procedures. Institutions in this sense are: State, family, school, hospitals, church, economic enterprises, army, judiciary, sport etc.

The objective meaning of social events is made available by 'knowledge resources'. These are collected, experienced in one's body and transmitted by social institutions that are resources embedded in the individual, who applies the sedimented knowledge when acting and living his or her life (Berger &Luckmann, 2010:27). In primary and secondary socialisation, in addition to developing personal identity and understanding how one should act, one assumes his or her own responsibility by 'looking at others'. This is how one forms what G.H. Mead (1996) calls the 'generalised other', which is an ethical construct because the figure of the 'other' is matured by living in society, learning life from others, from the social group to which one belongs.

The 'generalised other' may be understood as a mechanism through which the community gains control over the conduct of individuals. Ultimately, the generalised other is a uniform entity comprising all the sources of authority that we have internalised and that regulate our relationship with reality. The personal act involved in a communication process and its signifying symbols are therefore at the core of the construction of reality through a process of relational experience.

In order to enact ethical behaviours, one has to pursue cross-cultural training, facilitated by an inclusive education, i.e. adapted, one that provides people with equally distributed learning and development opportunities, useful for better understanding the other. Such a situation can be facilitated by 'structuration theory'. According to this theory, the basic domain of study of the social sciences is neither the experience of the social actor, nor the experience of the individual actor, nor even the existence of any form of social totality: this domain concerns social practices ordered through time and space (Giddens, 1986:2). At this stage, the scholar tries to find a synthesis between social and individual forces in shaping reality. According to this theory, the actions of individuals and social structures are intrinsically linked and they influence each other. At the heart of Giddens's thinking is the realisation that just as individual actions are limited by structures, in the same way they also bring about social change. Actions 'act' on the reality that is formed and shapes the actions themselves. Structures, then, are the rules and resources that actors use in practices that produce society itself: structures impose constraints on actions, but at the same time make them possible.

Critics of contemporary culture are convinced that the crises of our time are different from those of the past, as they believe that modernity involves new ways of constructing both the social and the meaning of human life, leading to an unprecedented historical crisis of meaning. Rarely do scholars assume that a radical transformation of the basics of human condition has taken place. This is certainly a suggestive force, although its empirical verification is not possible. In order to better understand the changes that may often be identified as a crisis of meaning, one must consider that meaning is just a complex form of consciousness: it does not exist in itself, but is always in relation to an object (Berger & Luckmann, 2010). Meaning is the certainty that there is a relationship between experiences and actions. The present experience can be related to past experiences, near or distant, to typical forms of experience taken from the social store of knowledge. The meaning of present action is prospective; completed action, on the other hand, has a retrospective meaning. Actions are focused on social institutions that are accumulations, i.e. historical reservoirs of meaning helping to unburden the individual from the need to start over again each time to constantly reinvent the world.

Institutions (see footnote 2) are configurations of superstructures, juridically organised with the purpose of guaranteeing social relations by preserving and making available the meaning of both the individual's actions in the different fields of action and his or her overall conduct of life. Control of the production of meaning is accompanied by control of its transmission: through education or planned indoctrination, the aim is to get individuals to do and think what corresponds to the norms that are accepted and widespread in society.

2. PLURALISM AND THE RULES OF ETHICS

When crises of subjective and intersubjective meaning accumulate in society, to the point of creating a general social problem, the causes can be sought in the social structure and thus in society. When different value systems and/or fragments of different value systems coexist, we have what is called pluralism.

Marcuse *et al.* (1969) understands pluralism as a minimum condition for a modern democracy to function. Weber, who always pays attention to the agent (the one who performs the action),

distinguishes two types of ethics that could be considered opposing positions, although they are not necessarily expressions of different ethics. The scholar thinks that every behaviour can be rational with respect to value, with respect to purpose or with respect to both. This conclusion might seem a contradiction; instead, it stands as a confirmation of the polytheism of values, because it underlines how global society marks the transition from the ethics of conviction to the ethics of responsibility, implying the ability to make just choices where tradition has given way to multiple universes of values (Weber, 1948:56). Thus, justice as an ethical conviction is not enough: an ever more just and therefore more responsible justice must be sought. [3] A politician who follows ethics must make decisions that promote the common good. A politician who follows ethics must make decisions that promote the common good.

The ethics of conviction is driven by passion and follows certain principles that are considered absolute, irreducible and universally valid. Those who practise it think only of the conformity of their actions and not of the consequences of those actions, which relate to a moral order. On the other hand, the ethics of responsibility belongs to those whose virtues include a sense of responsibility and foresight. The outcome is ascribed to the personal actions of the person who does not assume absolute principles, and recognises the polytheism of values without trying to rank them on a hypothetical scale. This implies a duty to always evaluate one's actions according to the principle of rational action in relation to purpose. For Weber, any ethically oriented conduct can oscillate between two maxims that are radically different and irreconcilably opposed. However, he believes that these two approaches are not antithetical, but rather complement each other: only together they make the 'true man', that is, the man who has a vocation for politics, the one who succeeds in combining ends, means and consequences of action by embodying the above virtues (passion, responsibility and foresight). The politician's task would therefore be to mediate diversity, plurality, variety, and turns them into concord. Society should 'do something' so that there is equality of force, otherwise the weaker surrenders. For those in power, what is just is the force that can be exerted to control events, imposing it brazenly with arrogance and denialism.

Leaders must balance their ideological convictions with responsibility towards their voters, considering the long-term consequences of their policies. The ethics of conviction can guide our interactions based on values of fairness and honesty, while the ethics of responsibility pushes us to consider how our actions affect others emotionally.

Through the understanding and application of both ethics, one can aspire to a life that is not only morally consistent, but also socially responsible. Recent words exchanged between heads of state may mark a point of no return: those who have force only know force, and not justice, and they justify force: justice is one thing, justification is another. Pascal[4] says that we call 'peace' what is in reality the capitulation of the weaker: it may be justified, but it is not just. It takes strength to restrain aggression. If we want peace, we must be equals; if the forces are unequal, we move towards servitude or death. The hope for peace is only a force of the heart, because if we do not know how to defend our ideals, the use of violence will reoccur. We tend to live in the abuse of lies. Lies work when there is no knowledge of history. A flock wants a leader[5] and only judges victories as right: if an action is successful, it means it is right!

Pascal's pessimistic (or realistic?) position on the relationship between force and justice is well known. His hope is that these two poles may coexist for the good of man. But in this world justice has no possible way of asserting itself and using force for that purpose, so force inevitably prevails. 'Justice without force is powerless, force without justice is tyrannical'. The French philosopher finally admits with desolation that justice is subject to dispute, might is not: it is easily recognised and undisputed. Thus strength could not be given to justice, because strength contradicted justice and claimed that she alone was just. And since what is just could not be made strong, what is strong was made just (Rigoberto, 2019).

While on the one hand there are (objective) preferences, on the other hand there is an emotional complexity that leverages our attitudes, and therefore our choices, through positive emotions such as pleasure, admiration, joy, euphoria, hope; but also with negative emotions such as contempt, hatred, shame, disappointment, fear, envy etc. Although it is difficult to

[3] Weber expressed this clearly when he said that in the world, one must always attempt the impossible. But the person who undertakes this task must be a leader and also a hero, in the sober sense of the word.

[4] Blaise Pascal was born in 1623 and died in 1662.

[5] We think of Orwell's novel '1984' criticising the manipulation of hatred and ignorance.

incorporate all these emotions into a model of rationality, it would be irrational not to acknowledge that, during interactions, one must consider the other subject as a bearer of emotional instances. Based on these assumptions, we consider individual preferences to be 'socially' individual, e.g.: reciprocity of intentions, dislike of inequalities, altruism.

3. CONCLUSIONS

More recently, Elster (1985) asks: 'What holds a society together?'. His analysis develops along the lines of rational choice theory within methodological individualism, according to which every social phenomenon is the result of the combination of individual actions, beliefs or attitudes. Thus, there are no societies, only individuals interacting with each other. Envy, opportunism, consistency: these are the dominant factors that determine the actions of the individual, and every society rests on a particular and unrepeatable mixture of such individual motivations. Elster reviews the unpredictable effects of these categories and shows how social norms provide a kind of motivation for action that is irreducible to rationality.

Defending the homeland is the celebration of a ritual: it has value, but no ethical value in itself. It is ethically indifferent whether these values are realised by men, and in the case that they are merely realised, it is completely irrelevant whether a responsible will did it or not. 'Justice done' is always the same, whether it is done through human will or divine judgement; in any case it is not an ethical value, despite its undeniable value, because it is not in the line of responsibility. Now it is the 'I' that struggles to assume or is forced to assume the function of centre of the *Lebenswelt*, the 'world of life'. It is the 'I' that recreates the rest of the world as its own periphery, assigning, attributing and defining an undifferentiated relevance to its parts, according to its needs. The task of holding society together (be it solid or liquid) is made subsidiary, contracted out, or simply becomes part of everyday politics.

In late modernity, the theme of the foreigner becomes more important. It is a multifaceted issue arising from the phenomenon of migration. In his work *Postmodernity and its discontents* Bauman (1997) presents a hermeneutics of the migration phenomenon through the fetish of purity, shedding light on why the topic of migration remains so relevant for contemporary public opinion. The scholar argues that over the course of history only a few great ideas, ardently professed, have managed to remain innocent in the moment of their implementation. One of these concerns the right to an idea of 'cleanliness', which relates to the vision of an orderly state of affairs to be constructed and protected from all sorts of dangers: real, foreseeable or impossible to foresee. Cleanliness corresponds to a vision of order in which every element must be in its rightful place. However, there are things that do not find an orderly place in any context, and do not fit into the vision of an orderly world. This category of objects that nothing can save or make 'clean' generally includes beings that are mobile because of their nature, capable of moving from one place to another, and thus of appearing without having been invited, let alone expected. They come and move without control, imposing their presence without any regard for the intentions of architects and guardians of order. A foreigner is seen as a chaotic element, therefore representing an element of instability of order. Order means regularity, and an orderly space is an environment in which we recognise, figure out and understand ourselves. The arrival of the stranger causes the standard on which the security of everyday life rests to falter. Each model of purity generates a specific variant of impurity, and each order creates its own categories of people unfit for order and in conflict with it. The foreigner reminds us that efforts for order never suffice in a mobile, fluid and changing world. In a liquid world governed by uncertainty, the presence of the foreigner echoes the idea of poverty: they are an irritating reminder of how vulnerable our position in society is, and of the chronic fragility of our prosperity. In a world where freedom is measured by the range of consumer choices, these new subjects have not achieved freedom. There is no place for them in the consumerist game. They do not add anything to the repertoire of goods, nor do they help to sort out the excess of goods in warehouses (Bauman, 1997).

In today's societies, the individual relies on a particular and unrepeatable mixture of individual motivations. Reckwitz (2020) examines the causes and structures of the social life of 'singularisation' in which we live. What is singular is emphasised, confirming Weber's position concerning the objective spirit that is linked to the lives of individuals – so much so that society is constructed from the interaction between individuals. Such strong presence of individuals as singularities complicates access to an objective spirit, which is always intertwined with the subjectivity of

individuals, but not only: also with the ideals inherent in the two faces of ethics, which prove to be the bearers of the objective spirit of culture. The interaction between subjects generates a situation oscillating between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility. It is precisely this tireless search for balance between the two positions that society can inhabit, without falling into dictatorships on the one hand and anarchies on the other; and it does so by empowering individuals to participate democratically in building a society whose goal is peace.

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