

## *Validity of Moral Norms: Perspectives of Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*

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### Abstract

In classical antiquity and the European Middle Ages religion was the principal source of ethical norms, and moral life was considered to be a submission to a pre-established cosmological order. In modern times a radical change in ethics can be detected, due to a new concept of human subjectivity, and leading to relativistic views in ethics as well as the loss of absolutely certain moral orientation. Moral norms are considered to be human inventions differing from civilization to civilization, an insight which is gaining acceptance especially in Anglo-Saxon philosophy. For Freud as well, moral values are cultural products, and on this matter his thought resembles the empirical approach in moral philosophy. According to Freud, moral principles and conscience are the result of the sense of guilt and of instinctual renunciation thereby imposed. Whereas in Freud's psychoanalytical approach the diagnosis of the discomfort caused by culture and ethics prevails, philosophical ethical analysis is much more interested in the positive effects of morals in society.

*Keywords:* Ethics; social norms; morality; psychoanalysis.

### La Cuestión de la Validad de las Normas Morales a Partir de las Perspectivas de la Filosofía y el Psicoanálisis

#### Compendio

En la antigüedad clásica y en la Edad Media europea, la religión era la fuente principal de las normas éticas, y se consideraba a la vida moral como sumisión a un orden cosmológico preestablecido. En los tiempos modernos, se puede detectar una mudanza radical en la ética, debido a una nueva concepción de la subjetividad humana, lo que origina opiniones relativistas en la ética así como la pérdida de una orientación moral absolutamente cierta. Se considera a las normas morales como invenciones humanas, diferenciándolas de civilización a civilización, comprensión ésta que se está imponiendo especialmente en la filosofía anglo-sajónica. También para Freud, los valores morales son productos culturales, y a este respecto su pensamiento se parece con el abordaje empírico en la ética filosófica. Según Freud, los principios morales y la conciencia son resultado del sentimiento de culpa y de la renuncia pulsional impuesta de esta manera. Considerando que en el abordaje psicoanalítico de Freud prevalece el diagnóstico del malestar causado por la cultura y por la ética, el análisis ético-filosófico está mucho más interesado en los efectos positivos de la moralidad en la sociedad.

*Palabras clave:* Ética; normas sociales; moral; psicoanálisis.

Ethical issues permeate discussions in all areas, whether in science, politics, medicine or everyday life. Almost always, the great demand for ethical orientation today is explained in terms of the so-called "ethical crisis". Professionals considered to be specialists in the discipline of ethics, generally philosophers and theologians, enjoy great prestige. People flock to hear their lectures – at least when their name is associated with an expectation that they will satisfy the hopes of their audience, i.e., for certain (or even absolutely certain) guidance regarding the difference between good and evil, as well as the criteria of good and praiseworthy acts. Condemnation of many morally reprehensible acts is also expected.

Theologians bring with them a great tradition of "religious truths" consecrated by the teachings of the churches. Philosophers also frequently base their doctrines on the wisdom of classical authors of Greco-Roman antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Kantianism and Idealism of the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In those traditions, a faith prevailed in the possibility of drawing up objectively valid ethical systems. It is noteworthy that objectivistic and universalistic claims in ethics were no weaker than in the various branches of the theoretical disciplines. Especially in the ethics influenced by Platonism, validity claims related to normative issues were at the same level as the certainties of the mathematical theorems. Nowadays, such confidence is waning. However, at the same time, new attempts are constantly being made to rebuild the edifices of lost certainties; it seems that nostalgia for the good old days is the driving force behind such dogmatism.

One of the theses I intend to defend in this presentation is that traditional objectivism in ethics is an illusion, and that bewailing an "ethical crisis" is nothing but a misunderstanding. Once one discovers the illusionary nature of a doctrine, it loses its persuasive power. There is no use arguing over "certainties," in the subjective sense of the word. One may, however, ask whether they are well grounded. As for the "certainties" of ancient ethics, either they are based on pseudo-truths or else they are no more than subjective convictions.

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## Ancient Ethics from the Perspective of a Theological Cosmology

If today's world is a setting of life characterized by an "ethical crisis", what might be the inverse of this kind of world? The most natural response is the following: in both ancient Greco-Roman world and Middle Ages civilizations, an "ethical crisis" would have been unimaginable, because in both cases individual freedom could not be conceived of as a factor disturbing the existing order. The latter, in turn, was presented to people as both a normative order predetermined by divine powers, and as the sphere of a pre-established meaning of life. This can be explained by the fact that religion was the main perspective in which human conduct was perceived.

In Greek mythology, humans are left in the hands of unavoidable fate. The course of life, which often calls for deciding among different alternatives, frequently entangles them in insoluble conflicts: between liberty and necessity, human and divine perspectives, and individual and society; thus, a tragic vision of life prevails. In the great epic poems of Homer, the Iliad and the Odyssey, human acts are the direct result of acts of the gods. Conflicts among the gods provoke conflicts among men, such that wars among men are a mirror image of the wars of the gods. It seems that the supremacy of fate in the Greek world left no room for specifically ethical values, as distinct from prudential values. As is well known, the key concept of the ethical philosophies in ancient Greece was happiness. Thus, we may read the ethical treatises of that period as expositions of prudential rules appropriate to and advantageous within a pre-established way of life, with its immutable structure.

Different from the Greek gods, the God of the Old Testament gives orders to the Jewish people. He is a God who commands and, in case of disobedience, punishes: the people have a choice between recompense (or reward) when they obey and punishment when they disobey. A blind and unconditional obedience is required, including even a willingness to sacrifice in holocaust one's own son, as shown by Abraham's act of sacrifice, interrupted at the last minute by an angel of the Lord. This is an ethic of total submission to heteronymous rules, rules supposedly of supernatural origin, the absolute and objective validity of which was beyond any doubt.

Also in the Middle Ages, there prevailed in Europe an ethic of submission to the divine will, except that in the Christian world view, reward for obedience and punishment for disobedience are postponed until the Final Judgment Day. At the core of ethical-theological treatises is the idea of eternal salvation, which one must be worthy of, and thus it becomes the main motive for moral behavior, i.e., submission to the divine commands. The most perfect elaboration of this theme is found in Thomas Aquinas. According to him, God is not only the Primal Cause of the entire cosmos, but

also the Supreme End toward which all creatures strive. God is the First Cause of everything that happens in the world, although the autonomy of the individuals is also guaranteed by the secondary causality attributed to them.

The order of divine providence may be considered from two angles: first, in general terms, starting from the causality of the divine act of governing the whole creation; and second, from the special perspective, according to which a thing happens due to a particular causality, which is the performance of divine governance. Within the first mode, it may be perceived that nothing is opposed to the order of divine governance, because all divine order is directed toward the good: everything, in its activity and by its effort, directs itself toward the good, not toward evil. From the second perspective, every inclination of a thing, whether natural (derived from the species) or voluntary (derived from freedom), is nothing other than an impregnation of God, as the Prime Mover. Therefore all things attain that for which they are ordained by God, whether in a natural manner (as species) or in a voluntary manner (through liberty), somehow through their own initiative. For this reason God is said to order all things sweetly (*suaviter*). (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, qu. 103, art. 8, resp.)<sup>2</sup>

It may be deduced from all this that divine providence achieves its aims in nature through the species and in history through human freedom. However, this freedom is encompassed by a global "rationality," in which being, truth and goodness converge (*ens et verum et bonum convertuntur*): nature and human liberty are encompassed by the saving providence of God. Also within this theological and teleological conception of the world, human life, together with its specific ethic, is included in a pre-established order, such that for any individual, the true meaning of life is equally predetermined. In this context, ethics is incorporated within a theological-cosmological worldview. It may be perceived that individual freedom, even though recognized in principle, is of no importance to the choice and recognition of ethical and political norms, because it is already mounted on prefabricated tracks. Nevertheless, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the voices of individual subjects were heard more and more often, gradually coming to the attention of the public. Western subjectivism emerged from the underground, where it had led a clandestine life, and came to the surface (Becker, 1982, p. 35). It was mainly nominalism, humanism and the Protestant Reformation which, through their criticism of the essentialist view of the theological-cosmological order, the theological-ethical monopoly of the papacy and the guardianship of the faithful by the ecclesiastical authorities, brought about the triumph of the idea of individual freedom, which, starting at that time, was to have great importance, both for the development of a

<sup>2</sup> Free translation of the Latin text of Thomas Aquinas.

new kind of ethics and for political thinking (Becker, 1982). The consequence of this development was that traditional ethics lost its metaphysical basis, and with it, the foundation which had seemed to guarantee its objective validity. Finally, with seventeenth century English empiricism, the sciences were separated from ethical thinking, putting a distance between them that had never been present before.

To justify the validity of ethical norms, it is no longer possible to have recourse to singular empirical facts, because ideal essences and other normative elements have no place among this type of facts. Thus, it is no surprise that at the beginning of the modern sciences, doubts began to arise as to the objective validity of ethical arguments.

#### A Modern View of Ethics

Our abridged version of ethical thinking in the framework of a former cosmological order is, of course, only the explanation of the mainstream of moral ideas which determined private and public life in western societies for centuries (in Europe for more than two millenniums). There have always been critical reactions against the prevailing current of metaphysical and ethical conceptions, such as sophistic thought and skepticism in ancient time, and nominalism in the Middle Ages. These subjectivistic, relativistic and skeptical doctrines sometimes refuted a predominant dogma by affirming simply a contrary dogma, thus suggesting that there were no arguments by which the truth of one of the conflicting opinions could be proved; sometimes they adopted the method of suspending judgment or defended the viewpoint that universally reliable knowledge was unattainable in particular areas of investigation.

These controversial debates between the predominant doctrines and the unorthodox opinions can be left out of consideration here, especially since the latter never got widely accepted, and their influence on the official teachings remained insignificant. Our historical review is to be considered as a contrasting background, on which we can emphasize the radical innovations of modern moral reflection. Taking Popper's critical epistemology seriously, Herbert Keuth (2005) expressed one of the most representative skeptical modern viewpoints with regard of moral thinking concisely:

*"All empirical knowledge is fallible, but ethical knowledge, even fallible ethical knowledge, is impossible. In any case, all models of ethical knowledge proposed so far have failed. Hence, as we cannot know what we ought to do, we must content ourselves with deciding what we want to do". (p. 193)*

Similar skepticism concerning the possibility of scientific knowledge with regard of the objective validity of moral norms can be found in Max Weber. Thus older skeptical opinions come to be rehabilitated on the ground of highly

improved epistemological reflections. Freud is another representative critic of traditional ethical thought. Very well known is his opinion of the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. Freud clearly saw that that it is a commandment impossible to fulfill, and in his clinical experience he often had the opportunity to diagnose the pathogenic effects of all ideal standards that demand too much of the mental constitution of human beings. From a philosophical point of view another aspect of Freud's critical evaluation of traditional morality is more important, namely his opinion that ethical standards neither are godsend present nor universally valid rational principles, but only cultural inventions which, like other cultural creations, can be objects of critical examination, so that ethical relativism is taken for granted. By the way of focusing the question of moral norms in terms of psychoanalytical research any possibility of founding morality on the ground of *a priori* principles is excluded. As we will later see, in the context of Freud's psychoanalysis a revival of the traditional ways of justifying ethical principles is absolutely unconceivable. Freud does not justify moral principles, but analyses their supposed origin and their psychological influence on individual and social life.

Given that the old metaphysically-grounded ethics, which were unable to resist the force of empirical-scientific thinking (which, in turn, had overthrown the theological worldview, replacing it with a mechanical-causal conception of the world), it is only natural to ask the following question: how does ethics, the importance of which for social life is unquestionable, face the verdict of empirical-scientific thinking? In responding to this question, one reference, for those who opt for an empirical approach, would undoubtedly be education. It is obvious that any individual's morality, his attitude toward ethical values and norms, is a product of his education. Here we are faced with a circular phenomenon, because moral education itself is a social fact, which, at the same time, has a social function: moral attitudes and ethical values are transmitted from one generation to another. In short, morality, and with it education, are social and intergenerational phenomena.

This way of thinking was anticipated by authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Thomas Hobbes and David Hume. Other philosophers followed in their footsteps; for instance, John Leslie Mackie (1977) and Willard van Orman Quine. In his little essay, "On the Nature of Moral Values" (1981), Quine explains the acquisition of moral attitudes by the induction of certain habits: certain types of behavior are approved or rewarded by parents and educators, while others are disapproved or punished. These educators' reactions provoke in the learner agreeable feelings in the case of approval and disagreeable feelings when he suffers punishment or disapproval. The child begins to change his behavior in accordance with the expected

favorable reactions. In the beginning, good conduct is only a kind of technology through which the child tries to avoid unpleasant consequences and obtain pleasurable consequences. However, one may observe a transmutation of means into ends: in practice, things are often appreciated which previously were only means. To be able to eat fish we go fishing, but fishing can become a sport and a pleasurable activity. This psychological mechanism is of fundamental importance to moral education: by means of reward and punishment, the learner's habits change; but the learner finally transfers the appreciation to the praised act itself, thus attributing it greater intrinsic value. When good conduct is considered an end in itself, moral education has been successful. It is obvious that according to this approach, there is no intention to present an *a priori* foundation for ethical norms or moral conscience; quite the contrary, it is merely the genesis, both intergenerational and individual, of moral conduct.

Such an empirical approach also opens up a new perspective on the social dimension of moral behavior. According to David Hume (1972), one of the functions of moral teaching is an attempt to broaden sympathy (which in primary groups is a natural sentiment) to include within this sentiment, as far as possible, people who do not form a part of the circle of intimate friendships, thus contributing to the creation of a habit of benevolence among human beings. If this teaching is crowned with success, this will certainly bring about a social system of collaboration, which is advantageous to all.

A similar idea may be found in Quine (1981):

Thanks to the moral values that have been trained into us, however, plus any innate moral beginnings that there may have been, there is no clash of interests as we pursue our separate ways. Our scales of values blend in social harmony. (p. 60)

This positive view is intensified as Quine (1981) continues:

The moral values tend by virtue of their social character to be more uniform from person to person, within a culture, than many sensual and esthetic values. Hence the tendency with regard to the latter to allow that *gustibus non disputandum est*, while ascribing absoluteness and even divine origin to the moral law. (p. 61)

Here Quine (1981) merely manifests his comprehension of such tendencies; he himself is far from agreeing with the thesis of absolute truth or divine origin of moral law. To the contrary, he prefers less extravagant hypotheses to explain the uniformity of moral values among members of the same culture. This uniformity is surprisingly great, in comparison with other types of values, but it is not absolute (and, because of its origin in particular socialization processes, this would also be impossible). Quine observes that:

Disagreements on moral matters can arise at home, and even within oneself. When they do, one regrets the

methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science. The empirical foothold of scientific theory is in the predicted observable event; that of a moral code is in the observable moral act. But whereas we can test a prediction against the independent course of observable nature, we can judge the morality of an act only by our moral standards themselves. (p. 63)

And, with regard to the validity of ethical norms, a comparison between the methodologies of ethics and of the sciences leads to a simple and practically unquestionable consequence. As Quine (1981) states:

It is a bitter irony that so vital a matter as the difference between good and evil should have no comparable claim to objectivity. No wonder there have been efforts since earliest times to work a justification of moral values into the fabric of what might pass for factual science. For such, surely, were the myths of divine origins of moral law. (p. 63s)

Ethics' claim to objectivity is inappropriate, and any attempt to transform it into a factual science is doomed to failure. Even myths of the divine origin of moral values confirm this, claiming, as they do, to justify a dogma through recourse to an instance beyond the reach of human knowledge.

The conception of ethics presented here, initiated by David Hume (1972, Book III) and perfected by certain of his followers, could well be characterized as ethical positivism, by way of analogy with legal positivism. Law is a product of men; laws are created, whether explicitly by legislators or in a supplementary and informal manner, through judicial precedent or through tradition and customs (Mackie, 1977). Such is the common opinion. Could it be that every law is positive law? Faced with this question, there are differing opinions. For legal positivists, the answer is "yes", all law is positive; there is no other kind of law. The response of the proponents of so-called "natural law" is "no", behind the positive laws exists "natural law," in the form of juridical principles which, never being created (eternal principles, co-existing with God), are valid in all societies. The great legal positivists of the past century – Kelsen (1960), Hart (1961) and Alf Ross (1974) – submitted this position to a rigorous critique, showing that the principles of supposedly immutable natural law that the jusnaturalists had proposed are actually heterogeneous and often mutually contradictory, and that in nature itself norms are nowhere to be found.

The broader thesis that specific ethical norms are also human creations, and that in ethics, too, there are no eternal principles, is clearly expressed in the title of a book by John Leslie Mackie (1977), *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. The purpose of this type of philosophical ethics is not to conduct a destructive criticism; to the contrary, ethics is presented as an indispensable invention of humanity, since without its socializing function the survival of mankind, itself precarious, would be even more uncertain. Ethics, invented

in an informal manner by human beings, together with another human invention, law, guarantees a minimum of peace, collaboration and solidarity among human beings. This philosophical analysis explains the genesis of ethical values in utilitarian terms. However, the motive for respecting such values is not necessarily utilitarian, because, as a consequence habitually orienting oneself by such values, the means may become the end, and the moral value respected itself.

#### Ethics and Psychoanalysis

We have come to the point where we can now discuss the relationship between the new ethics and psychoanalysis. Ethics, seen in this way, is not based on a priori principles; rather, it is a cultural phenomenon. We already emphasized that this is a conception shared by psychoanalysis. For Freud also moral values are cultural products, the explanatory analysis of which is to be done using empirical models. It was precisely this empirical approach which was scandalous to many philosophers of German language, during the first half of the past century, when Freud was still alive, since ethics analyzed in this fashion loses its aura of a priori validity. Furthermore, a moral conscience derived by psychoanalysis from the Oedipus complex or drives, such as described by psychoanalysis, provoked a defense of a moral conscience as "practical reason" capable of knowing the moral principle, the Kantian categorical imperative, valid for every rational being. It was Paul Häberlin (1913), professor of philosophy at Basil, who, among others, opposed this idealistic-moral doctrine to Freud's anti-metaphysical view.

This idealist dogmatism has gone out of style. We might even say that the analytical-realistic philosophy espoused here bears a certain resemblance to Freudian thought, at least with regard to its empiricism, while it has almost nothing in common with those idealist philosophical ideas. Nevertheless, this affinity between the two ways of explaining moral values is just one side of the coin. There are also incompatibilities in these analyses. Thus, we must take a closer look at the points of convergence and divergence.

Freud's attempt to clarify moral phenomena by explanations of that sort typically given in empirical sciences is certainly unacceptable in traditional philosophy, since such an explanation abstains from founding ethical judgments on "practical reason", which in traditional ethical thinking allegedly prescribes how we ought to act. For the moral philosophy inspired in David Hume (1968, 1972, Book III), on the other hand, reason has only cognitive functions and not specific normative functions; i.e., it is not a source of norms. Consequently, here also, there is agreement with Freud's opinion. As for the distinction between good and evil, the respective judgments are, according to Freud, tied to men's happiness: in a simplifying manner, the term "good" can be employed to designate that, which promotes

happiness and the term "evil" is to signify that, which provokes failure to attain happiness. But this idea has to be modified, for the reason that Freud's discovery of the influence of unconscious mental phenomena on the behavior of his patients has consequences for the conception of moral conscience. Freud perceived that there were factors influencing the behavior and the emotional life of his patients like mental phenomena of which people normally are aware of in the state of total consciousness, even though they (the patients) were unconscious of them. There is no reason why it should be different in the case of moral conscience.

In Freud's "Civilization and its Discontents" we find a good summary of his ideas on this matter. "One may reject the suggestion of an original – as one might say, natural – capacity for discriminating between good and evil (Freud, 1929/1978, p. 792). Moral conscience is intimately associated to the sense of guilt. "People feel guilty (pious people call it "sinful") when they have done something they know to be bad." Nevertheless, "a person who has not actually committed a bad act, but has merely become aware of the intention to do so, can also hold himself guilty." "An extraneous influence is evidently at work; it is this that decides what is to be called good and bad" (Freud, 1929/1978, p. 792). The extraneous influence is, as we will see, the infringement of the super-ego, emerging from the sphere of the unconscious and striking on the consciousness. Freud not only breaks with the idea of rational origin of moral knowledge; over and above that he considers the moral conscience as an extraneous instance, thus calling into question the moral autonomy of the person.

There are two origins of the sense of guilt: one arising from the dread of losing the love of persons one is dependent upon; and "the later one from the dread of super-ego" (Freud, 1929/1978, p. 793).

A great change takes place as soon as the authority has been internalized by the development of a super-ego. The manifestations of conscience are then raised to a new level; to be accurate, one should not call them conscience and sense of guilt before this. At this point the dread of discovery ceases to operate and also once for all any difference between doing evil and wishing to do it, since nothing is hidden from the super-ego, not even thoughts. (Freud, 1929/1978, pp. 792-793)

Freud's tripartite division of mind into id, ego, and super-ego is in sharp contrast with the traditional rationalistic conception of an intrinsically coherent "practical reason" which is supposed to be capable of achieving moral knowledge of objective validity. It is true that within the mental apparatus the ego is the rational agency that operates according to the reality-principle modifying the drives and transforming them into socially acceptable conduct. But the rational function of ego is only *one* function of the mental apparatus, namely mediating between the id, i.e. the drives emerging from the sphere of the unconscious, and the authoritarian super-ego. There are simplifying interpretations

according to which in a healthy adult the three elements are in harmonious balance (Rohmann, 2000, p. 171). In Freud's explanations, however, the ego appears as a place of conflict between three principle enemies: the drives of id, the external dangers (perceived by ego) and the aggressiveness of super-ego (Fontana, 1994, p. 171). In the enduring conflict between the three parts of mind, the super-ego is by no means the superior and convincing instance that stipulates rules of moral conduct of obligatory validity. On the contrary, the result of the clash between the three instances depends on whether the fear of the aggressiveness of super-ego overcomes the energy of the drives emerging from id, which functions entirely according to the pleasure-pain principle, or whether the force of libidinal drives is stronger. The ego is not at the disposal of a form of rationality which by itself could be practical; the agency of the ego, according to the reality-principle, is merely a secondary and regulative mental activity, the success of which always is paid by loss of pleasure and happiness.

With regard to the value of human civilization, Freud is not ready to manifest his own opinion, but at least emphasizes the subjective character of such judgments.

My impartiality is all the easier to me since I know very little about these things and am sure only of one thing, that the judgments of value made by mankind are immediately determined by their desire of happiness: in other words, that those judgments are attempts to prop their illusions with arguments." (Freud, 1929/1978, p. 801).

It is beyond any doubt that according to Freud also judgments of moral value fall under this verdict.

The existence of wishes for happiness is undeniable; but as for the possibility of making them come true, Freud (1929/1978) was skeptical.

They seek happiness, they want to be happy and remain so. There are two sides of this striving, a positive and a negative; it aims on the one hand at eliminating pain and discomfort, on the other at the experience of intense pleasures...it is simply the pleasure-principle which draws up the program of life's purpose ...and yet its program is in conflict with the whole world, with the macrocosm as much as with the microcosm. It simply cannot be put to execution;... one might say the intention that man should be *happy* is not included in the scheme of *Creation*. (p. 772)

Here Freud (1929/1978) makes no reference to ancient ethics, with its stress on happiness; however, from an historical-philosophical point of view, we might read this passage as a rigorous critique of that moral philosophy based on the idea of a teleologically organized cosmos. For Freud, such a cosmos does not exist. Our world is not a dwelling place that is propitious for living happily; in that sense, one may say that the foundation of ancient ethics is an illusion. But considering that, from his own point of view, ethical thinking as grounded in a desire for happiness, Freud, in diagnosing the almost permanent frustration of that desire, manifests himself as a representative of modern skepticism

toward ethics, attributing little value to morality and to ethical thinking which pretends to establish universally valid norms of moral conduct. Here we have to take a look at Freud's self-evaluation concerning his innovatory discoveries, comparing the results of his own research with the revolutionary discoveries of Copernicus and Darwin, considering the latter ones from a psychological point of view.

In the course of centuries the naïve self-love of men has had to submit two major blows at the hands of science. The first was when they learned that our earth was not the centre of the universe but only a tiny fragment of a cosmic system of scarcely imaginable vastness. This is associated in our minds with the name of Copernicus... The second blow fell when biological research destroyed man's supposedly privileged place in creation and proved his descent from the animal kingdom and his ineradicable animal nature. This reevaluation has been accomplished in our days by Darwin, Wallace and their predecessors... But human megalomania will have suffered its third and most wounding blow from the psychological research of the present time which seeks to prove that the ego is not even master in its own house, but must content himself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind. (Freud 1920/1977, pp. 284-285)

Freud's place in the modern period of history of science coincides in fact with its culminating point when the last vestiges of traditional opinions in cosmology, for instance, were surmounted. The Copernican revolutionary conception had displaced the earth out of the centre of the universe, but in a first period the idea of a spherically closed universe was maintained and still defended, for instance, by Kepler and Galilei. Decades before, Giordano Bruno had elaborated the theory of an infinite *homogeneous universe without centre*, including infinite numbers of worlds. It was relatively late that the conception of *homogeneity* of the universe was given up; only since Edwin Powell Hubble in 1929 had discovered the centrifugal movements of the galaxies, the conception of a temporally changeable and expanding universe became generally accepted. If we compare the change from the Copernican homogeneous closed universe, where our earth is only a decentralized tiny fragment, to an infinite, always changing and expanding universe, we may say that there is a remarkable parallelism in Freud's idea of human mind: his theory of the psychic apparatus is at the same time a mechanistic and extremely decentralized conception of the phenomenon of psychic forces: the psychic apparatus is inhabited by ego, super-ego, and id,

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Popper (1984, p. 38): "As for Freud's epic of the Ego, the Super-ego, and the Id, no substantially stronger claim to scientific status can be made for it than for Homer's collected stories from Olympus. These theories describe some facts, but in the manner of myths. They contain most interesting psychological suggestions, but not in a testable form". I sympathize with this critique, but in the context of this article I am not interested in the epistemological status of what Popper calls Freud's "epic". I only want to underline the analogy of the mechanistic and decentralized conception of the universe in modern cosmology and its counterpart in psychoanalysis.

and neither of them is the central instance. Concerning the high degree of mechanization and decentralization, Freud's conception of the psychic apparatus can be understood as an analogy to the culminating point of modern cosmological theory.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of a completely decentralized self is indeed much more provocative than the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions. In his article "Freud and Moral Reflection" Richard Rorty (1986, pp. 1-27) elaborated a very coherent interpretation of the most important moral consequences of the Freudian theory. Freud usually designates ego, super-ego and id as psychic "instances"; Rorty (1986, pp. 4-5) however, calls them "quasi- persons" or simply "persons" with own opinions, desires and intentions; but at any present time only one of these persons is accessible, or more precisely, is partially accessible to introspection. The opinions and desires of id normally remain totally unconscious and moreover parts of the opinions and desires of ego and super-ego, but they can influence our behavior. The suggestion that unknown persons are parts of ourselves and induce us to do something what we prefer not to do is indeed much more shocking than the heliocentric ideas of Copernicus and Darwin's theory of our descent from the animal kingdom.

Rorty (1986, p.7) dissociates himself from the predominant interpretation of the unconscious in the sense of an effervescent mass of disarticulated instinctual forces – an idea that really can be confirmed by many passages in the Freudian work – and he emphasizes much more the aspect of a "rational" unconscious denoting one or more well-articulated systems of complex, highly sophisticated and obscure opinions and desires. This is the version of a pragmatic reader of the Freudian work, who shares with the author the opinion that Aristotelian questions concerning the "essence" and "true self" of man have become obsolete. For such a pragmatic intellectual, taking Freud seriously means that he wants to know these strange persons. To undertake this task now appears as a moral obligation which can be resumed by the Freudian formula "where id was, there shall ego be", so that the old imperative "know yourself" gets a new sense: it does not mean that ego is more "natural" or more truly the self than id. What we are morally obliged to know of ourselves is not our essence in the sense of human nature we share with all the members of our species and which in traditional ethics was the basis of moral responsibility for fellow human beings; in Rorty's interpretation (pp. 14-15), Freud appears as an advocate of an extremely individualistic morality, in which self-realization and self-responsibility are the principal themes.

Concerning the question of moral norms, the most important aspect is the fact that moral conscience, by Freud called super-ego, also loses its outstanding authority as the guardian of our intentions and actions. In contrast to

traditional opinions, it is no longer our central self or that former authoritarian part of ourselves which has access to universal truths and general principles of morality, valid for all human beings: it is only one and not even a particularly central part among other parts of a more extensive machine. Our sense of duty is nothing more than the internalization of accidental events, and the particular origin and development of this normative "instance" in every individual leaves its idiosyncratic imprints on it. Our sense of moral obligation is not a question of general ideas contemplated by the intellect, but it consists of traces of meetings between particular persons, namely persons having authority (parents, teachers) and persons subject to them (children). Freud thus conceives the moral conscience as imprint of a usually distorted memory of certain very particular events. Consequently, the moral character of a person is nothing more than the product of accidental circumstances; it is an empirical phenomenon, and it is, like all empirical phenomena, exposed to many influences and changeable.

In this complicated situation, the old imperative "know thyself" or has to be considered impossible to fulfill, or is to be interpreted in a new way. According to Rorty, Freud teaches us to tolerate our own ambiguities and evaluate our unsteadiness with sympathy. As we no longer must submit unconditionally to the commands of conscience, we can try to introspect with equanimity and, as far as we succeed in transforming what is unconscious into what is conscious, we are able to discover new forms of self-description and to project new forms of existence, alternatives which can be inspired by the conscious as well as by the unconscious part of our psychic faculties; for Rorty (1986, p. 8) thinks that the unconscious is a sensible and extravagant partner, from whose crazy opinions it can be very useful to learn. The purpose of the formation of character can no longer be the effort to reach a universally acceptable ideal; personal maturity rather consists in the capacity of a nominalistic – i.e. non-essentialistic – and ironical self-inspection. In this interpretation Freud is presented as the advocate of an extremely liberal and individualistic morality which corresponds especially to the ideals of a nominalistic and pragmatic intellectual. Freud teaches us to think of ourselves as machines which can be modeled and remodeled. A pragmatic and nominalistic intellectual like Rorty can use this theory in his strategies to form his character according to his freely adopted ideals and even make his character an object of art.

Rorty's interpretation of Freud's moral reflection culminates in an extremely individualistic ethic of pragmatic intellectuals. Moral attitudes are seen as individual attributes, and moral imperatives as self-imposed norms. In the perspective of this conception each individual lives in his private normative world. The problem is that morality thus described can only be the morality of intellectuals. But in

contrast to Rorty's presentation, we have to state that intellectuals of this kind do not live the life of hermits. There are socially valid norms in all societies which impose restrictions on the person's individual life, and nominalistic intellectuals are not exempt from the duty to observe the laws. The moral norms of private life cannot be completely isolated from the sphere of legal valid norms, for legal obligations are also morally relevant.

Rorty (1986, p. 11) is certainly right in saying that Freud's theory concerning social norms and his criticism of the rigor and cruelty of some ethical norms of his epoch are not very original (and for that reason only took into account the Freudian reflections on private morality). But Freud did not ignore the fact that psychic equilibrium requires a certain capacity of adaptation to the predominant and frequently authoritarian rules of society, so that psychoanalytic treatment cannot be restricted to a purely individualistic orientation, but has to help individuals to develop the necessary capacities of adaptation. In spite of the coherence of Rorty's interpretation we are certain that Freud had a less individualistic view of ethics. It is quite possible that it was his empirical realism that prevented Freud from rigorously deducing all the consequences of his individualistic starting-point. In contrast to it, the logical coherence of Rorty's interpretation is destructive, for it ends in the blind alley of a purely private, idiosyncratic morality. If one asks for the practical relevance of this conception, the answer cannot be positive. On the basis of such a theory it would be impossible to plead for any kind of social responsibility.

We must admit, however, that also in Freud there cannot be found any significant contribution to social ethics. What kind of ethic is needed for a democratic society is without any doubt an interesting question also for a pragmatic intellectual. Modern philosophers who share with Freud the opinion that ethical norms cannot be discovered by intellectual intuition of the essence of the human being, but are nothing but cultural inventions, generally continue to ask what kind of ethical and legal norms have to be created in order to optimize the functioning of democratic societies. The solution of this problem requires the interdisciplinary collaboration of philosophy, social sciences and jurisprudence. As for psychoanalysis, we reasonably can doubt of its competence in this question. Certainly the collaboration of social psychology can be very helpful.

This social dimension, which is not much emphasized in psychoanalysis, has still a more extensive dimension, which is in the centre of moral philosophy, namely the question of how to amplify the feeling of sympathy and solidarity between human beings. Freud for his part is principally interested in the intra-psychic dimension. He perceives that the super-ego frequently manifests itself as an intra-psychic despot, rigorously controlling the drives and, with this, preparing the subject for a reality in which one lives

renouncing most of his/her desires. He diagnoses an ambivalence: the irrational desires are innate and therefore cannot be eliminated, but their destiny in the cultural world created by man is frustration, the principal factor of which is moral conscience. One question remains unanswered: whether one should opt for moral acts and reduce aggressive tendencies, or whether it is preferable to reduce one's commitment to the "moral law", in order to increase the possibilities of transitory experiences of happiness by the satisfaction of pent-up needs (as compensation for additional social conflicts). In consequence of Freud's abstention "to express any opinion concerning the value of human civilization" (Freud, 1929/1978, p. 801), his judgment with regard to the social dimension of ethics is necessarily ambiguous. In Freud's system, ethics or morality can only be treated in terms of utility, comfort and convenience versus uselessness, discomfort and inconvenience. Judgments of utility depend on personal decisions; so each individual has to take responsibility for his personal judgment in this matter.<sup>4</sup>

In the philosophical analysis of moral norms, the idea of frustrated desires for happiness is not to be found. As for the question of whether morality has, in itself, its own reward or is frustrating to those who submit themselves to it, this is an intra-psychic issue which is outside the sphere of interest of moral philosophy. Since philosophy is not open to clinical reflections of this type, it does not run the risk of confounding pathological with healthy behavior. What is of interest to moral philosophy is the social dimension of moral behavior; and, in this regard, the question of the gratification of moral acts is put in social terms: in their reciprocity, moral acts imply gratification for the participants, because, to the degree that prevailing moral norms in a given culture are respected, solidarity among the societal members is reinforced.

As for reconstruction of the genesis of respect for moral values in educational processes, Quine's philosophical analysis stands out for its clarity, coherence and simplicity<sup>5</sup>, avoiding, as it does, unnecessary speculation, which doesn't clear up very much. In contrast, recourse to ancient myths, or invention of one's own myth, i.e., the Freudian myth of

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, Lacan is more radical. In conceiving psychoanalysis itself as a practical ethics, and precisely as the ethics of desire, he defends the thesis that the only ethical imperative is not to desist from your desire, for the price is too high for the subject. However, this does not mean that the subject should indiscriminately follow any and all of his desires. But as Lacan offers no qualitative typology of the desires, that "ethical" warning is totally ambivalent (cf. Lacan, 1988, pp. 384-385).

<sup>5</sup> The term "simplicity" should not be confused with "simplification," through which a complex problem is reduced to overly simple explanations. I use the former term here in contrast to explanations that are too extravagant and speculative and which, instead of explaining anything, obscure the problem even more.



the murder of the primeval father of the primitive horde, are not very satisfactory explanations; for that reason, I prefer not to analyze them in detail. Quine (1981, p. 61) calls the hypothesis of the divine origin of the moral law an extravagant hypothesis, replacing it with an empirical-rational explanation of the process of moral education. In modern scientific thought de-mythicize the supposed divine origin of moral principles is inevitable. In contrast, there may be found in Freud a tendency to re-mythicize: the preposterous Freudian speculation that myths – the Oedipus myth and his own myth of the primitive horde – are actual reports of real events in pre-historic times and that, in a mysterious collective memory, indeed, they are still present and lead to unconscious feelings of guilt, seems to be the fruit of a novelist's fantasy. Could this really be how to explain the origin of moral conscience? The attempt of Protestant theology of the twentieth century to demythologize the New Testament, i.e. to divest it from its mythological form in order to uncover the meaning or message underlying such forms may be a failure; perhaps there is no meaning separable from myths. Nevertheless it is the insight that a myth in itself cannot be an adequate explication. From a philosophical point of view, Freud, inventing myths, confounds mythological narratives with scientific explanation.

With regard to the large degree of agreement among human beings on the fundamental moral norms, especially within the same society, and even among people of different cultures, Quine's explanation is simple and convincing: the variety of moral norms is doubtless much more limited than that of other types of habits. This is explained by the fact that human societies generally face the same basic problems, have similar human needs and possess equal intellectual capacity to solve such life's problems. For this reason, at least at their core, moral norms (do not kill, do not steal, do not lie, keep your promise) are characterized by a high degree of uniformity. In fact, this explanation may already be found in David Hume (1972, Book III).

I would like to make one more observation regarding the loss of an absolutely secure normative orientation in our time. The journal, *Psicologia: Ciência e Profissão*, in its editorial (for the first issue of 1991) introducing the articles on ethics in that issue, states: "It is demonstrated ... that habits and customs that circumscribe an ethic are dismantled and lose their status of absolute truths, creating the uncomfortable but necessary relativization, the partial truth that does not produce an absence of ethics, as many have claimed, but that creates the possibility of recovery of an ethic to sustain the complexity of our time, of new advances and of the identification of such an ethic". (p. 3)

This loss is, in fact, a process on the path of clarification and self-awareness of human intelligence, for that ancient, supposedly certain, normative orientation rested upon a

great illusion. Overcoming illusory beliefs is, in itself, progress.

In contrast with the editors of *Psicologia: Ciência e Profissão* (1991), in our opinion the relativization of the old absolutist claims has not become necessary because of the complexity of our time; on the contrary, that ancient claim always surpassed human capacity and, already in the olden days, provoked skeptical and critical voices. Alas, these were always silenced by the grandiloquent idealist messages that so pleased the public and the political authorities alike. Bearing uncertainty is a challenge that absorbs energy and requires courage. It is no wonder that after the collapse of teleological cosmology, attempts have been made to ground a new objective and universally valid ethic in human subjectivity – in the "transcendental subject" of Kant and the "communicative reason" of Apel (1982) and of Habermas (1981). Today, such attempts are condemned to failure, because their foundations are unsustainable. A critique of these positions would require more space than is available in this paper, and is to be undertaken in another study.

Another attempt to escape from normative uncertainty is a search for ethical guidance in the wisdom of other cultures and religions, among which Buddhism enjoys great popularity. The problem of the West is not a lack of ethical "information." The ethical standards of the Occident (which, with reference to their main principles, are not so different from Buddhism), having been handed down from generation to generation, are present in the conscience of a large majority of persons. It is highly unlikely that the horrors of the Nazi holocaust and the massacres of the Gulag Archipelago may be explained simply by a "lack of ethics" on the part of the people involved. All we know of the biographies of those responsible for those horrors indicates that the main cause of the transformation of "normal people" into bureaucrats of death was their willingness to be seduced by ideologies that promised a paradise on earth (Lübbe, 1989). While they were acting as functionaries, that kind of ideological faith silenced the voice of conventional morality, by which those people still oriented themselves in their private lives (Lübbe, 1989)<sup>6</sup>. If this interpretation is correct - and this is a challenge to psychological research - the main cause of those horrors was an absence or weakness of capacity for public judgment, and not an ignorance of the ethical principles prevailing in modern cultures; nor was it the neutrality of scientific thinking with regard to ethical values, as Zygmunt Bauman proposes (Bauman, 1998).

As for the complexity of modern times, new ethical challenges have in fact arisen in the areas of ecology and

<sup>6</sup> I recently had a discussion with a convicted Communist who went so far as to defend the politics of Mao Tse Tung. When I made objection to the massacres Mao ordered, he responded: "If you want to make an omelet, you have to break some eggs." This response exemplifies the victory of blinding ideological fascination over political judgment.

medicine, where a new kind of ethical thinking is required in view of the new uncertainties. We are in the middle of a process of creation (or invention) of new ethical principles corresponding to new discoveries and unknown realities; this is a task in which many disciplines are collaborating, together with good sense of ordinary people.

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