



ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY AND PROBLEMS OF VALUES AND CHANGE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WESTERN WORLD

(HEIDEGGER – RICOEUR – RAWLS – HABERMAS)

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In 1970, some four decades ago, the French scientist and thinker Jacques Monod (Nobel Prize winner for Biology) wrote, 'No society can survive unless it is guided by an ethical system based on values that are intelligible to most of its members and accepted and respected by them. However, we have no such thing. Can modern societies maintain unlimited control over the amazing forces granted to them by science which direct a humanity steeped in optimism about its future and material pleasures? Can it, on this basis, resolve its unbearable tensions? Or is it destined to collapse?'¹ This observation sums up the moral and value-related problems facing modern societies and reflects the disquiet felt by intellectuals in those societies about questions of ethics and values. At one time Western thinkers shunned any mention of ethics and values

¹ Monod, Jacques, 'La Science et Ses Valeurs' ('Science and its Values') in *Pour une éthique de la connaissance (Knowledge Ethics)*, p146, quoted by Jacqueline Russ, *La Pensée Ethique contemporaine (Contemporary Ethical Thought)* coll: Que sais-je? 1994.



because triumphalist modernism dismissed such concepts as old-fashioned. They continued to think this way until the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas referred to ‘the prolonged suppression of ethical questions in Western thought.’¹

Recently, however, we have seen an unprecedented upsurge of interest in ethics and values, to the extent that the market for books on ethics and morality has really taken off. This demand has been fed from a number of sources including an uncomfortable awareness that the concept had declined (at least, since the German sociologist Max Weber propounded his theories), an accompanying absence of major ideological beliefs, the dominance of individualism in Western life, and the development of modern technology leading to the emergence of new moral questions and the adoption of new values. The demand for serious thinking on values and ethics has continued to grow, to a point where some people have begun to speak about a new ‘renaissance of values’ and a ‘return’ to the issue of morality.² The ‘Introduction’ to the book *Ethics Today* refers to ‘an insatiable appetite for ethics’³, with particular reference to the rules, principles, conditions and consequences of human actions. Although these questions have been debated since ancient times, the renewal of that debate today has a novel approach all of its own.

Today’s thinkers, those with a particular interest in ethics and values, find themselves having to reconcile a desire to establish a ‘universal ethical system’ (in response to what is known as ‘global civilisation’) with ‘multiple values’ and their implications, including the principles of ‘respect for differences’, ‘the protection of individual rights’ and ‘maintaining one’s original identity’, that is to say, the paradox of a single uniform system of ‘ethics’ and a plurality of ‘values’.

How can something that is plural become singular? A study on *Ethics and Value Dimension* by four leading Western thinkers focuses on

1 Habermas, Jürgen and Rawls, John, *Débat sur la Justice Politique (Debate on Political Justice)*, traduction de Rainer Rochlitz, Coll: Humanités, Cerf, 1997, p9.

2 Russ, Jacqueline, *La pensée Ethique Contemporaine (Contemporary Ethical Thought)*, op. cit., p122.

3 Canto-Sperber, Monique, in *Ethiques D’aujourd’hui (Ethics Today)*, seminar 1, Puf, 2004, p10.

the following topics: The Ethics of Care (Martin Heidegger, 1889-1976), Discourse Ethic (Jürgen Habermas, 1929-), The Ethics of Justice (John Rawls, 1921-2002) and Ethics and the Self (Paul Ricoeur, 1913-2005).

Martin Heidegger: The Ethics of Care

Several significant observations have been made about Heidegger's position on ethics. The main body of the *Historical Dictionary of the Philosophy of Heidegger*, which is devoted to an analysis of the main concepts of Heidegger's thought, does not contain either the word 'ethics' or the word 'morality'¹. Joanna Hodge begins her book *Heidegger and Ethics* with the following sentence: 'Heidegger himself wrote only very little about ethics, and the sole purpose of what he did write was to point out that ethical questions were of no concern to him.'² Many people asked about Heidegger's position on ethics said much the same as Joanna Hodge, and it was commonly held that, in view of Heidegger's dislike of the concept of ethics as a philosophical topic, his thought was devoid of anything resembling an 'ethical philosophy'.

In contrast to this widespread view, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy believed that 'only by a blind reading, or no reading at all, could she have thought that Heidegger cared nothing for ethical matters.'³ What he meant was that if by ethics we mean a set of principles and goals for governing behaviour, whether imposed or voluntary, individual or collective, Heidegger had no philosophy in that sense. However, no true philosophy evaluates ethics in this way. It is not the job of philosophy to set standards of behaviour or codify values. What it is required is to examine human 'actions' as they are, that is to see what it is that puts them in a position to choose criteria or values.

If it is fair to claim that ethics does not make an overt appearance in

¹ Alfred Danker, *The Historical Dictionary of the Philosophy of Heidegger*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Lanham, Maryland, and London, 2000.

² Hodge, Joanna, *Heidegger and Ethics*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p1.

³ Nancy, Jean-Luc, Entrée: *Heidegger*, in *Dictionnaire d'Ethique et de Philosophie Morale (Dictionary of Ethics and Moral Philosophy)*, ed. Monique Canto-Sperber, Puf, 1996.



Heidegger's work, it would also – paradoxically – be true to say that it was always of major importance and a driving force in his thought; one must, therefore, look for it within the context of Heidegger's philosophy as a whole. His entire thought was ethics-oriented, rather than any specific part of it. The notion of 'Being' – Heidegger's favourite term for his ideational construct – is permeated with the ethical ethos to a point where he referred to it as the 'fundamental ethic', thus equating his thought with ethics.

It would be true to say that if we look at any philosophy we will find that it runs counter to the anthropological approach (that is, to a view of man, either positive or negative), and this is also true of a philosophy such as Heidegger's, which claims to be in opposition to the humanistic or humanitarian position. Even so, it is also the case that any study of Man must, in fact, be a study of human behaviour, and this is essentially what ethics is.

As Heidegger had a contrary view of Man that inclined towards negation, he looked at man from the point of view of his actions, that is to say, his ethics. In Heidegger's view, human action is related to Being, whether this means suppressing or revealing it. Action alone is the means through which man fulfils his mission of revealing the existence of creation, rather than suppressing it – which is more generally the case – thus 'liberating man' to fulfil his 'humanness'. Unlike the rest of creation, Man is endowed with an ethical sense, in that he is the only creature that is 'opened up to' his own Being, the ontological Being and Being in its widest sense, which is usually called Man, and which Heidegger prefers to call 'Dasein'. This 'being opened up', which reveals the meaning of his existence, is not the product of a high 'ideal' or 'value', as, for example, would be the view of Ibn Arabi, who had a unique understanding of those concepts, but of 'Man' and 'mankind', as expressed by the notion of a 'key'. In Heidegger's view, ontological existence is the 'gate' and Man is its key. Man is the key to the cosmos and it is Man who reveals the reality of Being.

The man [Heidegger? Tr.] said, 'Man is the key to the existence of existence', while Heidegger sees this key not as a Divine gift from Heaven but as emanating from Man, since Man is the 'ultimate in openness' and



its original source. He has not received his values and criteria from any other prior source.

This distinctive feature of Mankind is just a human trait, no more and no less. It is not an honour that has been imposed upon him by any source. He is obliged to assume 'responsibility' (this is a clear moral concept) for Being since he alone is the one who reveals Being and its meaning. In this sense, he alone is a 'moral being'. His responsibility is threefold: towards Being, which represents his own existence, towards the Being of ontological existence and towards Being in general.

He has no 'honourable status' (also a moral concept), unless this responsibility can be described as such. The equivalent of an 'honourable status' of a human being is an implied part of his commitment (also a moral concept) to reveal the meaning of Being. According to this meaning, 'the fundamental ethic' is nothing more or less than an 'anthology of the celebration of meaning'¹. And also according to it, ethics – in Heidegger's view – is devoid of any metaphysical or Divine foundation.

The difference between Man and other creatures is that he is the only one who holds the key to Being.

This monopoly is not a 'privilege' or even a mark of distinction, it is an obligation, not a badge of honour. Man's 'monopolisation' of the concept of Being implies that he is 'open' to the rest of existence in that he is the only creature that is 'open' and not 'closed in' upon himself (as inanimate creation is) or concerned with his immediate environment and consumption needs (as animals are).

Moreover, he is the only creature that is 'open' to those things that are 'closed in' upon themselves such as inanimate objects, plants and animals. He is the 'open creature' that holds within himself a thorough understanding of the secrets of Being.

Furthermore, Man is not merely the only 'open creature' in existence. He is also the 'host', 'protector' and 'guardian' of Being, who is required to fulfil two functions: to 'keep the pledge' and to 'be a good guardian'.

1 *Ibid*, p648.



This is because Man is essentially the agent in which, and through which, ontological existence is made manifest. He is also the creature that provides the tongue through which creation as a whole speaks and declares its essential existence. He is the Voice of Being and the agent who makes it manifest. And if he alone has been granted a tongue, he has not been granted it so that he can use it exclusively to express his own essential existence but, rather, to lend it to others. The tongue is the agent for entrusting Man to fulfil his obligation towards Being; it is not Man's function to become totally absorbed in himself. His true basic function is to be attached – or subjoined – to ontological existence and to be the tongue that speaks in its name. Man's existential role is to 'reveal existence', to 'reveal on its behalf' and to make it manifest, not in the sense of 'producing', 'creating' or 'fabricating' it but in the sense of 'reciting' it as it actually is, safeguarding it as it actually is and preserving it and coexisting happily with it. Heidegger describes this function with his famous sentence, 'Leave Being in the state that it is in its essence. Do not subject it to coercion; do not replace it with anything else and do not seek to create it,' that is, leave Being to 'reveal its own reality' by itself; do not seek to force it into a mould, but 'listen' to it. Do not try to 'tame it' or 'manage' it, but 'pay heed' to it and 'support' it. Do not 'prepare tools' to 'compel' it to do things but 'prepare a tongue', which will make it manifest. This, in Heidegger's view, is the ethical approach to dealing with Being.

'Leave', in Heidegger's parlance, usually has the meaning of 'liberation', so 'leave Being' means 'liberate it'. Here 'liberate it' means 'help it to be open-handed with what it has', that is to reveal and declare its reality. While the German philosopher (and Heidegger's teacher) Edmund Husserl adopted the slogan, 'Let us take account of things', his pupil took the opposite position with the slogan, 'Let us liberate things'. 'We should liberate Being' means we should 'leave it to be the Being that it is', that is we should 'let it be'. 'Leave' in this sense does not mean 'abandon', 'forsake', 'don't care about' or 'ignore' ... nor does it indicate any romantic contemplation of Being, nor its opposite. If 'making use of Being' is an acceptable – or required – concept here, then 'making use of the truth, or reality' is vital, that is making use of what will safeguard and preserve



the 'Beingness of Being'. This means making use of 'Beingness' and 'perpetuity', not 'evanescence' and 'ephemerality'.

To sum up, 'leave' here means 'devote yourself to Being with all your mind and awareness'. 'Devote' here does not merely mean making use of Being, safeguarding it, giving one's attention to it and regulating it, but rather, being open to its efflorescence. 'Leave' in this context does not mean being consumed with and absorbed in Being, but the opposite; it means not suppressing Being, so that it manifests itself as it actually is, that is so that it allows what is in our minds to coincide with what our eyes see; this means 'revealing' and not 'concealing', 'manifesting' and not 'hiding'.

In essence, we should submit ourselves to Being as Manifest Being and leave ourselves to the revelation of Being as it is. We shall then understand the meaning of 'being free' and comprehend that 'freedom' consists of letting the Beingness of Being become manifest, while 'truth' or 'reality' means being aware of the revelation of Being, through which openness is achieved.

Heidegger links the ethics of dealing with Being with the concept of values that played such a dominant role in the history of Western thought. In a letter to Henry Mongis, author of the book *Heidegger and Critique of the Notion of Value*, he acknowledges the need for a 'critical clarification of the concept of value through a comprehensive examination of the history of Western philosophy', the vital importance of 'a critique of that concept' and the necessity of 'linking it with the question of existence'¹. It was Plato who first embarked on a debate about Being in the context of this value logic, while Nietzsche developed the debate to its logical conclusion. In fact, by basing his philosophy on the concept of values, Nietzsche was actually a Platonist without realising it; indeed, his Platonism was without bounds, in that Plato was the pioneer *par excellence* of the philosophy of values².

1 Heidegger, Martin, 'Lettre à Henri Mongis' ('Letter to Henri Mongis') in Henri Mongis, *Heidegger et la Critique du Concept de Valeur* (Heidegger and the Critique of the Value Concept), Martinus Nijhoff, La Haye, 1976, pVIII.

2 Heidegger, Martin, *Questions 1 et 2 (Questions 1 and 2)*. Cher: Gallimard, 1993, p545. See also: Heidegger, Martin, *Essais et conférences (Essays and Conferences)*, Cher: Gallimard, 1958, p91.



While Nietzsche pondered over the logic of ‘values’, he saw classical metaphysics as leading to things being endowed with false values and announced the death of the source of values – the Christian moral God. Hence his nihilistic premise that everything is valueless and futile and that the ‘Christian God’ has lost His power over Existence and human destiny. This meant that there were no moral controls or metaphysical commands and prohibitions to dominate Existence¹.

However, Nietzsche did not have a valid view or understanding of nihilism. Indeed, if he did not have this nihilistic tendency that was critical of metaphysics, he would have taken a contrary position and encouraged it as a factor for freeing Existence from its burdens and establishing new values derived from the Will to Power². In considering nihilism and the notion of Existence as having no meaning, he failed to see the true substance of Being. If he had posed the question, ‘Why has Being no meaning?’ and replied, ‘Because the false nature of the old values has become clear, so they have collapsed,’ his position would have been far removed from true nihilism and closer to quasi-nihilism. That is why Heidegger says, ‘Nietzsche never thought about the true nature of metaphysics’³, ie. Nietzsche never entertained any doubts that the cause of nihilism was the meaninglessness of Existence and that he should ponder on the destiny of Beingness and understand its abandonment of Existence and the absence of Existence. This is the true nihilist position, rather than the so-called quasi-nihilist one⁴.

So Nietzsche did not think of nihilism in isolation. He was a nihilist who thought about nihilism and did not see. He was blinded by the concept of ‘value’; he could only think of Beingness if value was his starting point and he had no perception of the nihilism of being⁵. What Nietzsche sought to use

1 Heidegger, Martin, *Nietzsche*, Vol. 2. Paris: Mayenne, 1989, p32. See also Heidegger, Martin,, *Essais...*, (Essays ...) *op. cit.*, p220-221.

2 *Ibid*, p88-89.

3 Heidegger, Martin, *Chemins qui Ne Mènent Nulle Part (Roads Leading to Nowhere)*. Cher: Gallimard, 1987, p299.

4 *Ibid*, p319.

5 *Ibid*, p49.



as a means of transcending nihilism, ie. values, was actually the very source of nihilism; by this we mean Beingness becoming a 'value' and then fading away. This is aptly expressed by the statement, 'It was he who perfected nihilism.'¹ This means that if Nietzsche knew how to diagnose, intensify and propagate nihilism in the modern age, he had no idea of its origins or principles, nor had he any remedy for it. The reason for nihilism was not, as he maintained, Being losing its meaning, rather it was Beingness that was absent. One could say that Beingness abandoned Being just as Being abandoned Beingness². That was something that Nietzsche never thought about. Hence debate with Nietzsche was like 'a debate with nihilism'³.

Nietzsche was the 'Final Thinker'. By this we mean that he put the seal on metaphysics and marked the end of its history. Heidegger would not have looked at him the way he did were it not for two factors. Firstly, he found his thought combined all the reasons why the concept of metaphysics was eternally recurring, including the notions of the 'self', the 'will', 'humanness' and 'values'. Nietzsche's philosophy was thus the last truth to reveal itself to a thinker about Being; by this we mean the reality of Being being a Will to Power and a combination of all earlier truths⁴. Secondly, Nietzsche's ideas were not the arbitrary products of a dreaming and marginalised mind, but were of serious historical significance. This was because of what Nietzsche had to say about the triumph of the Will to Power and the emergence of the Superman and his empowerment on earth during our time. The Superman is living among us at present. More than that, he is us. Beingness prevails among us in the form of a growing, dominant and unconditional Will to Power⁵. That was Nietzsche's true vision, which has become reality in the Age of Technology⁶.

1 *Ibid*, p273-285.

2 Greish, Jean, 'Etudes Heideggériennes: Les 'Contributions à la Philosophie: (a partir de l' EREIGNIS » de Martin Heidegger) ('Heideggerian Studies : Contributions to Philosophy (from Martin Heidegger's EREIGNIS ')), *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques (Review of Philosophical and Theological Sciences)*, 73, 1989, p613.

3 Heidegger, Martin, *Ecrits politiques (Political Writings)*, Millau: Gallimard, 1995, p200.

4 Heidegger, *Nietzsche 2*, *op. cit.*, p243.

5 Heidegger, *Chemins ... (Roads ...)* *op. cit.*, p350.

6 Heidegger, Martin, *Concepts Fondamentaux (Fundamental Concepts)*, Millau: Gallimard, 1998, p32.



Jürgen Habermas: the Ethics of Discourse

Over the past quarter century, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has made a lively contribution to a series of deep philosophical debates involving a new look at various moral and political issues caused by the changes that have taken place in Western societies. Which of these should one consider first? ‘Welfare’ (the value of ‘goodness’) or ‘justice’ (the value of ‘justice’)? The ‘collectivists’ were inclined to put the value of ‘goodness’ or ‘welfare’ before the value of ‘justice’, their motive being that they wished to see the ‘community’ (or ‘group’) giving preference to ‘goodness’ (the central tenet of their thought) rather than the principle of ‘justice’, which produces disputes between groups and results in settlements that tend to result in the ‘welfare’ of the ‘community’ falling by the wayside. On the other hand, the ‘liberals’ were inclined to give priority to ‘justice’ over ‘welfare’. In Habermas’ view the ‘goodness’ (or welfare) of an individual in the community and communal ‘justice’ should not be seen as mutually incompatible or in competition with each other.

In fact, ethics is sometimes clear and sometimes obscure. In Habermas’ numerous books it takes a form sometimes described as ‘the ethics of discourse’ or ‘the morality of intercommunication’. Two books in particular deal directly with the issues of morality and values in his thought – they are *Morality and Intercommunication* (1986) and *On the Ethics of Discourse* (1991); there are also several other books dealing with questions that are covered in his political writings (1990).

The Habermas version of ethics combines elements that are capable of being ‘blended’ as well as a choice of options. Where the ethics of discourse is concerned, Habermas endeavours to produce a unique and creative blend of two mutually contradictory ethical systems: he tries to combine the universal and pure absolute (as in Kant’s ascetic morality) with modern moral relativism. He also defends the rational, aware ethical tendency against the impulsive moral tendency, and is inclined to give preference to ‘manners’, in the language of the ancients, and ‘ethics’, in modern parlance, over ‘fundamentalist morality’ shorn of its contexts, which take no account of the circumstances in which those ethics are applied. However, despite his inclination to take context into account, he is



not prepared to abandon his universalist view of moral action in favour of relativism under any conditions¹.

Like Kant, Habermas saw the goal of every ethical theory as being to establish the basic principle for moral interaction so that appropriate moral criteria could be set up. Here we can see a divergence between Habermas' moral view and Kant's. 'Instead of my imposing upon everybody else a moral code that I want to be universal (as Kant did), I need to submit my code to everybody else so that we can examine it together through discussion. The question of claiming it is universal (as the ethics of discourse sought by Habermas claims to be) is the point where the problem arises; this is because there would be differences of opinion over where the centre of gravity lay and it would be impossible to reach a consensus (as Kant pointed out) on what constituted a universal law, though in Habermas' view it was possible to reach a consensus on a universal standard rule.²' On this basis, the essential difference between Kant's ethics and Habermas' ethics is that the former sets out criteria for moral action in a way that leaves no room for doubt, while the later bases them on the principle of 'rules open to discussion', which may either succeed or fail.

This takes us on from Kant's proposition about 'rational beings' to Habermas' 'contextualisation' of those beings within their contexts, that is to say, seeing them as 'social beings'³.

This is what he describes as the 'universal principle', which has been abbreviated in the Latin script by the first letter of the word 'universal', ie. U. By this he means the principle that allows the rules of debate between members of a group to be transformed from principles governing private discussion (or internal dialogue between an individual and himself, following which he imposes those rules upon others after he has approved

1 Fortin-Melkevik, Anne, entry: Habermas, in *Dictionnaire d'Éthique et de Philosophie Morale (Dictionary of Ethics and Moral Philosophy)*, op., cit.

2 Habermas, Jürgen, *Morale et Communication, Conscience Morale et Activité Communicationnelle (Ethics and Communication : Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action)*, Cerf, 1986, p88.

3 Habermas, Jürgen, *Idealisations et Communication, Agir Communicationnel et Usage de la Raison (Idealisation and Communication : Communicative Activity and the Use of Reason)*, p39.



them all by himself without consulting anyone else) to rules setting out the procedures for debate between individual members of the group, which will lead to consensus after a period of discussion¹.

This is how agreement is reached. It stipulates that there should be no standard rules, since they would constitute 'power' or 'jurisdiction', that is, unless they expressed the 'public will', thereby becoming the equivalent of a 'universal law'.

[I have omitted four lines here that refer to Karl Otto Apel, because I can't even make a guess at what they mean. Tr.]

These amendments by Habermas to Kant's moral philosophy had a practical effect on his ethical outlook. For example, according to him, the subject 'What is the situation regarding a morally just person?' could be a subject for rational discussion within the context of practical discourse. According to this approach, questions such as 'What is a good life?' or 'What is happiness?' are not 'existential issues' but 'propriety' ones and are concerned with demonstrating the validity of any normative precept that may be devised in this connection. Here Habermas makes a distinction between 'ethics' and 'morality' on the basis that 'ethics' is related to individuals from the point of view of their value choices (ie. their choices of the values they believe in), while 'morality' refers to the experimental choice of actions driven by practical discussions aimed at establishing the 'validity', or otherwise, of the rules and standards produced by the world in which we live.

More than that, the question does not merely concern 'collective ethics' but also the relationship of those ethics to (a) politics and (b) their nature with respect to 'international ethics'. Great importance is attached to their political aspect and even more importance is attached to their international aspect, since it is the business of 'the ethics of discourse' not to exclude anyone from the discussions and to avoid any ethnic conflict.

¹ Habermas, Jürgen, *Morale et Communication (Ethics and Communication)*, p78.

John Rawls: the Ethics of Justice

Both Habermas and Rawls are prepared to resort to ‘hypothetical situations’. We have already seen how Habermas postulates ‘the ideal dialogue’ and now we come across Rawls postulating the ‘original position’ in order to extrapolate his principles with regard to justice. Both of them saw the dialogue that took place between them, in the manner usually described by Heidegger as ‘dialogue between philosophers’, as an amicable, brotherly dialogue.

Habermas acknowledged that Rawls had shaken off the dust that covered the major moral questions in contemporary Western thought, and that he had restored the status of moral studies as a serious academic discipline (beginning with his famous work *The Theory of Justice*.¹) In his view Kant was the first person to formulate the basic moral issue in a way that could be replied to rationally. That issue happened to be: If a dispute should break out between members of the community, we shall be required to act in a way that is ‘good’ for everybody. In doing so it should be borne in mind that the question ‘What is good?’ is a moral question *par excellence*. That was the question that inspired Rawls in his theory of justice, and which he rephrased by asking, ‘How can the citizens of a political community live together according to the requirements of justice?’ Rawls objected to it on two grounds – expediency and value grievance – and proposed an interactive reading between the two essential components of the concept that ruled Kant’s moral thinking: the notion of ‘volitional independence.’

If, in ‘The Ethics of Discourse’, Habermas made ‘discourse’ a means of establishing criteria for the rules of conduct, Rawls made ‘negotiation’ a basis for establishing the principles of interaction between people in defending their interests. This negotiation has nothing to do with setting up an institutional authority, in the case of the ‘original position’, as maintained by doctrinalists of the social contract, but involves the establishment of the principles of social justice. The conclusion was: If certain people look at things in an unbiased way, and are hidden behind a screen so that they

¹ Habermas, Jürgen, and Rawls, John, *Debat sur la Justice Politique (Debate on Political Justice)*, *op. cit.* p9.



do not know each other's identity, talents, social status, tastes or aims in life (apart from possibly some 'primary options', such as freedom, income and 'basics of self-respect', which are essential requisites for a decent life), they will choose to rule, or be ruled, by two principles of justice: the first is a liberal principle that guarantees basic freedoms (freedom of expression, freedom to take part in political activity, freedom of worship etc.) and the second is the principle of minimising economic and social disparities as much as possible for the benefit of the weakest and most disadvantaged members of the community. The former principle seeks to safeguard freedom (which should not in any way be infringed, except possibly in the interests of freedom itself), while the latter aims to be based on the former and not override it in any circumstances. Rawls gives 'justice' priority over 'welfare' or goodness, though they are both principles of justice in that they represent fairness.

However, there is a 'Theory of Justice Rawls' and a 'Post-Theory of Justice Rawls'. His later position, as compared with his earlier one, may be summarised as an abandonment of the construct of a comprehensive rational ethical theory – in contrast to his aim when setting out the theory of justice– in favour of a more modest vision that separated ethical theory from political theory and endeavoured to distinguish the ethical view of justice (that he had begun to abandon) from the political view (that he had begun to embrace). Initially, he began to revise some of his universalist ethical ideas and focused increasingly on the rationalism of modern Western societies, to the point where he came to interpret rational choice of the principles of justice in the 'original position' not as a 'simple' choice, but as a choice in which the normative precepts of the community determine what is regarded as 'rational'. Furthermore, he began to gradually move away from Kant's absolutist universalism and the notion of the social contract, and instead, to see his theory as if it were an attempt to resolve the problem of ethical and religious pluralism in society; consequently he came to focus on politics alone and not on universal principles, choices and philosophical values. In the Introduction to his book *Justice and Democracy* he propounds the questions as follows: 'The basic issue is knowing if one should understand the theory of justice as part of the universalist school, religious,

philosophical or moral – which may be called the question of justice as fairness – or whether we should see it as a political vision of justice that shapes a democratic system.¹ The universalist view is precisely the one he attributed to Habermas in his famous contest with him. However, his new position was based on the idea that one ought not to defend the two principles of justice – as fairness – on the grounds that they are compatible with some moral situations that could be presumed to be universal, but because they represent a broad political position. His ultimate goal was to formulate a liberal political theory in which the focal point would be a theory of justice that supports political institutions, which allow for ethical and religious pluralism in a stable society², the reason being that modern democratic societies are pluralist societies in which there are universalist ethical, religious and philosophical schools and sects. No single one of these is embraced by the entire population, nor are they expected to do so in the foreseeable future. Therefore the universal system for all this pluralism is a liberal political system which assumes, for political reasons, a plurality of universalist schools of thought that are not compatible with each other, but are generally accepted as being a normal result of people becoming actively engaged in free institutions under a democratic, constitutional set-up³. A further assumption is that there should be at least one rational universalist school that does not reject the basic elements of a democratic system.

Of course, it is not always assumed that a democratic society should only comprise rational schools of thought, indeed, it may have schools that are irrational or even verging on lunacy. The new issue is to identify how a stable, just democratic society of free and equal citizens – though divided into mutually incompatible religious, philosophical and ethical schools and sects – can continue to exist. Indeed, how can these different schools coexist and support the political view on which

¹ Rawls, John, *Justice et Démocratie (Justice and Democracy)*, trans. from the English by C. Audard, P. De Lara, F. Piron and A. Tchoudnowski, Nouveaux Horizons, Seuil, Paris, 1993, p7.

² Kakathas, Chandran, entry : John Rawls, in *Dictionnaire d'Éthique et de Philosophie Morale (Dictionary of Ethics and Moral Philosophy)*, op., cit.

³ Rawls, John *Justice et démocratie (Justice and Democracy)*, op., cit., p9.



the constitutional democratic system is based? The answer is ‘Political liberalism is capable of it.’

Paul Ricoeur: the Ethics of the Self

Paul Ricoeur rejects the ‘ethics’ of both Habermas and Rawls on the grounds that in both cases they are of the ‘propriety’ variety. He sees two trends in modern ethical thinking: ‘ethics of the good life’ and ‘ethics of the normative precept’. The former is derived from Aristotle, who established what is known as ‘teleological ethics’, ie. an ethical system that lays stress on the good life because it produces tangibly positive results. The latter is derived from Kant, who was more inclined to ‘propriety’ ethics, which laid emphasis on ‘moral law’ as being valid in itself, regardless of the context in which it was applied.

This dualism has re-emerged in modern times and has become embodied in contemporary ethical philosophical trends. An examination of them will reveal that Rawls’s ‘ethics’ (with their elements of social contract and their opposition to anything of a teleological nature) are in fact ‘propriety ethics’. Similarly, the ‘ethics of discourse’, propounded by Habermas, are a reconstructed version of Kant’s ethics under a new name – the ‘morality of intercommunication’ – transferring them from a perception model to a linguistic one.

Furthermore, Paul Ricoeur disconnects the link between the ‘ethical principle’ and the self (the ‘cogito’) and sees the precept as being of necessity related to the self; at the same time, however, it contains inconsistencies and elements of pluralism, in that the self is enabled to put itself in the place of another, thereby making itself universal in reality, ie. not universalist as per the Kantian ethical precept based on the ‘cogito’ but with a ‘pluralistic universality’.

Ricoeur rejects both trends – the teleological and the ‘propriety-based’. In his view, neither of them is able to form the basis of a genuine philosophy; even if he seems to give priority to the former over the latter, he is not unaware of the risks of a collapse of teleological ethics, **[just over one line here I can make no sense of. Tr.]**



The book *Oneself as Another* marks the peak of Ricoeur's ethical philosophy¹. It is a work that deals with what he calls the 'ethics of the human self', in that it sees Man as a 'person of ethical responsibility'. He defines the ethical link as being first and foremost a 'link with the other'. He avoids two 'far-out' positions: the position of Husserl, who sees the 'other' as an analogous (or identical) representation of the self, ie. that the 'other' is you, but in your imagination (this may make it impossible for the 'other' to manifest itself, since it is a constituent element of the identity of the self) and the position of Levinas who, while placing great emphasis on the role of the 'other', regarded the 'other' as an "'enterprise' that invites me to become responsible for it.' This meant that Levinas did not allow for any interactive link to be seen between the self and the 'other'.

Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between 'ethics' and 'morality'. In his view 'ethics' deals with the domain in which a person seeks to live a full life with and for others and in just 'institutions'. In this sense ethics has three dimensions: the 'self', the 'other' and the 'institution'. 'Morality', on the other hand, is concerned with criteria, obligations and restraints.

In Ricoeur's view priority should be given to 'ethics' over 'morality'. However, it is not enough in itself; it must move on from there to morality, since a moral constitution is indispensable. What is it that makes this 'transition' necessary? The answer is, violence. It is violence that compels 'ethics' to move on from the 'opted for' (ie. from what I have chosen for myself) to the 'commanding' (ie. what the moral constitution commands me to do), the 'obligatory' and the 'forbidden'. This transition is the product of morality; it is a transition from a positive desire (ie. what I choose and hope for) to a negative constraint (ie. do not lie; do not kill). The reason for this is that opportunity for violence is always present in the nature of human action itself and is waiting for the suitable moment to break out. How could it be otherwise when human action – in essence – is action towards the 'other', and every action produces a reaction, and a disproportionality between action and reaction is likely to lead to a threat of violence at any

1 Ricoeur, Paul, *Soi-même Comme un Autre (Oneself as Another)*, coll: Ordre philosophique, Paris: Seuil, 1990.



time? This violence is not only physical, though that is the most evident; it may also involve overpowering the 'other' by force of will. As well as the destruction of the 'other's' body there is also the destruction of the 'other's' self-respect¹.

It is clear from the above that contemporary moral thought is a view of human 'action' from the point of view of its precepts, principles and consequences. However, it is more than just a view of reality. It is a view which is shaped by the circumstances and conditions of modern society and which takes into account the sensitivities of those thinkers – whose ethical theories we have discussed – and their visions of the horizons of that society within their disparate ethical theories.

¹ *Ethique et Responsabilité (Ethics and Responsibility)*, texts compiled by Jean-Aeschlimann, Coll: Langages à La Baconnière-Neuchatel, 1994, p14-18.