

## ETHICS BETWEEN CONVICTION AND RESPONSIBILITY

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### 1. *The distinction made by Max Weber*

The distinction between the so called ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility was emphasized by Max Weber in his famous lecture of 1918 on *Politik als Beruf* (Politics as a profession, or as a vocation): The problem faced by the German sociologists on that occasion was the relation between ethics and politics, i.e. how to resolve the contrast between some ethical norms, such as the evangelical commandment of turning the other cheek, and the political precept of resisting evil by force, or such as the Kantian imperative of always telling the truth and the political duty of hiding news the consequences of which could be dangerous for one's own State or Nation.

Weber did not resolve this problem, but said: "we must realize that every ethically orientated action may oscillate between two radically different and irreconcilably opposed maxims: it may be orientated either following the ethics of conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*) or following the ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*). This does not mean that the ethics of conviction coincide with the lack of responsibility and the ethics of responsibility with the lack of conviction. But there is an insuperable difference between acting in accordance with the maxim of the ethics of conviction, which in religious terms is: "the Christian acts as a just man and entrusts the outcome to God's hands", and acting in accordance with the maxim of the ethics of responsibility, following which one has to respond for the consequences of one's own actions".

Being conscious of the necessity, for the political man, of not renouncing either his ethical convictions, or his responsibilities towards other people, Weber is incapable of choice between these two ethics and adds: "whether one has to follow the ethics of conviction or those of responsibility, and when the one or when the other, nobody is able to determine". At the same time he contradicts his preceding sentences, affirming that "the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility are not absolutely antithetic, but they complete each other and only

together do they form the true man, the man who may have the vocation for politics (*Beruf zur Politik*)”.

Perhaps the reason for Weber's incapacity to resolve the problem of the two ethics was his agnostic, or non-cognitivist attitude towards ethics, i.e. his conviction that in ethical questions true knowledge of the facts cannot help us, because science, which in his opinion is the only true knowledge, is “free from values” (*Wertfrei*), that is limited to descriptions and explanations, and incapable of evaluations. But, on the other hand, the distinction introduced by Weber is praiseworthy, because it draws our attention to the fact that the politician has responsibilities towards other people and cannot follow only his own conviction, without worrying about the consequences of his actions. This depends, obviously, on the power he has, i.e. on the possibility that his actions have some important consequences on the lives of other people.

## 2. Hans Jonas and the “Principle of Responsibility”

The importance of responsibility for ethics has recently been stressed above all by the German philosopher Hans Jonas, who dedicated to this subject a famous book entitled *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (1979, English translation: *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 1984). Responsibility is, for Jonas, the principle on which the whole of ethics has to be founded, because in the age of technology every man has obtained the power of influencing the lives of other people, which once was possessed only by the politicians. The means, the instruments and the machines that the modern science and technology offer the contemporary man, give everyone the possibility of doing some actions which can have important consequences for others.

The paradigmatic pattern of the ethics of simple conviction, in Jonas' opinion, is the ethics of Kant, who dared to say: *dum fiat iustitia, pereat mundus*, i.e. “provided that justice be done, the world may perish, or collapse”. This type of ethics was possible, because at Kant's time nobody, except the politicians, had the power of influencing the lives of other people. Although modern science had already arisen, its applications, i.e. technology, were still limited and not yet important. Today the situation has completely changed and an ethics of the type preached by Kant would be an individualistic ethics, and its supporters

would be too egoistic, worried only about themselves and about being in peace with their own consciences.

Jonas thinks that an ethics of responsibility, i.e. an ethics worrying, for instance, about the consequences of our actions on future generations, presupposes necessarily a form of knowledge, he says even a form of metaphysics: a metaphysics which implies a teleological conception of nature, affirming that every kind of living being tends to its own survival. An ethics based on this metaphysics prescribes to respect this order and to assure the survival of human kind, for instance by avoiding air, water or soil pollution and by preserving, in this way, the environment. Jonas says that this metaphysics is of an Aristotelian type, even if – as it is well known – for Aristotle the teleological conception of nature belongs to physics rather than to metaphysics, and the end of human beings is not only surviving, i.e. living, but living well, that is the pursuit of happiness.

Many other contemporary philosophers refer to Aristotle's practical philosophy, i.e. to the function he gave the community, or the virtue, in particular the virtue of *phronesis*, as a necessary and sufficient base for ethics, and they consider the connection between ethics and community as a sufficient justification of responsibility towards other people. I allude, for instance, to the “rehabilitation of practical philosophy” made in Germany by philosophers such as H.G. Gadamer or J. Ritter, or to the philosophy of the Anglo-American “communitarians” such as A. Macintyre, M. Sandel and others. But for Aristotle the community, the virtue, the *phronesis* do not establish the ends of human life: they presuppose them and indicate the means to attain them. The Greek philosopher had an original conception of man and of his nature, which permitted him to indicate the ends of human life and to determine the content of happiness.

I think Jonas is right in affirming the necessity, for the ethics of responsibility, of some knowledge, at least of knowledge of human needs, or of human capabilities. I agree, therefore, with the Harvard economist Amartya Sen, who says that it is impossible to distribute wealth in the right way, without knowing what the human possibilities of using it are, and the human capabilities of being happy. But I am conscious that responsibility towards other people implies some



agreement with them on the ends which should be pursued, and that this agreement is difficult, or impossible, to establish through philosophy, and even more through metaphysics. For this reason it is necessary to search for some other way in order to find a consensus about what has to be done, especially by the use of technology.

### 3. *Responsibility and the ancient Greek dialectic*

The notion of responsibility, i.e. of responding to other people for the consequences of our actions, implies – in my opinion – the notion of replying, of answering a question, the question for instance of the goodness, or at least of the legitimacy of our actions. We have to answer to other people, who may ask us why we act in a certain way, with what right we adopt a behaviour rather than another. Responsibility, in my opinion, is the contrary of autonomy. A purely autonomic ethics, such as the Kantian ethics, implies answering only questions asked by our own conscience. An ethics of responsibility, on the contrary, implies answering questions asked by other people.

The ancient Greek dialectic had an expression to indicate this attitude: the *logon didonai*, i.e. to give some reason for a thesis, or for a choice, or for a mode of behaviour, to justify it, to show on what basis it is founded, by what arguments it can be defended. The complementary attitude to this was the *logon lambanein*, i.e. to receive this justification, but first also to demand it, to ask for it. The dialectic was just the art of discussing in this way between two partners, where one decided to defend a thesis and the other assumed the task of testing it by means of refutations. But in the ancient Greek dialectic there was a way to attain some agreement between the two partners, or discussants: this was the accordance with the opinions shared by the majority of people, or by the experts, including the public who assisted the discussion and acted in some way as judge, or as arbiter of it.

These opinions were called *endoxa* and were considered, if not always true, at least sufficient in order to resolve a controversy. When the consequences of a thesis, which could be inferred from it by means of deductions (*sullogismoi*) appeared in contradiction with the *endoxa*, or with most of them, or with the most authoritative of them, the thesis was considered as refuted, while when its consequences were in accordance

with the *endoxa*, and its supporter was able to resolve all the objections, i.e. to show that these objections were in contradiction with the *endoxa*, the thesis was considered as proved. It would be wonderful if the same procedure could be applied also to today's discussion of ethics, in order to determinate our responsibilities towards other people.

But what are today the *endoxa* which we could use in order to decide whether a thesis has been refuted or proved? I think that they exist, if not among the philosophers, at least among common people. They are the declarations of human rights, or the constitutions of many States, or the documents which have been approved by the United Nations assembly, i.e. all the conventions in which many people, or many States, agree in recognising that some rights cannot be violated. Generally around these declarations there is not unanimity of consent, but certainly there is majority consent, like around the *endoxa* of the ancient Greeks. Often these declarations remain unapplied and in practice are also violated, by single individuals or by some organizations or some States, but officially nobody would admit having violated them, because nobody wants to appear in contrast with them, therefore they can be used as premisses admitted by everybody for the argumentations in favour or against some modes of behaviour.

From a philosophical point of view the declarations of human rights imply a determined conception of man, which probably could not be admitted by all the philosophers. For instance the right to equality implies the existence of human nature which is common to all men and distinguishes them from other living beings; the right to ownership implies the permanence of personal identity through the changes which can arrive during one's life, i.e. the substantial character of human persons; the right to freedom implies a relative independence of man from material conditions such as birth, environment, social belonging, i.e. a non-materialistic conception of man. Not all the philosophers share such a conception and men who share it do so for different reasons. But this does not matter: the essential feature is the agreement about the declarations of human rights, which permit using them as premisses for ethical argumentations, or at least for argumentations concerning an ethics of responsibility.

On this basis it is possible to construct an ethics wider and richer than Jonas's ethics. This has been accused, rightly in my opinion, of being too minimalist, i.e. of reducing the good to survival, of contenting oneself only with the minimalization of risks, of proposing a "heuristic of fear". On the contrary, the declarations of human rights affirms not only the right of life, but also the right of health, of education, of a pleasant environment, of information, of thinking, speaking and publishing in freedom, etc. They imply a conception of the good life, or of happiness, which is shared, at least officially, by the majority of men and which can serve as a useful premiss for many argumentations.

In any case, what is important for an ethics of responsibility, is discussing, arguing, not contending oneself with unjustified decisions, but giving reasons for one's own choices and replying to others' questions, to others' objections. Ethical choices in the age of technology, *pace* Kant's, are not absolute commandments, categorical imperatives, which do not need rational justifications, but they are hypothetical imperatives, conditioned by the capacity of attaining some ends, which concerns other persons and must be accepted by them, or organized by them as consistent with their rights and their welfare. The means for determining these imperatives is discussion, argumentation in favour and against them, in other words dialectical procedure, in the sense of the ancient Greek dialectic.