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Can Ethics Be Systematized?

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When one speaks of a system of ethics, one should put the word "system" in quotation marks to indicate a much less rigorous usage of the word than that which occurs when one speaks for example of a system of logic. Indeed, a system of ethics is neither a well organized totality of propositions, where each has a well defined place with respect to accepted axioms, nor a coherent whole. Sometimes it owes its unity only to a general inclination, from which it borrows its name. Such is the case of the so called ethics of honor or that of ethics of renouncement. Sometimes its unity derives simply from the name of its author. Even though the problem of the most adequate method for dealing with moral questions has been discussed for centuries, there is still no agreement on whether one should build a system of ethics more geometrico or more inductive and each of these two approaches has always had adherents.

I shall review in this lecture a few ethical systems, some deductive in method, others claiming to be based completely on facts. I have chosen

them among those systems that occupy a place of honor in the history of moral thought and that constitute models frequently imitated. Although for each of them I could find reference in many authors, I shall report only on those who aimed at creating an orderly whole and who exhibited a visible preference for systematization.

I. SYSTEMS WITH DEDUCTIVE TENDENCIES

We shall examine first systems with deductive tendencies, systems that fix for the moralist a definite goal, namely that of making people happy and pretend to deduce all the rules of behavior from that principle. The derived rules are limited to recommending the necessary or sufficient means for achieving the goal. The causal relations between the goal and the means obviously are to be established through an appeal to facts.

1. I believe the moral philosophy proposed by Bentham in his "Déontologie" to be a classical model of this kind of system. I know of no other thinker who developed this system in such detail, pressing his thought to the end, even up to where it could shock emotions, and contradict existing prejudices or customs.

Let us briefly recall Bentham's views. According to him the goal, which the moralist seeks to achieve, is the greatest happiness of the greatest number. He considers as virtuous all action, that - using his own expression- "maximizes pleasures and minimizes pains." It is known that Bentham avoided the error committed by J.S. Mill and that he did not distinguish among the qualities of pleasures. Their value was uniquely determined by their proximity, purity, intensity, duration, and fertility: while the object, bringing them about, was of no importance. The only rule for

the distribution of pleasures and pains requires that everybody be treated equally. Bentham was opposed to any morality which advocates sacrifice. He considered it madness to renounce a great pleasure in order to assure our neighbor of a lesser pleasure. If making others suffer brings pleasure, the moralist may only interfere when this suffering is greater than the agent's pleasure. He may then inflict pain upon the agent to reestablish the proportions. The pleasure of the agent, diminished by his punishment, will thus become lesser than the suffering of his victim; it is even possible that he might suffer instead of rejoicing. If so, the fact postulated by Bentham that all people strive for pleasure and avoid pain should change the agent's attitude.

As is the case with all criticism, some criticism of Bentham was external, derived from another system while some was from within, accepting the author's point of view. Occupied with the formal structure of the discussed systems, we are interested only in the latter kind of criticism.

a) In blaming or praising, we are not permitted by Bentham to consider the agent's conscience. His motives, intentions, and efforts do not count, except through the pleasure caused by them or the pain avoided. If it were so, the boundaries of ethics would be displaced. A nurse injecting morphine into hospital patients would deserve enormous merit for the resulting alleviation of suffering. Animals as well as men could be the object of moral praise or blame. A cow, the basic foundation of the diet of a peasant family, would also deserve great respect thanks to its utility, which can ultimately be translated into pleasure and avoidance of pain.

b) Bentham was frequently and understandably reproached for having based his system on a calculus of pleasures and pain as if he possessed a yard stick permitting comparisons. Indeed, how does one decide which satisfaction is greater: that in smoking a good cigarette or that in admiring a Rembrandt painting. Do we suffer more from a toothache or when we learn that a supposedly good friend of ours has spoken badly about us while we were absent? Is there more pleasure in a friendly conversation or in being praised for work well done? How can we hope to achieve in these matters an intersubjective language, when the comparison of pleasures and pains is difficult even within our own personal values?

This calculus may evoke doubts not only in theoreticians, but also in pedagogues, because it can prove dangerous in practice. For, a person may use the lack of objective foundation of the calculus, to resolve the issues favorably to himself. Bentham's own writings furnish such examples. He is one of the first authors of ethics linked to the Christian tradition, who considers not only people, but also animals. And truly, animals, which are capable of experiencing pleasure and pain, cannot be excluded from his calculations. Yet Bentham does not hesitate to assert that the suffering of animals killed in the slaughter houses is less than the pleasure of those who are nourished by their flesh.

Aware of the difficulties mentioned, I still wish to defend Bentham from those who accuse him of having made out of ethics a bookkeeping procedure worthy of a small merchant. In his private life Bentham was not a good calculator and if he made of morality an object of computations,

it was in order to give it a scientific air and to make it dependent on cool and precise arithmetic instead of the changeable emotions. Similar ambitions guided Volney, Bentham's French contemporary in his "Catéchisme du citoyen."

c) Another frequent objection of Bentham's critics was, that the same global amount of happiness could be obtained either by distributing small portions of it among many, or by reserving great portions for a few privileged persons. This criticism would be valid if the maximization of pleasures and minimization of sufferings was Bentham's only principle. But another, independent, principle is found in his system, whereby each man counts as a unit "each to be counted for one and no one for more than one." At first seemingly clear, this principle admits of various interpretations. It may be treated as a rule of selection according to which it is immaterial whom we choose to augment his pleasures or diminish his pain. More feasibly, it can be taken for a principle of egalitarian justice, opposed to any privilege. In either case this principle introduces a new stress and its role is similar to that of a rule in the logical meta-system.

Bentham avoided the error common to those, who, while accepting happiness as the ultimate goal, in the end spoke of true happiness. This concept -- as shown by some contemporary authors -- always involves an ideal of personality. But while not distinguishing explicitly between true happiness and simple happiness, Bentham, too, implicitly hinted at a personality ideal. He did so, for instance, when he spoke of dishonorable flattery, thus introducing the notion of dignity or, when he unexpectedly associated efforts with virtue. These notions were derived from another stream of moral thought where pain and pleasure were no longer the only things that counted. By damaging the unity of his system,

they were an example of how difficult it is to dissociate rules concerning interhuman relations from an ideal of personality.

2. During the 19th century the growing industrialization suggested to various thinkers the comparison between a well organized factory and society in which the ethicist's task is to assure its smooth functioning and where the moral rules are supposed to reduce all friction to a minimum. Of course, it is possible to see in such systems a special case of the previous kind, aiming at elimination of conflicts, with the happiness of all in view. Still, these systems have a physiognomy peculiar to themselves and they deserve a separate examination.

Such a conception of ethics was already present in Hobbes. According to him all people, when they reflect calmly, agree on the desirability of peace. An action is good, if it promotes peace; it is wrong if it inspires conflict. Since the morality has to organize the life of the society, no ethics can treat people just as individuals. It is only by considering them as citizens that we obtain a criterion for defining the virtue and the vice.

One recalls that, having accepted this general tendency towards peace, Hobbes derives from it many rules that suggest means indispensable for its realization. Thus he tells us to observe all contracts, never to be ungrateful, to forgive the past offenses if they are repented for, not to give favors to anyone in the distribution of goods, etc.

As an aid in completing the above list, we obtain from Hobbes an auxiliary rule which helps to discover and to eliminate those actions which threaten peace. It says: "Don't do to others what you don't wish done to yourself." Another rule serves to limit the scope of application of moral prescriptions: "We don't have to follow them if our partner doesn't."

With respect to this sort of system the question arises whether any form of conflict is inadmissible. We know that a society composed of citizens blended into a homogenous herd is docile and can better assure us of peace than a society composed of individuals in which each insists on his independence of ideas and preferences. No one doubts that discussion, even though it is apt occasionally to generate deep antagonisms, favors the development of civilization. Shall we eliminate all conflicts, except those which protect us from more terrible conflicts? If Hobbes admitted that there are beneficial conflicts -- which seems likely -- he should have provided us with a basis of selection, to permit us to accept some and reject other conflicts. Such a principle of selection would surely reveal a model of man, whose life is in harmony with the lives of those around him, because a moralist must care not only to form a harmonious whole but also must care about the quality of those who are to form a harmonious whole. In Hobbes' writings one notices that he uses two measures and distinguishes between citizens worthy as citizens and citizens worthy as men. Charity and justice are the most important of civic virtues while magnanimity, courage and confidence as manifestations of personal strength are respectable in human individuals. Hence here again a model of personal perfection intervenes the prescriptions of social life.

II. Moral philosophies with empirical ambitions.

The systems just discussed have a pyramidal structure by imposing upon themselves the derivation of all rules of behavior from a single principle by the aid of deductive reasoning.

We shall now discuss a different model which seems to be purely empirical and in which the normative element appears to be absent. It is a system quite

fashionable today among anglo-saxon writers; and especially among social anthropologists however, it may be found as early as the 18th century.

The moral philosopher begins by enumerating human needs. The needs are multiple. His task is to find the best means towards their satisfaction. The facts seem to dictate everything: the goals are found empirically and so are the means. There are important reasons for the acceptance which this system enjoys. Since even if it was impossible to prove the truth of moral rules and value judgments, a system founded on the elementary needs shared by all humans could be generally accepted.

Today in the U.S. this system finds support e.g. among the philosophers who consider themselves operationalist. We read in the "Operational Philosophy," published in 1953 by A. Rapaport (p. 97:)

"The operationalist...believes that it is possible to construct a general system of values based on the ways and means of satisfying general needs." As soon as the efficacy of means may be demonstrated through experience, the operationalist becomes entitled to a supra-cultural position. He may criticise the effectiveness of different means used in various cultures to satisfy the same needs. The operationalist is not isolated in his support for this scheme. The efforts of various sociologists and social anthropologists are directed today at listing basic needs. The list is to serve as the starting point in the construction of ethics.

To the question: why should the basic needs of man be satisfied, the answer would probably be that otherwise man suffers. Hence there is a postulate binding us to seek the satisfaction of human needs. It appears

to be a first normative element of the system even though not made explicit by its authors. This postulate seems to follow from a more general postulate, that suffering should be alleviated unless it is a protection from an even greater suffering.

Another question: how to distinguish, from among all the numerous actions in which man engages to satisfy his needs, those which are worthy of moral approval? The farmer satisfies basic needs by cultivating his soil, the contractor, by building a house. All activity serves some need. When is an activity virtuous?

And now let us have a look at the notion of basic need. Their list varies considerably from one author to another. B. Malinowski attached a great importance to an inventory of needs that are common to all men, but are in different cultures, differently satisfied. He arrived at a list not like any proposed by his colleagues. The situation was clear with respect to the biological needs of the individual: of food, drink, breathing, sleeping, exercise or rest. However, his inventory became alarmingly complicated when those needs were introduced on which depended the survival of the society rather than individual. Operationalists whom I have already quoted, counts the need for order among the basic needs. They also recognize a basic need for social contacts or for self-extension, both of them really constituting an entire class of needs.

Even within the biological category of needs (those to drink, eat, sleep, breathe) the concept of basic presents difficulties. It certainly is not a basic need to drink wine of a given make and vintage. Neither is there a basic need to eat caviar. If, in order to overcome such objections, we consider as necessary the satisfaction of only those needs on which

depends our survival, we shall have to admit that in those countries where no one is threatened with death from hunger or cold, people don't have any basic needs not satisfied and consequently can do entirely without ethics.

One might try to use another criterion to distinguish basic and non-basic needs: Consider as basic those needs to which we give priority in case of conflict. But then our list will be quite personal. In certain societies certain families deprive themselves of food rather than to lose their social status. A lover may gladly forego his dinner to buy a gift for his girl. She in turn is always ready to fast a little, in order to dress appealingly.

Besides the obstacles in defining the basic needs, we face additional obstacles when we ask, whether we have to respect all needs which are sufficiently general? Suppose that good is what satisfies a need, but is it good to have certain needs? Asked Shaftesbury. We have nothing against a fly's delight in garbage, as he argued, but should we approve of it in a man?

Suppose Hobbes' picture of man was accurate and men really have a need to feel superior. Should this need be respected? Bertrand Russell, who in his later works expresses ^{views} /very similar to those we are now discussing, answers that we need not respect needs of this kind, because their satisfaction inevitably involves the necessity of thwarting needs of other people. Since needs such as that of domination can be satiated in a man only by suppressing other needs, Russell proposes to consider as right only those desires that remain in harmony with the maximum possible of other human desires. This criterion permits - according to him - that we give priority to love above hatred, to cooperation above competition, to peace above war.

Indeed, a postulate that the maximum needs should be satisfied enables us to ignore those needs that suppress others. And were this the only principle of selection, it could be used without inconsistencies. However, it is hard to imagine a moral system that would not also admit other criteria of selecting the needs worth satisfying and that would not order the selected ones in a hierarchy in case they cannot be satisfied simultaneously.

The sexual needs are certainly universal and elementary; still, it seems that all the cultures on our globe curb them. In almost all known civilizations sexual relations between close relatives are forbidden, even though the family relationships may be defined differently. Many cultures forbid premarital sexual relations, others do not permit them in the periods of mourning which are sometimes quite long. Still other cultures do not accept them between the spouses during lactation which often lasts much longer than in the Western world. These sexual deprivations are not imposed everywhere for the same reasons. Often they lack any apparent reason, frequently they are supposed to help attain perfection according to a given model. The Kwakiutls of Vancouver Island destroy all their most precious possessions during feasts, including oil, which is laboriously extracted from fish. They do it to satisfy a model of personality. Certainly, the task of a moral philosopher, seeking an ethics for satisfaction of the common deeds of man, would be facilitated by a reduction of their number to a minimum. Nevertheless, the moral philosopher wants to see a differentiated society composed of individuals rich in varying needs and is willing to accept the difficulties arising out of this richness rather than to renounce a personal ideal he cherishes.

This much for the necessity to amend the moral systems that strive

for the satisfaction of universal needs with normative principles of selection between the respectable and not respectable needs and normative principles for resolution of conflicts between the respectable needs.

Occasionally the very concept of need presupposes selection. It is so when the "real need" is put in opposition to whims, to the so called "caprice." Here the "need" means "approved need," while the caprices are non-approved needs.

The ethical system just discussed was considered to be free of normative factors and of value-judgments. We tried to demonstrate that this was just an illusion. One more normative element may be added to those already mentioned, namely the rule for selecting admissible means for the satisfaction of the needs. There is no doubt that the moral philosopher will reject some of them despite their effectiveness. A properly addressed flattery may be useful to an unemployed person in search of a job, but the moralist who considers it dishonorable will not recommend it.

One could finally ask whether a moral motivation could not be discovered underneath the studies of elementary needs. Why must we recognize only universal needs. Is it just in order to give a solid basis to the moral principles and to assure for them a general acceptance, or perhaps also because we are all equal with respect to these needs? If so, we are seeking justice, and we should formulate rules for deciding whose needs to choose when the same needs cannot be simultaneously satisfied in several persons. Hence we must have additional rules for distribution. During the German occupation people were dying of hunger in the Warsaw Ghetto.

At one time in the period preceding the mass extermination of the inhabitants, the physicians working in the Ghetto received from outside the walls a secret shipment of precious drugs, vitamins and nutritional substances to be used on children. Unfortunately there was not enough for everybody. If one distributed the contents in small doses among all children, the insufficient dosage would give none of them a chance for survival. Perhaps it was better to choose stronger children, give them larger doses and so save their lives? Should one have condemned all the children without favoring any, or should one have saved a part, while letting other children die? Fortunately it is not always in such a cruel form that the problem of choosing the recipients of a privilege is posed. Nevertheless, it must be resolved whenever it is not possible to satisfy simultaneously the identical needs of many. Some people would have judged that the enormous danger, in which the inhabitants of the Ghetto lived, made imperative the brotherhood in misfortune and solidarity until the end. But this rule could not be deduced from the premisses of the system.

If those who propose the satisfaction of the basic needs do so in order to prevent human suffering, we may treat their system as a particular case of the systems which seek happiness. However their scope is more limited, because they are concerned only with the suffering resulting from unsatiated elementary needs. The 18th century writers who spoke of natural rights had in mind the right to satisfy those needs. These were needs to whose satisfaction all were entitled. The obligation to respect those rights involved as many duties from the part of others. All such systems, though attractive in their apparent simplicity, were unable to resolve the many difficulties shown.

General conclusions.

We have chosen for analysis a few systems to which human thought has returned more than once during the centuries, the first being an application of deductive and the second of empirical methods. The reasonings found there were of a limited variety and could be reduced to two principal types: either certain behavior was first recommended in general and then a given act belonging to that category was demonstrated to be also an act of virtue, or else a goal for our actions was initially fixed and the conduct necessary or sufficient for its attainment was recommended accordingly. These are not the only possible reasonings. Various logicians are trying, not without success to create a logic of norms. The fact that in this domain the concept of truth in its Aristotelian sense does not apply, does not prevent us from speaking of truth as consistency of the derived norms with the norms accepted as axioms. Following the example of the systems of logic, we may require that the axioms be independent and non-contradictory. The construction of a normative system still requires preliminary work, because one must adapt to the new domain the notion of implication, negation, contradiction and others. Even though the choice between different systems will always remain free where it depends on our emotional formation, other things being equal, an orderly and coherent system is better than a disconnected set of opinions. When discussing the scientific aspect of normative systems, it should be kept in mind that the scientific character of a work depends on several rather than one quality. Clear statements have more theoretical value than obscure ones, concepts well defined are preferable to the undefined ones, modest judgments prevail over hasty generalizations, etc. All these qualities are subject to gradation and, if it is not possible to make a normative system scientific in the strict sense, one can make it satisfy at least part of the logical requirements.

I do not doubt that the moral theory may profit from the gropings which precede and accompany the labors of systematization. Therefore, I think that this task is worth the efforts of the moral philosopher. But what he has to keep in mind is that things are much more complicated than was admitted by Bentham or those who advocated a purely empirical ethics. I do not believe that it is possible to give to a system of deductive ethics the shape of a pyramid, taking one single premise as starting point. I do not believe that one can make out of normative ethics an empirical science, since - as I tried to show - in hidden value judgments are constantly emerging from our reasoning. And I do not see any possibility of treating normative ethics without having in view both the functioning of society with respect to a given ideal of interhuman relations and the perfection of those who are the members of that society. In the eyes of modern ethics these two groups of problems appear inseparable and seem to represent ethics in the strict sense of the word. As Bertrand Russell has stated recently: "Without civic morality communities perish; without personal morality their survival has no value."