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# Morality and Justice in Social Life

MUZEUM HISTORII POLSKI

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# MORALITY AND JUSTICE IN SOCIAL LIFE

**Abstract.** The article is an analysis of morality and justice in light of the views of such thinkers as M. Blondel, J. Ortega y Gasset, E. Chiavacci and S. Privitera. In contemporary public life, new social conflicts are generated by a growing neutralization with respect to the formation of conscience and progressive relativization of all values. It is very difficult to clearly identify what justice is today and the morality that should apply to relationships. A. Honneth and M. Hrubec emphasize the need for the so-called good life, which should be based on an attitude of appreciation and respect, and accepting the other person as equal to other people. Only in this way is it possible to remove the dominance of stronger individuals and sensitize communities to the need to build global responsibility.

**Keywords:** social life, morality, justice, social conflicts, power, global responsibility

1. Introduction. 2. Historical time, social environment and power. 3. Morals, morality and justice. 4. Social conflicts and ethical solutions. 5. Conclusions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Morality affects social life and protects human dignity. The Spanish philosopher and sociologist José Ortega y Gasset said that "public life is not solely political, but equally, and even primarily, intellectual, moral, economic, religious; it comprises all our collective habits, inclu-

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ding our fashions both of dress and of amusement"[1]. In today's secular and multicultural world terms like morality, ethics and virtue appear to be synonymous. The content of these terms could be differentiated if we ask whether a kind of moral basis precedes morality and ethics, or whether ethical reflection precedes morality and virtue?

The semantic relationship between these terms is concerned with practical normative impact on social conduct. Morality and ethics offer a systematic reflection on patterns of human behavior, regulations and norms for a reasonable and good life. The difference between morality and ethics is neither in purpose (*telos*), nor in etymology (*éthos – mos*), but in sources (*fontes*). This could be realized when one asks about the sources of philosophical ethics and tries to define reasonable ways of cultural and emotional life, tradition, customs, justice, or self-discipline.

The primary normative basis exceeds human moral experience. The ideals, desires, the so called *meta-reality* that was examined by Plato, who argued that eternal forms existed before the physical world, could be provided as evidence. Even in the 21st century, humanity is not able to control natural laws or force people to forget the ideals. The order of Logos had fascinated ancient cultures before any social norms were defined. Their nature was either theophanic (revealed) or human (formed by people studying ethics and moral science). Revelation is presented, in opposition to rational reflection, as an embodiment of "different cultural and literal modes in continual variation of time and in parallel approximations"[2].

The primary source of morality (*fons moralis*) is revealed truth which defines, in cooperation with systematic human recognition of good and righteousness, what is moral and virtuous. The source of ethics is truth about good which is recognized by humans in every-day experience. These truths have accumulated in history as sapience (*hokmāh*, *sofia*, *sapientia*) for the sake of human welfare. Human morality as a voluntary application of moral and ethical norms is particularly significant in the inner serenity of an individual (*ordo personalis*),

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[1]  J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, New York 1993, 11.

[2]  E. Chiavacci, *Teologia morale fondamentale*, Assisi 2007, 37.

as well as in the social order (*ordo socialis*), experienced in synergy with others.

Through everyday experience, one learns the art of "small steps" which include modesty, deliberation, ability to discern truth and falsehood, good and bad, favour and disfavour, certainty and uncertainty, order and disorder, moderation and extravagance, importance and wastefulness. E. Chiavacci says that "man lives in particular situations in which he makes many important decisions, and recognition of his identity requires giving to all these decisions their ultimate meaning. The ultimate meaning and its basis are beyond discussion – that requirement is moral life"[3].

## 2. HISTORICAL TIME, SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AND POWER

The time horizon defining human history and social conduct is dynamic. It is historically structured. The life of each individual develops over time, through particular events and personal acts. Even God reveals Himself in time through important events and acts which have been constantly recalled in history. The emergence of moral norms could be traced back to ancient times, first as taboos, then as law. They have been given to people: a) either in the beginning of human history, around the 20th or 19th century before Christ, as recorded in the Old Testament; b) or collected and summarized by rulers and legislators, like in the Code of Hammurabi, with the aim to empower the state and improve social conditions.

The exact dating is questioned in both cases, although the names appearing on the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs could help identify the period. The French historian Daniel Rops claimed that "any date before the 7th century before Christ is unconditional"[4]. As can be seen, reasonable moral and ethical norms developed on the basis of theology and were expressed in simple human terms in order to build socially just structures which the welfare of the society depended on. Hu-

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[3]  Ibid., 14–15.

[4]  D. Rops, *Biblia a jej ľud*, Trnava 1991, 53.

man life and mutual relations have been improved with the help of the norms. Moral norms carry meaningful content for the wellbeing of all humankind; each individual is a unique, autonomous and independent subject, however. Acting in accordance with morality is crucial in the practice of social conduct, as: a) not everything that can be experienced with the senses, scientifically verified or technically constructed is morally acceptable; b) no end can justify morally wrong means.

The French philosopher Maurice Blondel in his work *Action* asked two questions: a) Is there any meaning or purpose to human life? b) What is the meaning of human actions? He realized that he was living a particular fate without any particular wish and without explicitly knowing who he was. He found these concepts eluding, but felt that responsibility for their comprehension or miscomprehension would affect his own future and eternity. There is nothing that could be added to or taken away from one's actions once performed. Where does the feeling of responsibility come from? The thinker realized that people were predestined to life or death, for eternity. Nevertheless, he asked: How and why if we did not know in advance?[5].

Analogous questions are being asked by many people regardless the age. And we all have to get over these questions without the help of others, even though there is a difference between what we want and what we do. Many decisions we make do not coincide with our wishes, and many of our deeds do not correspond to our intentions. It might happen that we do not act according to what we want, or are forced to do something we are not interested in. The orientation of one's will inclines naturally to that which is personally recognized and deliberately chosen.

Actions are important in human life, but righteousness requires that they be in harmony with what is right and what is our duty. Righteousness is a virtue that is preceded by *conditio sufficiens* in order for an individual to become righteous from the moral point of view[6]. Indivi-

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[5] Cf. M. Blondel, *L´Azione. Saggio di una critica della vita e di una scienza della prassi*, Milano 1993, 65.

[6] S. Privitera, *Il volto morale dell´uomo. Avvio allo studio dell´etica filosofica e teologica*, Palermo 1991, 110.

duals is responsible for all that they do, there is no escape, and if there appears to be any, it is a false idea. Indeed, some people naively believe they are not concerned with the issue as they do not expect eternal life. Despite that, time cannot be stopped; it is running and making man powerless. The social environment and one's actions are interconnected, but decisions and choices are the responsibility of the one who makes them.

According to M. Blondel, action is a general requirement of social practice. Everybody is concerned with it; it is the highlight of universal determinism. Our actions happen without any effort on our part. Action is a necessity that cannot be avoided. To resist it would require an effort which is beyond us. Even in sleep humans are active – they breathe, dream, and think. Action is not a necessity, it is an obligation. It is performed even if it is painful, even if it requires sacrifice or death. Action consumes the physical body, it requires emotional surrender, giving up one's desires.

M. Blondel claims that individuals cannot develop, learn or grow spiritually without impoverishing their own selves. Every decision eliminates other options. Therefore he asks: Is there a way we can stop? And he answers: No, we need to proceed further on. And can we refuse to make a decision in order to keep all the options open? And his answer is: No. We can either choose, or lose everything. There is no space to be neutral or passive for too long, for otherwise all our options could be lost[7].

### 3. MORALS, MORALITY AND JUSTICE

Morality is "an external manifestation, an act, performed according to the criteria of moral law and moral rules"[8]. The concept of morality is a compound form which is manifested in the perspective of social relationships. It is therefore very difficult sometimes to decipher the

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[7] Cf. M. Blondel, op. cit., 66.

[8] H. Hrehová, *Základy morálnej teológie v dejinnom kontexte I. (od jej počiatkov po tridentskú reformu)*, Brno 2012, 32.

relationship between persons and social structures in practical life, as they follow from a number of different relationships and proportions between different realities, e.g. my world and the world of others, divergent goals, circumstances and means of self-fulfillment. Social relationships develop under the influence of moral conscience. Alfons Auer emphasizes that "man faced with a particular decision follows his basic orientation in life in the questions of good, freedom and charity"[9]. In fact, it is the matter of proportions between the subjects and objects in which the moral motion is reflected up to the final act.

Justice – as a fundamental virtue in communal life and public space – transcends individuals and their possibilities. All people are open to justice and desire it eagerly, and that desire interferes with many areas of social, economic and administrative life, with industry and commerce, and depends on cultural knowledge, on the forms of instruction and education, on the influence of politics, religion, and the mass media. Social justice is the key to co-existence. Therefore, we naturally look for firm ground to stand on: What type of rationality and justice could be included in the bases of practical philosophy, and thus ethics? Will juridical, political and philosophical discussions suffice?

It appears that while there seems to be enough of dialogue, discussion, and argumentation today, we can clearly see a marked disproportion between theory and practice, between truth and justice, between prescription and description, between acts motivated by utilitarianism and those performed with sincerity and benevolence; between scientific guidelines and norms, ethics and science, which is evident today mainly in the field of medicine and biotechnological research.

In view of the progressive relativization of morality and values, it is also very difficult to judge which values and what kind of behaviour is to be preferred in a particular situation. Should our behaviour be guided by individual or by social justice? It seems that in the contemporary society one thing is certain: human actions are more effective when they are performed with love. Without love, our actions lack authenticity. According to Blondel, it is so because "in every man there

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[9]  A. Auer, *Morale autonoma e fede cristiana*, Milano 1991, 28.

is something unique that deserves to be uniquely loved"[10]. If we do not love others, we do not care whether they are treated with justice. But if we consider others equal to ourselves, we are committed to justice and common welfare.

In everyday life, we often hear that morals and good manners are not worthwhile. It is so because controversial norms are presented as though they were of equal status with universally valid moral norms. Besides, in the mass media, amorality is placed in the centre of attention more than morality, which is often undervalued and ridiculed. Injustice is often given for justice, and error for truth. Who has caused this, and who will set things right? Are science and research able to provide an answer?

Morals are founded on morality, which is the way, proceeding, creativity and promptness to study the new. It is a process in which our understanding of truth and good develops and comes to maturity. Justice calls for morality in the social space, and its application lays foundations for peace. The moral requirement creates space for just structures at all times, and even our age of multiculturalism and relativism cannot avoid this. On the other hand, it is right to protect identity, respect cultural differences and make sure that no cultural community feels marginalized or threatened in its future existence.

## 4. SOCIAL CONFLICTS AND ETHICAL SOLUTIONS

In the recent years, we have witnessed a revival of social conflicts throughout the world. The reason is not just globalization, cultural plurality, economic or management crises, growing unemployment rates, but first of all arrogance and immorality which are breeding grounds for new forms of exploitation and exclusion even in highly-developed western countries. While it is true that a crisis triggers psychological stress and may giver rise to social conflicts, they would not emerge if those in power and those who live in luxury showed more solidarity with those who work for minimum wages.

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[10] M. Blondel, op. cit., 253.

That is why we should speak out today for victims of exploitation and slave labour. Just think about companies who have gone bankrupt and failed to pay their employees for months of their work; slavery-like practices employed against people struggling for survival who are forced to work abroad; or the enormous bureaucracy demanding work overtime and even on weekends. All of this contributes to the antagonism and growing barriers between the rich and the poor, employers and employees, the young and the old, those who work and those who are long-term beneficiaries of welfare, majority and minority groups, country and city dwellers, as well as to conflicts in interactions with authorities or influential opponents. It thus appears that the grounds for social discontent are prepared by lack of sufficient moral and social appreciation.

For the same reasons, social conflicts are now back in the centre of attention of social philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, lawyers and, also last but not least, ethicists and moralists. They ask the following questions: Why does the escalation of social injustice emerge in social context almost sporadically? Is it because of the greediness of some and powerlessness of others? Why are we not able to cope with this disproportion, even when we have detailed critical theories offering an elaborated commentary on the process?

It is not so easy to answer these questions. Marek Hrubec from the Philosophical Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences and Faculty of Arts of the Charles University in Prague explains that a critical social theory emerged already in the 1930s during the World Economic Crisis (1929–1933)[11]. The need to pay more attention to human rights, with a full sense of responsibility, became more urgent in consequence of the moral evaluation of war acts and world policy, especially after the Second World War. Max Horkheimer, a representative of the Frankfurt School in Germany, is acknowledged to be the first critical social philosopher[12]. We can conclude from the context of social philosophy that

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[11] Cf. M. Hrubec, *Etika sociálních konfliktu. Axel Honneth a kritická teórie uznání*, Praha 2012, 7.

[12] According to M. Hrubec, the critical theory has been formed in four stages: from Max Horkheimer through Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, who belong to the

social injustice, exclusion and marginalisation are most effective when chaos, civilization differences and mass collective protests prevail.

History shows that all political regimes, like slavery and its discrimination of women, children and slaves, feudalism with its segregation of social classes, capitalism with its valuation of individual contribution (performance and market value), Nazism with its primacy of the Aryan race, socialism with the equality of all and lack of competitive and productive motivation, as well as present democratic regimes with their liberalism and multiculturalism have employed their own repressive practices. On the one hand, there is too much talk about global justice; on the other, the practices of political embargos, cultural and racial discrimination continue as ever.

That is why critical theories are still very important today, as they offer us analyses of society, economics, politics, culture, social movements. Their task is to provide rational reflection at a distance from the course of events. In the rhetoric of these theories, the following questions are raised: What are the causes of social conflicts? What kind of rejection is considered unacceptable to an extent that triggers social conflict? What kind of moral expectations about social justice must be disappointed so that people will feel themselves rejected? How can unjust failure of recognition be eliminated early in time?

Axel Honneth, influenced by Hegel's concept of acknowledgement and Habermas' intersubjective theory, tried to answer these questions. Analysing social phenomena, he tried to find his own answers to questions about the causes of social conflicts. First, he sought to answer four initial questions: What conditions influence a good life? What possibilities are most suitable for self-realization? What precludes the formal understanding of the acting and behaviour possibility? What historical tendencies have influenced the development of recognition and rejection among people?

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1st generational stage of social critics, then through Jürgen Habermas, who belongs to the 2nd generation, then through Axel Honneth lecturing at Goethe's University in Frankfurt am Main and director of the *Institute for Social Research*, as well as Nancy Fraser and others, who are creating the core of the 3rd generation, till the 4th generation of young students inspired by Honneth and Habermas. Cf. ibid., 8–9.

The whole of Honneth's concept of a good life highlights the positive and negative tendencies in the historical development of social conflicts and their influences reaching into the future. He presented his thoughts without imposing them on others, but by enhancing their own understanding of the importance of social recognition and self--realization. He formulated his deliberations mainly in the form of reflections, warning about possible consequences of marginalisation and disadvantaging of particular persons or groups, either at the local or international level, with respect to their claims for recognition in the social sphere[13].

With regard to the expectation of fair social recognition, Honneth identified three basic levels of acknowledgement:

− The first level concerns the sphere of intimacy, being the matter of recognition through love and friendship. The intersubjective development of personality begins in childhood in one's relationship with parents, siblings, the near and dear ones. A child is recognized by being accepted by his or her parents. A person grows into independence and individuality only gradually. The struggle for recognition is coupled with moral development, in which "the historical game of dialectics between the particular and the general"[14] is realised;

− The second level deals with recognition in legal terms. The modern state legally considers all men to be equal, even if it is not always the case in practice. In today's social sphere, there are still those who are equal and those who are more equal then others. It is therefore necessary to make sure recognition is guaranteed by constitution;

− The third level is concerned with social recognition, which is the appreciation of the specific contribution made by an individual person, of his or her general characteristics and expressions. The whole world knows these awards: "Deed of the Year, Best Sportsman, Moderator, Journalist", as well as the awards of "Mothers" and "Fathers". Each of these three types of recognition may of course be adjusted and modified at the local or international level. The increasing need for "a clear

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[13] Cf. Ibid., 13.

[14] Ibid., 115.

consensus on the questions of justice" in today's integrating world is a very positive phenomenon. For example, with a view to achieve this goal smaller countries begin to integrate into larger entities, aware that in isolation they would not be able to face the challenges of fair recognition. There are also certain difficulties with the new definitions of justice at the national, transnational, international, and global level, first of all concerning issues like the right to work and the refusal to identify a person with an object which can be freely manipulated. Parity intersubjective approach subject – subject can prevent different social deformations and conflicts.

Honneth points out that people are not generally critical towards the society. They can see the discrepancy between reality and the adopted standards of consensual communication, but they know that in practice social norms will be infringed or violated. Discrepancies are removed only when they become unbearable and morally condemnable[15].

The post-traditional society relies on numerous analyses and statistics, but they can be manipulated as well. It is clear that no theory is perfect, which is why we need new, more thorough analyses, and based on them also certain adjustments in the social sphere. The contribution of Honneth's social reflection on the theory of recognition consists in making people realize the problem of social and cultural exclusion needs to be solved. The reactions of those who fail to be recognized almost always trigger rebellion, so the approach adopted when solving social conflicts is very important.

On the other hand, honest citizens are provoked by the boasting of those in power and their arrogance resulting from unhealthy politics. That is why citizens trust neither political parties nor politicians. Their disappointment results from the fact that most of today's politicians think only about filling their own pockets, using everything and everyone to reach the status of the "nouveau riche". What, than, can be done by ordinary people, who work and pay taxes? How should they cope with the privileged caste who have no conscience? And how have we gone so far down the road of decadence?

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[15] Cf. Ibid., 18–19.

Admittedly, there have always been some among politicians who abused their position to seize public funds. When proven guilty, however, they at least had the decency to be ashamed, and some were even moved by conscience to pay back what they had stolen. Today, we are witnessing the exhibitionism of those in power, who not only do not feel ashamed for their deeds, but even justify what is inexcusable.

Miloslav Kral, the Czech mathematician and theorist, views the meaning of power in connection with control. He says that "while traditional totalitarianism was defined by a prison cell, postmodern totalitarianism is characterized by a virtual cell which moves together with the person without their being aware of its existence to the extent that they behave in accordance with the algorithm of the ruling élite. Modern totalitarianism declares itself to be democratic, but it is in fact only a game of make-believe"[16].

This typical Machiavellianism has modern tools at its disposal, which it uses to manipulate people by affecting their minds, opinions, values, models. Postmodern totalitarianism has generated models of personalities, celebrities and politicians which are the object of media attention.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Two points result from the ideas outlined in this contribution: the need to strive for refinement in the concept of personal dignity, and to promote a style of love and friendship in relationships with others. Only then can the autonomy and uniqueness of every person be taken into consideration. Emphasis on the need to realize the social, corporate, and moral responsibility for life, social relations and solidarity can also be added to this style. Democratic governments should support and strengthen the family, the intimate and friendly structure which is the recognition of love protecting social relationships. Today's Europe has the ambition to develop new theories at national institutions and through European legislation, though this system is poorly elaborated

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[16] M. Král, *Civilizace a mravnost. Perspektivy moderní civilizace*, Praha 2010, 50.

in the case of international recognition, which can be seen on the example of remote adoption, recognition of marriage or diplomas.

Of course, solidarity is not a symmetrical form of interpersonal relationship, as it takes into account the actions of an individual, who should be a contribution to the society. It is altruism, the ability to understand the particular situation of another person, and willingness to help them. The endeavour to reformulate basic legal relationships is therefore justified in order to prevent pathologies in the society and domestic violence. M. Hrubec says that "the permanent denial of rights and social recognition has destructive effects on human relationships and exposes the subjects to the risk of hardship"[17]. There is a need to develop human feelings at the cognitive level by recognizing the equality of all people, and also at the practical level like the presence of intellectual life forwarding to trans-national and global responsibility.

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[17] M. Hrubec, op. cit., 82.