

INTRODUCTION

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We live in a period of difficult cultural transition. There is an atmosphere of disorientation that accompanies technological revolution, the meeting of different cultures, and growing welfare. New problems emerge, and new avenues question the ethical feeling of single persons and communities on widespread and uncritically accepted behaviours centred on an egoistic subjectivity at the expense of the public welfare.

In the postmodern age, moral issues and personal responsibility have implications for the ethics of human relations, politics, and the economy. In fact, the ongoing changes in the so-called global society are so complex that they impress anthropology and the construction of new identities. Similarly, the transformations that globally redesign social organizations and amplify the contradictions of the contemporary age triggered a condition of moral, political, ideological, and religious perplexity. This condition reveals the inner fragility of the contemporary age and lead us to open our eyes to the complex matters dealing with civil life, involving and putting into communication different fields of knowledge that require different competences (by scientists, philosophers, theologians, lawyers, economists, psychologists, and sociologists) to understand the quality and quantity of the ongoing metamorphosis.

The urgency of a rigorous and illuminated debate on ethics is triggered by modernity and assists in the gradual erosion of anthropological, social, and religious principles of the costumes and institutions to the benefit of individualistic and egoistic interest. In front of this horizon, we explore the ethical relevance of the complex relations that the development of scientific research and technological applications have with the moral issue. In ethics, an argumentation is understood when the subject is at the centre of the moral argument. The values of scientific research and of personal dignity, which constituted the basics of the modern age and of the humanization of social life, risk being obscured in the postmodern age because they lose the strength and freedom derived from rationally critical options in the processes of choosing and assuming responsibility.

Exploring and reflecting on the present social transformations, development of scientific research, and increasing request for ethics on the part of the society

are important to rigorously consider the opportunity to compare and combine technological and scientific research on human rights and wellbeing. This exploration consists of an understanding of contemporary life, postmodern problems, and above all, getting the point of the existential questions that arise from the transition to modernity that deal with the person and his or her place in the new cultural context. The supremacy of technology testifies how its development contributes to increase the convergence, sometimes exaggerated and forced, of the internationalities on empirical problems, and to relegate the attention to ethical problems on the margins.

These problems pose questions to social sciences on the complexity of social life in relation to technological development, the crisis of values, and the search for meaning. The present common need to reflect on the ethical questions posed by economic globalization, new technologies (especially in the fields of informatics, robotics, and telecommunication), the nomadism of populations, the development of the Third World, the governability of the world, the creation of universal rules of cohabitation, and of the development of a «new human order» has no record in the history of humanity.

«Ethics in action» means to pay serious attention to the simultaneous convergence of two increasingly appreciated values; it is the necessity to improve the rational use of scientific research to favour action and the consideration of the human being as a cognizing being. These two values, which were foreseen and preached during the modern age, become the object of a coordinated plan for activities centred on personal dignity. An incontrovertible need reflects on the interconnections between the knowledge derived from the rational use of the experimental method and the anthropological knowledge of human existence, which is anchored in personal consciousness. It is not possible to talk about a unique knowledge derived from reason because it is not proper for humans and consciousness. Otherwise, it would be reason's knowledge that is aimed at itself and auto-referential. Possible breaks may arise when scientific reason's knowledge (which is also technical-operative knowledge) does not take into account the knowledge of persons' consciousness, which constitutes a specific anthropologic and phenomenological existence. The first debate deals with free will and personal responsibility of the human being in the face of two fundamental and interweaving values: scientific knowledge and respect for personal consciousness and freedom. The problem is the nature of a knowledge that would help human beings and not only human reason. No knowledge may be qualified for reason in itself; knowledge is always and only proper of human beings because they are anthropologically finite and suffering, being sufferance as universal as joy is. Only such a knowledge necessarily refers to human free will, to intrinsic subjectivity and reason beginning an order of authentic consciousness.

When the theme of reason is introduced, which refers to knowledge that consciousness has of the actions reciprocally and responsibly produced in a relationship, the epistemological question about the reason of the tight correlation between the definition of science and the meaning of actions is produced within the relationship. Science may arrogate to itself the right to determine conceptual

fixities on mind without asking personal freedom to intervene, in so doing determining a fixed knowledge that cannot be questioned. Such a scientific knowledge is constituted by a precise methodological standard, i.e., the standard of objectivity, which is the act of suspending any question on intentional actions and meanings attributed to the existence of each person. But in this moment a dilemma arises: when the act of suspension is accredited as an act of knowledge, the act of suspension takes the meaning of suspending the consensus to the original knowledge that consciousness itself shaped and constituted originally. This dilemma, when posed between professional responsibility in using a method and the ethics of personal values, subjectivity, and consciousness, questions an ethic in action.

Another theme that should be taken into consideration arises from today's culture. Due to the break between the reason of technological knowledge and the reason of the attribution of meaning to human existence between science and consciousness, postmodern culture and the current anthrop-phenomenological way of thinking frustrate the previous fascination and primacy of scientific knowledge. It seems largely compromised by the fact that technology poses itself as an independent (instead of dependent or interdependent) variable if compared with scientific research and fundamental values. These signs of crisis are eloquently expressed by those theories that announce the coming of post-modernism, hermeneutic philosophy, structuralism, and constructivism.

These theories hold that the knowledge of reason that is not anchored in a specific cultural tradition is not viable. Meaning and the attribution of meaning within a relationship are indispensable in the current forms of speech, especially when relationships become compassionate toward human beings. This is the authentic place of responsibility. Here is the true junction between modernity and postmodernity, and here is the problem of the detachment of technology and science from consciousness and the anthropological values of the persons. Here is poised the important theme of the relationship between science and values (and of the problems derived from this relationship): ethical conflicts and moral paradoxes that must be faced by a consciousness that takes responsibility for its choices. This must be inserted in the complexity of a society that requires that subjective experience is taken into account and avoids rigorous planning impossible or at least undesirable. An ongoing adaptation to instability and change is required. This question is evident in the moral field where the rise of a multidimensional and plural thinking contrasts the ideal of a universal perspective also on what is «good» or «bad»: we pass from white-black contraposition to the infinite range of hues and shades of gray that announce the entrance of judgments and evaluations that are not founded any more on undisputed and indisputable criteria. This leads to the problem of the sources of validation and justification of the different viewpoints.

If we give up the belief in the existence of a scientific or metaphysical truth, what may be the ethical foundation of the future society? The risk is passing from a dogmatic to an anarchic viewpoint on ethics. Here the ethical matter is a declination of the question of subjectivity, meaning, and value in contemporary culture and science. Following the curiosity underlining the scientific enterprise

may lead the human being and the scientist to make life and reason converge and search for the intrinsic equilibrium between ethical/esthetical components and technical/rational components of research and human values.

Departing from these premises of ethics in action may be respect a need for versatility and dynamic approaches that establish or capture the relationship among different domains of knowledge as different models of worlds and contexts of connections – in contrast with a formerly dominant tendency to fix and isolate elements. This is reflected in an integrated organization of the knowledge of science and consciousness; a knowledge increasingly oriented toward interdisciplinarity to mobilize resources for the development of transmodal communications.

In line with this purpose, the present book represents a reflection on the request for ethical questions and answers to the cultural, social, psychological, juridical, and economical problems of the current age. Today, a massive tendency toward homogeneity and homologation prevails as a peculiar characteristic of the modernization process that governs Western society. This tendency is also evident in scientific research, where a need for theoretical and empirical studies, oriented to overcome the hegemony of rationalism and positivism, is felt. Rationalist and positivist paradigms represented a historically relevant framework but are today unable to understand the social phenomena that must be constantly compared with the study of the value and normative systems also derived from different cultures, which are themselves changing toward modernity.

Through the contribution of authors from different fields of knowledge, this book proposes a different framework to deal with this changing and plural society. The book opens with a contribution by Raskin and Debany, who address the issue of the inescapability of ethics within a constructivist framework and the difficult questions it poses to the theoretical foundations of constructivism. We chose to open the book on this perspective because we think it represents a starting point of our view of ethics as knowledge that guides action. This viewpoint marks the following chapter by Sabrina Cipolletta dealing with presence as an exemplification of what we mean by ethics in practice when dealing with health care relationships and more specifically with the psychotherapeutic context. A different perspective is adopted to deepen this context. Cavanna and Vallotti propose a psychoanalytical view, analyzing its theoretical model and its implications on the therapeutic alliance. Although psychoanalysis and constructivism are traditionally different, similarities arise when dealing with engagement in the therapeutic relationship. The following chapter by Salvini and Faccio explores some implications of an action based psychology that construes a diagnosis in a clinical setting. In particular, it analyzes a recent phenomena, the vigorexia. It illustrates how this diagnosis is socially construed rather than objective, as the institution of a psychiatric diagnosis would suggest. Each individual choice – e.g., physically training through body-building – may be read through the lens of that scientific knowledge that states the rules of a universal truth, as previously recalled in this introduction, or may be inserted in human beings' existence.

If we pay attention to each individual's presence, body becomes a central point because presence is always embodied, as highlighted in the second chapter.

It is not by chance that many of the experiences discussed in different chapters deal with body. Vigorexia is only an example. Passing from the therapeutic context to the field of experimental research in psychology and neuroscience, other embodied experiences are considered and analyzed through different theoretical and methodological perspectives. Cipolli, Plazzi and Tuozi introduce a new forensic and psychological issue – i.e., dream enactment and violent behaviour during REM sleep, which poses interesting questions on the place of self-determination in human acting. In the following chapter, Sartori, Agosta and Pezzoli examine the links between brain and lying, proposing a new tool to detect lies. It represents a new avenue where psychology encounters law.

We definitively enter the field of law with Zanotti, who explores the relationship between law and ethics. By analyzing the complex relationship between the individual and the legal system, the author sagaciously raises the question of how persons may keep individuality in front of law while being equal before it. This matter has important implications, especially when dealing with topics like the origin and end of life or sexuality and marriage. The relationship between the individual, the law, and the community is recalled by Patrizia Patrizi, who raises the issue of how to communicate a promotional and pro-social culture of responsibility when the wellbeing of one side (individual or community) seems to contrast with the ill-being of another side (individual or community).

This leads us to a more general reflection on work, spirituality, and political action by the exploration of the dynamics of power, authority, and freedom. In the ninth chapter, Trentini examines the anthropological meaning and the psycho-social scope of power in relation to authority and freedom. Departing from the etymological analysis of these terms, the author underlines the links of power with action and points out how the separation between authority and power is historically situated in the birth of the «citizen». Finally, Kaneklin concludes this book, proposing to rediscover the political value of action in social and work organizations to overcome the divide between spirituality and work. With this reflection on the foundations of contemporary society, we finish our journey through different theories and practices and we hope we ask more open-ended questions than to give answers on the basics of our acting.