

Dabbling with Ethics: How moral values impact of our immediate social environment?

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Our minds are bombarded on a daily basis with huge quantities of information that needs to be processed into thoughts and ideas; the rapid pace in which the human communities outline their dynamics nowadays is directly influenced by the role of communication technology. As a result, we are more prone to making ethical errors due to our limited capacity to make a clear distinction between ‘fabricated information’ and the ‘truthful information’. The ethicist is the one that is left with the difficult task of making a well calculated intervention in a society’s social framework in order to facilitate the neutralization of its unbalances which so often trace their roots in a moral or ethical crisis. Moral and ethics are often debated at a theoretical level in academic environments but with a lack of interest for their practical use in day-to-day life. The study of ethics is in favor of the development of multi-perspective outlook on the world, of a thought process that avoids falling under influence of ethnocentric ideas, and even more important, erasing those errors of thought and conduct that set the foundation lies, corruption and the abuse of one’s power and social status.

It should be made very clear from the very beginning that this paper does not intend to give answers; I stopped long ago hoping to find solid answers in ethics. I found out that the main objective of this field is not that of giving us the actual answer, but rather, giving us the epistemological framework that will lead us to the answer that is the most suitable for us.

Every society has its own way of evolving over time, we can talk about similar development patterns but we will never find two that match perfectly. Ethics, once viewed only as a branch of Philosophy, now gained an impressive number of scholars that focus on ways in which the study of Ethics can facilitate the birth of a new social era, one that is safe from disturbances, violence and inequality among people. It should be made clear from the beginning that there are a lot of ways in which ethics can be perceived as a subject, quite often, its critiques highlight the high degree of relativism that ethical norms have.

This limitation is perceived at three levels – geographic, temporal and cultural - they can overlap, they can intersect, there’s nothing that could make one incompatible with another. Most often, cultural

relativism is the one that is used in the battle against the legitimacy that Ethics can hold both in the class room, as a subject of study, or in a company, as a framework for the employees conduct. Modern ethicists are preoccupied nowadays with outlining those sets of values that are common to all of mankind in order to design ethical norms that are applicable regardless of aspects that are linked to geography and cultural particularities. On the other hand, the temporal limitations that some values and ethical standards have cannot be ‘fixed’ and there is no need in the majority of cases for their comeback; there are numerous instances in which some of the values that were held by people in the past were dysfunctional and counterproductive.

A good example would be ‘blind obedience’, a different form of obedience then the one from nowadays, the form that we are talking about was in some way a byproduct of the ‘divine command’ which set certain people into certain social positions as a result of God’s decision to equip them with power over others. Our talk about ethical errors or errors in Ethics can take two very different paths:

- *Ethical errors* are made up of one’s incapability of coherently understanding the conduct that an ethical norm wants to apply.
- *The errors of Ethics* rather refers to the way in which an ethical norm was thought of and structured that it isn’t capable of regulating one’s conduct in such a way that it would lead to positive results.

An even trickier question comes when we must clarify the distinction between the concepts of error and flaw. From my own perspective, if there were to be a distinction between the two that would come from the way in which they make their existence noticeable.

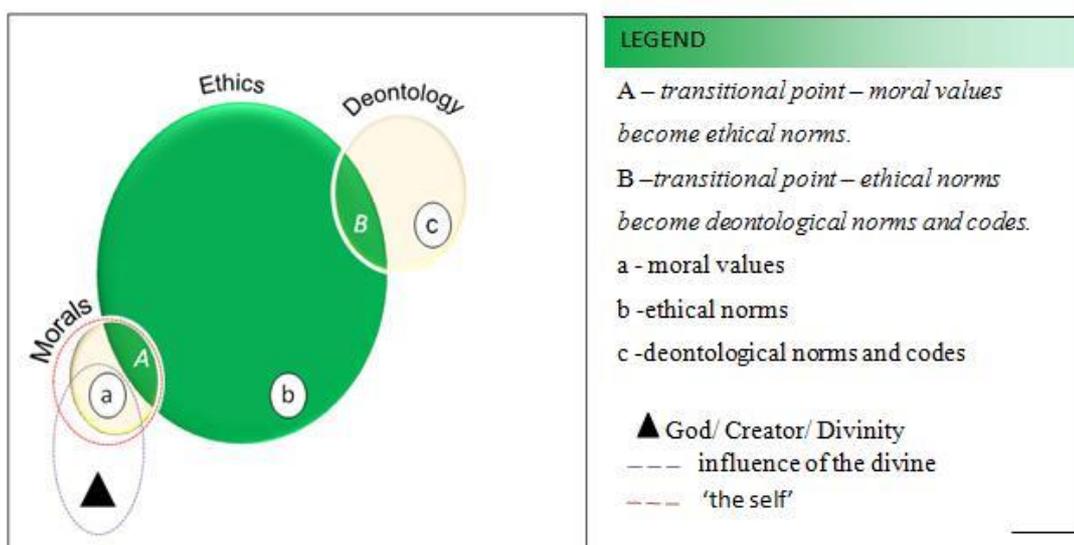


Figure 1 – Connections between morals, ethics and deontology

An error could relate more to the misconduct, to a lack of understanding of a conduct’s consequences; on the other hand, a flaw might relate to an error’s result and may be noticeable at both a psychological and material level. In any case, we can all agree on the fact that the two notions that were presented in the lines from above are inseparable by nature.

Errors, their structure and the way of functioning, gained a huge interest in the context of the growth in size and power of companies which are conscious that their stability and further development are dependent on the minimization or errors in all areas of activities.

Another issue that puzzles many finds its roots in the statement that ‘no ethical norm is universally applicable due to cultural relativism’; and how can we put our trust in a science that has such shallow roots? This is a subject that was widely debated, yet again, we can talk about universally accepted ethical norms only if we bring in to discussion two other elements:

- *Universal values* – based on the statement there is a set of ‘universal human values’ which act as a base for ethical norms that legitimize their use through the wellbeing that they bring to the lives of individuals and their communities.
- Legitimization of values through their author’s position, strength and influence on others.

Even so, the legitimization of the use of a universal set of ethical norms base on people’s adherence to a set of common human values can be dissolved by the growing level of nihilist

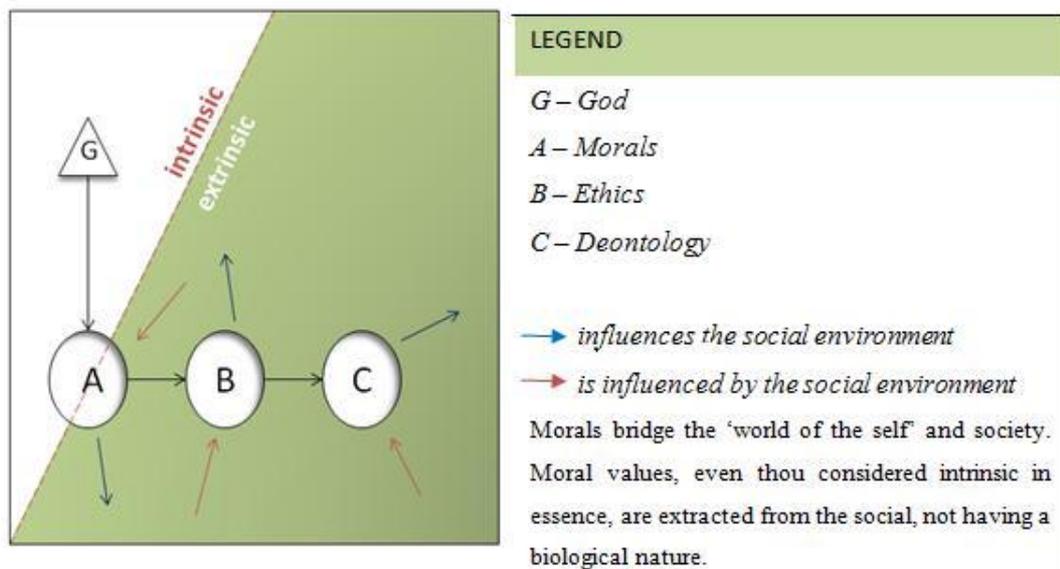


Figure 2 – The ethical circuit sourced from the ‘Divine Command’

ideologies which deny legitimacy of value as a base for conduct and generally questions the very essence morality do to its subjectivism and the credibility of those parties that impose moral standards as a way of fulfilling the ‘Divine Command’.

There is quite a controversy over the legitimacy of the Divine Command for a number of reasons. First of all, if we use this idea in the context of ethics we are heading towards a non-naturalistic approach in which social harmony isn't the result of the predominance of conducts which don't put man in opposition with the natural world (people, animals, plants), but rather it becomes the result of an intervention from the exterior that man cannot resist. This poses a lot of problems when it comes to the credibility that ethical codes can have; it shows that morals and ethics are impersonal, they don't represent the product of human thought and experience but rather represent an element which represents the natural consequence of men's creation by a superior being which he is eternally subordinated to. Ideas, doctrines and thoughts which had non-naturalistic tendencies were raised in popularity during the time of the Reformation in which the emerging Calvinist teaching was in favor of a life path that was preset, that was unchangeable and one in which the elements that make up our world don't have an unpredictable interaction and evolution.

The popularization of Calvinist ideas lead to the apparition of a new image of the social and natural world, a vision that was the subject of fatalism and inequality, a vision of a God that set privileges for some and eternal suffering for others. On the other hand, it comforted some, because there was no longer a real personal fault for one's fails in life, it was comforting to know that there were those who were predestined to spend eternity with God and those who were meant to spend eternity in suffering and there was nothing that could be changed about it.

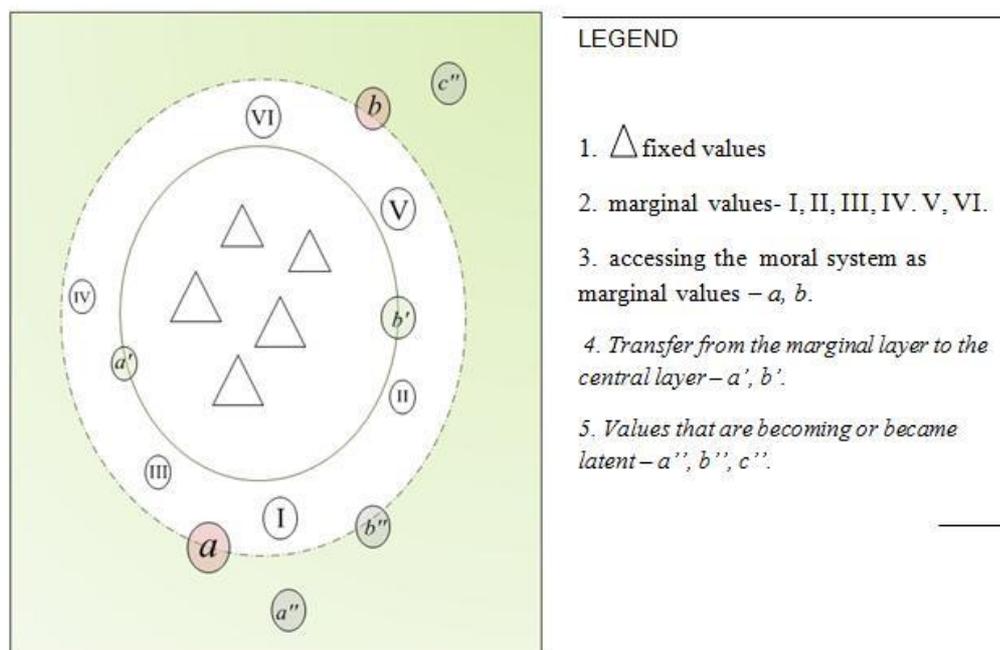


Figure 3 – The position and movement of values within a moral system

So how can we design a universal set of applicable ethical norms? There is a chance by making a short analysis of what actual are the criteria by which we label something as ethical or unethical, and how can we find the right values that can be universally applicable to all cultures and societies?

For much of man's history, ethical and unethical conducts were quite frequently absorbed into the concepts of good and evil. This isn't so surprising the social context of the last centuries in which the Church held a monopole on everything that related to moral literature and other writings on this subject. Morality was perceived as a tool that could be administered only by the Church which was installed with power from the Creator.

Morals were exclusively a subject that related to religiosity and with religious life in general, as a result, the values that acted as a base for ethical norms fluctuated between the concepts of good and evil because morality was subordinated to religious ideologies.

Nowadays, we cannot talk anymore about morality which is centered only around good and evil, but rather it is more constructive to talk about morality and ethics which gravitates around pleasurable/ irritating; functional/ dysfunctional or harmful/ non-harmful.

Hedonism, and all the ideologies that it fueled, tell us that men is naturally attracted to everything that gives him joy and comfort. As a result, can we state that there are values that are both intrinsically and extrinsically positive in any cultural environment and context? If we take the value of education, which is cherished in all human cultures, can we create ethical norms based on it that are applicable anywhere? A thing that must be kept in mind is that *education* doesn't encompass only formal education and informal education as we know them in the Western World. The phrase 'he's educated' or 'he's the educated one' can be attached to the notion of wisdom in the same way as it can be used to denote one's academic performances. The translation of values from a culture to another is in many instances limited and impossible. An interesting case when it comes to the translation of moral values from one culture to another is when the actual meaning of a value can be modified by its position within a system. This is the case of the value of *purity* which takes a central position within the Hindu system of moral values; in this case, *purity* has different substances than it has in the context of the Western World. The 'Hindu purity' is different from the 'Christian purity'; in both cases purity would be linked at one point to one's 'healthy moral profile', but yet again, the difference is rooted in the centrality of this value in this two systems of belief (Gandhi, 1987). For Christians *purity* came to represent a byproduct in their quest for obtaining salvation and eternal life; it is a requirement for 'God's plan for Salvation', but it isn't held as the Christian faith's ideological foundation. In Hinduism, purity has a solid and quite well

outlined configuration, this central value is manifested through in two distinct ways which are interconnected – *purity of the mind* and the *purity of the body* (Arumgam, 1999). The *purity of the mind* is the one that dictates that of the body, a mind that is prone to falling into a moral chaos cannot sustain a healthy body. Moral chaos is unavoidable, it happens to each one of us being a visible manifestation of our flawed nature; when dealing with moral chaos our struggle is not only internal, it automatically translates in the way we interact with our immediate environment. Opposed to Christianity, Hinduism highlights the purity of man in his ‘natural state’, by ‘natural state’ we understand man from an intrinsic angle, one that did not enter or did not get absorbed into the society which is a playground for polluting and immoral practices (Hall, 1999). Men’s purity is, as mentioned above, an intrinsic characteristic, an infant enters into this world both physically and spiritually pure. Pollution comes from the exterior and infiltrates in to man’s inner self, first infesting the thought, and immediately after, the physical body.

The elements that set the ground for the installment of moral chaos can vary substantially from one individual to the other, moral chaos, or the element that triggered it find its source somewhere in our distant or immediate social environment, highlighting once more that moral values are a social product and don’t have biological traits.

To many readers purity and pollution may seem quite distant as concepts related or relatable to morality to the geographic area in which they hold the highest degree of popularity, the Indian subcontinent. In our world, we tend to judge actions and conduct by applying attaching the label of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ , rather than using concepts as complex as purity and pollution. The easiest way that we translate this two moral labels into a theoretical form, keeping mind the social particularities of the century in which we live, it would be by directly relating them with pleasant-unpleasant, pleasurable-uncomfortable, functional-dysfunctional.

Conscious or not, all of the notions that are written above can be easily absorbed into a hedonist social doctrine, one that says that people naturally tend to favor those things that give them a sense of pleasure, and are inclined to reject those that bring them discomfort. Hedonism reached its peak of popularity with the advancement of technology and the fall of religiosity; new technologies promised us a future in which our lives would be easier, a future in which we will do less manual labor and achieve a bigger quantity of goods. The advance of technology was fundamentally fueled by the favorable prospective of doing less work and having a higher level of comfort in our daily life.

Even so, *the purity-pollution dual* was present in Europe for centuries without being noticed by the majority of people; it was and still is in use by the Romani people, a group that traces their roots to the Indian subcontinent. Purity is a central-fixed value in traditional Romani culture, its origins

are related to the ancestors of the modern Romani who were practicing various forms of Hinduism; their spread in Europe was synonymous with their abandonment of their ancestor's faith, or what was left of it, and adopting the religious practices of the communities in which they settled. Purity remained up to the present a fixed-central value in Romani culture, and its importance is especially stressed by conservative communities. The 'Hindu purity' and the 'Romani purity' are today notions that are similar in form but have substantial differences in regards to their substance; first of all, the Romani had developed over time new functions for this notion and nowadays it tends to be mainly synonymous with the conservation of the vernacular elements of the culture. As a result, purity became to a certain degree relatable in the ban of intermixing with other groups.

Another function that purity still plays is in some rituals and events that mark important points of an individual's and of a community's life. Weddings and funerals still put a huge stress on the purity of those that are the central figures of the event or of those who are present as 'spectators'. After death, the physical body became polluted, as a result of decay, because of this, there are a number of costumes that are meant to limit the effects of negative energies. In this case, non-values are translated in to restrictive ethical norms, and values are turned in to premise and descriptive ethical norms.

CONCLUSION

This paper had as a focal point the debate on the possibility of the construction of a set of 'universal ethical norms' that could guide the conduct of anybody, regardless of their cultural background. From what we saw, values vary quite a lot, depending on the cultural environment that we are referring to; another issue derives from the fact that even there is a number of values that are present all around the world, some may translate them quite differently into ethical norms than others. There is no set of guidelines that can offer a unitary way of translation of values into ethical norms, thus cultural discrepancies tend to get wider.

One thing that we can do is that of listing the criteria that should act as a base for when we were to pick the 'universal values'. Are those 'universal values' prone to give us pleasure and comfort? Will they be perceived in the same way in the majority of cultures? Should those norms be affiliated to hedonist ideas? Should they be counter-natural norms, ones that ban us to do those things that bring us pleasure and comfort?

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