

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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## **Ethics and Hermeneutics**

Ramon C. Reyes

*Philippine Studies* vol. 35, no. 4 (1987) 420–429

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## Ethics and Hermeneutics

RAMON C. REYES

As a branch of philosophy, ethics may be defined as the study of or the reflection on the rightness or wrongness of human action. It is a fact of life that we distinguish between right and wrong actions. Very early in life, we are made to realize that not all actions are permissible. Some actions are considered praiseworthy. Others are condemned and prohibited. As we grow older we are made to appreciate the finer distinction underlying the difference between judgments regarding the feasibility or efficiency of an action, and judgments regarding the social acceptability of an action, and over and above these, judgments regarding whether an action is morally right or wrong. *Mabuti bang gawain o di kaya'y masama?* In other words, we learn to make technical judgments, socially prudential judgments and moral judgments. Thus, for example, in such an undertaking as the Chico River Dam project, it is one question to ask whether the project is technically recommendable in terms, for example, of the irrigational benefits and cheap energy it could generate. It is another question to ask whether the project is socially acceptable or politically expedient. And it is still another question to consider whether such a project is morally justifiable.

### THE ETHICAL DIMENSION

To be more precise, we could perhaps define the ethical or moral dimension of man as having three elements: it has to do

with human action, properly speaking; it has to do with the rightness or wrongness of human action; and finally there is the element of obligation.

First, the moral aspect of man has to do with human action, properly speaking. In other words, here we are dealing with man insofar as he is truly active, insofar as he plans and posits goals for himself over and above the natural course of events, and deliberates and decides on means to adopt in order to attain those goals, and goes about to implement the means adopted in view of his intended goals. In brief, morality deals with the free acts of man.

Secondly, morality has to do with the rightness or wrongness of human action. It is not sufficient then that an action is freely done. To be moral it must conform to some norm in relation to which the action is said to be right or wrong. Such a norm is eventually an expression of some fundamental ideal vision of man that the community is committed to. An action is therefore right or wrong, moral or immoral depending upon whether or not it conforms to such an ideal vision of man.

The third element in morality is that of obligation. In other words, insofar as morality has to do with the free acts of man, man freely does what is right or what is wrong. And yet this free choice between doing right or doing wrong is not a purely indifferent choice such as in choosing between strawberry ice cream or chocolate or mocca. Implied in the alternatives between right and wrong is a certain duty, a certain exigency that we must do what is right and avoid what is wrong. In other words, the moral choice between right and wrong is not merely a matter of choosing among particular goals and objectives. Rather, moral choice would seem to involve something of greater moment, something that has to do with the very meaning of man's existence. In such wise, it is said that to do what is right is to do what is *good*, in other words, that which in some way is in line with the very nature of man's being, and to do what is wrong is to do what is *bad*, that which seems to run counter to the very fiber and grain of man's existence.

Hence, it is said that it is a moral obligation to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong. In other words, freedom in morality does not signify simply the freedom to do whatever one pleases. Rather, it signifies the nature of man to be self-made or, to be more exact, self-making, self-determining. In other words, morally

speaking, man is responsible for himself and his fellowman, man has the freedom to make of himself truly man as his very being demands, or the freedom to betray his own being and relinquish his birthright as man. Therein lies his dignity as man.

We see therefore that the question of moral obligation, the interrogation regarding its ground and origin constitutes the main issue in moral philosophy. Thus, we see that the main preoccupation of moral thinkers is to show or explain the origin or ground of this moral obligation and by the same token to show the principle underlying the moral distinction of what is right and what is wrong.

For Plato, for example, the force of moral obligation is seen to proceed from *eros*, love or desire, that certain "tendency of the soul," a certain deep craving or hunger for satisfaction, and that this quest of the soul leads him on to some kind of a dialectic course, a struggle with oneself, some kind of a pilgrimage or spiritual voyage towards the union with what is good and beautiful and the procreation of what is good and beautiful.

This quest eventually leads man on an ascending path, starting from the desire of the physically beautiful and the procreation of the physically beautiful, to the higher desires of the more spiritually beautiful and the desire to procreate spiritual offsprings, such as poetic works, social and legal institutions and the sciences. But in the end, the quest of *eros* finds rest and peace only in the union with the highest form or idea, the absolute Beauty and Good itself, that which is above all change, that which *eros* has been searching for all along. This highest, ultimate stage signifies not a mere knowledge about the absolute Good and Beauty, but a state wherein the soul possesses and is being possessed by absolute Good and Beauty. Not being a matter of knowledge then, such a state is ineffable and incommunicable. And in this final state of union, the soul attains immortality, that which has always been the goal of the quest for physical and spiritual procreation. For Plato, therefore, the origin and ground of moral obligation lies essentially in this orientation of man toward absolute Beauty and Good.

For Aristotle, the source of moral obligation is the immanent life of reason in man. Morality is fundamentally an activity for Aristotle. There are however two types of activity in man: first, the transitive one, wherein the goal and purpose of the activity

is something outside of the activity, such as in the various technical activities in view of turning out useful products. Secondly, there is the immanent type of activity, wherein the purpose and meaning of the activity is within the activity, or more precisely, is the activity itself, such as in the act of true friendship.

That which precisely specifies the being of man as man is this capacity for immanent activity. And the highest immanent activity man is capable of is the activity of reason, that self-instituting and self-governing order within man that achieves itself in the communal life of the *polis* or the city-state, and in the activity of contemplation, wherein man in some way coincides with the activity of God Himself in the eternal act of knowing Himself. For Aristotle, therefore, the source of moral obligation is reason itself as immanent in man, that which requires him to dominate his passions, to participate in the cultural life of the community, and to enter into contemplation that in some way makes him like the gods.

In Saint Thomas Aquinas, we see a synthesis between Plato and Aristotle, or more precisely between the Neoplatonic sense of human interiority that leads man to seek for some absolute outside of him, and on the other hand, the Aristotelian sense of conformity to an immanent order of reason within himself. Thus, in Saint Thomas, we see in his notion of *synderesis* or conscience, first, a sense of a deep bond with and orientation to the Creator and secondly, a sense of immanent reason as expressed in the first principles of Natural Law, which is the very law of his rational being. For Saint Thomas, then, the foundation of morality and of moral obligation, as manifested in the experience of conscience, is ultimately God Himself, to Whom man in his very being is oriented, and proximately the rational nature of man and the Natural Law immanent in his nature.

For Immanuel Kant, the ground of moral obligation is the being of man as freedom. Freedom is that fundamental capacity of man to act, to be some kind of an original cause, over and above the physical chain of cause and effect that reigns over nature. As such an original cause, man has the capacity to pose goals for himself over and above the course of natural events and take up means in view of such goals. Man then as freedom is not a mere product of nature but is precisely self-determining.

Freedom however does not signify simply doing anything as one wishes. For that would eventually mean negating one's freedom.

Thus, Kant distinguishes between *Willkur* and *Wille*, between arbitrary will and rational will. In other words, freedom must remain consistent with itself and with the freedom of others. Hence, freedom is subject to laws, laws however that freedom itself posits for itself in order to be consistent with itself.

Freedom is both an actuality and a task for man. It is an actuality in the sense that man here and now has this power to be an original cause, to posit goals, to overcome his own natural drives or tendencies. On the other hand, freedom is a task insofar as man needs to realize this fundamental capacity for freedom in the concrete context of his organic and psychic constitution and the natural, social, and historical forces which constitute his environment. The basic moral obligation then is to will to be free, to treat oneself as well as fellowmen with respect as befit free beings who are on the way to being more and more free, to seek to establish a human realm of freedom and peace wherein there could be true reciprocity of human persons.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

At this point, we may perhaps ask ourselves, how, in comparison, philosophical hermeneutics would view the moral dimension and how it would go about grounding or justifying moral obligation. But before doing so, it might be good to first examine, if only in brief, what philosophical hermeneutics is all about.

Closely associated with the names of Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Habermas, philosophical hermeneutics regards man as historically situated even as a knowing and as an acting being. Man is viewed to be immersed in his situation as defined by such encompassing elements as tradition, language, social structures, and historical forces. While it is true that as reflection and will, man may to some extent transcend his situation, such power of transcendence however is not absolute. Man's thought and action cannot but continue to remain in function of his situation as defined by the language, the tradition, and the past history of his community.

At best, therefore, man's understanding of himself and his situation would be a certain interpretation or reinterpretation, not an immediate intuition or vision of the matter born of some kind of an all-encompassing, all-surveying, total view. In other words, man finds himself within a preexisting structure, thus a preexisting

outlook constituted by his language and tradition and historical situation. This preexisting structure has the effect of an interpretational or hermeneutical circle, since language and tradition as structures are bearers of sedimented preexisting meanings and assumptions which predefine the scope of man's outlook and in great measure anticipate its findings. Hence, some hermeneuticists would view things from the perspective of the "narrative," wherein all the different elements of human existence are viewed to take place according to some kind of a structured plot and converge toward some meaningful end.

In such a historical perspective, the hermeneuticist proposes to avoid relativism precisely by accepting and resolutely taking cognizance of man's historicity. In effect, man must take a critical attitude which takes seriously the limitations of man's finitude. Such a critical attitude, to a certain measure, frees man from the blindspots and prejudices of his situation. The critical attitude, however, at best has a negative value. If the hermeneutic attitude is to yield more positive results, there has to be something more, such as that which will show what is novel or unique in the historical situation.

For this reason, hermeneuticists would go further to find among the resources of traditional language some way by which to break the fixed meanings of codified and systemic language. And they claim to find it by viewing language not only as code and structure but as speech, whereby man as speaker, in addressing himself to the other, puts new life into language and succeeds in saying something new, breaking through the closure of the conventional code by way of metonymy and metaphor and symbol. Hence, language is not only a system of fixed meanings but at times succeeds in being a creative or poetic "event," saying something new, something yet unheard of till then. By another route, other hermeneuticists seek to renew tradition by way of a dialogue or a dialectic between the present and the past and eventually by a fusion of these two horizons, and this process is seen to open up to something historically new.

The move to renew tradition and traditional language and allow for the emergence of something historically new brings up the question whether this something new which emerges refers to real possibilities in being or would they be mere voluntaristic projections of man and of language. For this reason, other hermeneuti-

cists would go beyond language to find some "deeper meaning" as grounded in the possibilities of being itself. However, here being is not to be taken as to mean that which transcends the historical situation, but rather would signify that singular, historical glimpse or "mittence" of being, the possibility or possibilities of man born of the historical situation. In this sense, being would not mean some kind of an ahistorical overarching first principle or ground, that man goes back to in reprise again and again, but rather more of the nature of an historical "event" or *kairos*, novel, unique, that manifests itself unbidden, catching man by surprise each time, as described for example in Heidegger.

### HERMENEUTICS AND ETHICS

Having seen very briefly the viewpoint and approach of philosophical hermeneutics, let us now see how the hermeneutic attitude would approach the ethical dimension of man.

First, the hermeneutic approach would point out that the whole problem of morality and moral experience does not issue out of the ruminations of philosophers. Rather, morality begins out there in the preexisting traditional cultural community, which is man's first initiation into moral life. It is our community which first orients us toward a certain system of valuations of right and wrong, hence toward a certain vision of man and of the world. Morality is first of all something we inherit as part of our cultural heritage or tradition.

On the other hand, morality is not simply a matter of repeating the traditional system of values we have inherited. Rather, it would be something like a creative repetition, whereby the present horizon goes to confront the traditional giving rise to something new, thus something precisely historical. To put it in another way, imbued from the beginning with a certain precomprehension, a certain vision or ideal of man which he has inherited from tradition, man, situated in the present, reminisces, as it were, to retrace his roots, in an effort to regasp more purely, to retrieve that original vision that has animated this whole tradition from the first moment of its history. In this process, a dialogical encounter between the present situation and the traces of past actions and past realizations ensues, resulting eventually in the creation of something new, a new understanding, a new way of grasping, thus a



new concept in view of a new realization, and thus effecting a renewal of the historical tradition itself.

In this perspective, let us see how moral conscience is to be viewed. Being historically situated, conscience will not be seen as in possession of certain definite universal principles which it simply applies to the particular situation. The moral problem is not a question simply of subsuming under a universal concept or rule a particular situation, but first of all the question of how to come up with the concept with which to grasp the new situation. Conscience therefore would be viewed not so much as in possession of definite universal principles as imbued with some fundamental orientation, with a certain ideal and vision of man bequeathed to him or awakened in him by his moral tradition, which needs to be reconceptualized and redefined from historical situation to historical situation. To be sure, conscience also inherits from the past certain ways and principles by which past moral situations have been resolved. But the historical present never being quite as past, such past ways and principles could at best serve as tentative guidelines rather than as universal principles under which the present situation would be simply subsumed.

Hence, being heir to a certain vision and ideal of man and confronted with the present situation, conscience, as it were, returns to its past, going into a dialectical struggle between the configuration of the present circumstances and the remains and traces of past guidelines and solutions, and in the process seeks for a way to grasp, thus to conceptualize the present situation and at the same time to recover that original ideal and vision at the source of the moral tradition. In brief, as practical judgment, conscience must seek not simply a concrete application of a universal concept or principle but rather an altogether new creative response to the historical moment.

More concretely, let us take the example of the problem of social justice confronting our conscience today. If we were to view this problem merely as a matter of application of certain universal principles to the particular moment, we are bound to end up repeating past response to new challenges posed by new historical realities and thereby miss the *kairos*, that proper demand and opportunity of the time. Instead, what would seem to be incumbent upon us is, first of all, to adopt a generous, open and self-critical attitude in order to purify free our view and our will as much as possible

of what might merely be established prejudices and ideological self-interestedness we might have inherited from the past. Secondly, we must try to confront and understand and read the present situation as best we can. And thirdly, with the configuration of the present in view, we must seek to retrieve that fundamental inspiration at the origin of our moral tradition, such as perhaps the ideal of the infinite worth and dignity of the community of human persons, and try how we might best embody such original inspiration and ideal and exigency in the present.

Eventually, to the extent that we are faithful to this moral demand, we shall be reconceptualizing or redefining the sense of justice for the present. Hence, in the name of that true and original justice, we must strive to open up ourselves generously, exert ourselves to go beyond merely acquired responses, continually questioning past solutions, with a view to being truly responsive to the demand of the situation at hand. In this sense, then, we shall be giving reinterpretation, a new definition of justice for the present, not merely applying universal principles to the particular moment.

If it is to be asked at this point what in this hermeneutic perspective would be the ground of moral obligation, the answer would lie not so much in tradition but rather in that original ideal or vision of man animating tradition, an ideal which is an exigency, which finds itself in constant dialectical tension with itself through tradition and history, constantly demanding to realize itself in concrete form from historical moment to historical moment. Or, it could also be said that the ground of morality is conscience, being that original exigency in man, but steeped in a given historical tradition and in constant tension with it. Or finally, it may also be said that the ground of morality is Being itself, not in the sense of a transcendent, ahistorical ground, but precisely as historical Being, as *kairos*, as Event, manifesting itself in conscience from historical moment to historical moment in the form of concrete human possibilities demanding to be realized in the present.

#### CONCLUSION

In summary, we started by asking ourselves what constitutes the moral or ethical dimension of man and we saw this to be comprised essentially of three elements, namely, freedom or the human

act, the distinction between right and wrong, and the sense of obligation. Subsequently, we saw through certain examples in the history of moral thought how this moral dimension of man is explained or justified. Next, we sought to describe in brief the characteristics of philosophical hermeneutics and then proceed to ask ourselves how philosophical hermeneutics would approach the ethical dimension of man. We saw that hermeneutics would view moral man as historically situated, beholden to a moral tradition animated by a certain vision or ideal of man, and morality would consist in the end in our fidelity to that exigency of that original ideal or vision, thus in the docility to the call for a continuing dialectic between the ideal and the given, between the present demands and the traces of past responses, in the constancy to renew and to reinterpret the original ideal or vision and to actualize it from historical moment to historical moment in the course of our concrete life.