

Topic 4: “For man, when perfected, is the best of animals; but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all.” – Aristotle, *Politics*

The cohabitation of the opposites: the unique fragmentation of human nature within society

“Lume v’è dato a bene e a malizia”

In this verse-line, Dante posited the ambiguous situation which men represent in our world: as men were thought to proceed directly from the will and light of God (through a complex process of radiance, subject of medieval metaphysics of light) and are created at His resemblance, their will as creatures does not possess infinity, as they still are imitations, but it has a greatest gift: freedom.

Human animals within the animal world: instinct and rationality versus instinct

Aristotle used to define humans as animals, as we biologically are, but he also stated that we possess a different nature. What does this so particular nature consist in? Reason is the key concept to find an answer. We humans can steer our thought and make it work on a world which only exists in our mind (i.e. whenever we make projects or try to anticipate the effects some particular actions could cause) and we also look for a deeper sense everywhere around us and within us: in a few words, we are rational. Also animals are capable of a sort of thinking, but they mostly follow their instinct and they need to experience each single situation in order to anticipate an analogous one. So, then, while animals only possess instinct, we are characterized by both instinct and rationality. Thus, we are provided with at least two intertwined natures: we venerate our highest rationality while we keep secretly loving our darkest instincts.

Different souls in the same world: merging viewpoints

It is taken for granted that our diversity as human beings is hugely various; whenever we take into consideration the word “viewpoint” (as the feature which differentiating humans), we should refer to its widest meaning and to the enormous variety of situations it involves about everything: feelings, emotions, thoughts, perspectives, opinions. This variegation of aspects constitutes a greatest source of mutual enrichment, but it is also really risky, as someone could believe it is perfectly fair to make me suffer (or even make me die), while I obviously do not think so. But I could perfectly be a masochist or one who is about to commit suicide: if so, I would perfectly agree with somebody who would be normally considered as overcome by primitive pulsing instincts, if not simply mentally sick. Different perspectives about the same situation. In spite of this disquieting prospect, we cannot lose the opportunity of exchanging experiences with the others: it would be such an unbearably terrible loss. That’s why we need to regulate our relationships in order to get the best out of them.

Free reason and choice as new subjects of enquiry

Let's disregard instincts for a moment and focus on reason: reason is supposed to be the guiding light of our lives, but it does not always produce positive effects: we could be either unaware of the effects of what we are doing, or perfectly aware of it and still willing to act so. Free will is not just a gift, it is a responsibility which brings dramatic lacerations to our hearts: which is the right choice? Which is the wrong one? This question brought about a new discipline which tried to find solutions to these problems: ethics. It is the very existence of ethics which implies and demonstrates the necessity of freedom in man's nature: otherwise, it would have never had origin as, if men had not had the right to choose, there would not have been subject to ethics. The leading path of ethics is traced upon the word "justice".

Plural justices in a plural world

Ethics has often been identified with the pursue of the Good through a moral code, but there is a fundamental question, belonging to the field of meta-ethics, which has too often been ignored: is there really a possibility for a common ethics, for a general bridling moral code which will suit every case? Men are certainly profoundly similar and different at the same time: we are physically recognizable as belonging to the same specie, but what happens inside our minds is completely different: each one of us has his unique personal perspective of everything in the world, even good and evil. Does "the Justice" really exist, or is it fragmented into many individual universes? It has been then posited that we do not live inside an objective reality, but inside an inter-subjective one: if most people see something from a similar point of view, that specific one becomes general. Actually, there is a very need for acting this way, as we cannot let chaos rule our lives, so we are forced to generalize what could seem a mere tendency. This way it seems that the cult of the mass (if this so abstract concept has actually a basis) is the key to interpret our world, following the kantian idea of acting as if our behavior could be safely (if not positively) extended to the whole specie. A step towards the same conclusions was also made by Adam Smith when he stated that we should act thinking of what is good for most of the people.

Is generalized Good an ethical one?

Even if we took into consideration the idea of common good as a moral principle, would we always be able to identify it with the very idea of Good? We have here a clash between the physical world and the metaphysical one: we could accept to follow some threads to put order inside our social experience, but we have to reflect deeply if these could be also accepted as moral within us. The metaphysical world, where concepts as "Good" and "Justice" are located, is typical of our minds and, as explained before, it does not exist as a unique one. Witnessing this contradiction, Jean-Paul Sartre stated that the Good is what is good for me and the Evil is what seems evil to me. This conception could be perfectly acceptable if our existences as individuals would have never met each other. We live in a plural world, actually, and the social experience is our greatest strength: without mutual cooperation, we would not have come to our present level of development. Even Aristotle itself stated the

importance of a life in plural, when he wrote that man is φύσει (by nature) a political animal.

Anyway, generalized Good could still be meant as the closer idea to the ethical one, but probably most people usually accept passively as a moral law what is good for the others (too often we are victims of intellectual laziness) without even trying to have a personal opinion. Everybody should make an effort to merge his personal viewpoint with the general one: there will still exist a plurality of ideas, but linked together by one of the terms of the fusion (generalized good) and intellectually valuable; after this process within us, there will surely be space for an open and aware ethical debate leading to further conclusions.

The rules of our greatest game: daily life together

It is then implicit that in our social experience there is no place for complete freedom of action (although theoretically our freedom of thought is unrestrained), as we have to trace the borders between many personal cosmos which constantly encounter each other. We need thus to follow a normative code in order to grant the highest degree of order and, hopefully, satisfaction, to our lives. There are no meta-problems about the existence of laws: they have to exist as we cannot live within complete unruliness and injustice and, as they exert their action inside the physical world, there is the possibility of decoding and restraining some aspects of it. We are perfectly willing to sacrifice part of our personal freedom in order to achieve safety and order: who does not accept it is, unfortunately, not suitable to live in societies.

However, even though the existence of a code is not an issue, how this code should be structured and what its main aims should be are fundamental questions we have to ask ourselves when we have to face practically the moment of writing laws.

It is undoubted that laws must be based on ethical presuppositions and aims: if we identified the aim of ethics with the Good, it follows clearly that we have to pursue, through our laws, typical features of this entity, like the mentioned above order and safety. Generalizations help us again, and this time with a more solid base: if before we compared single and mass at the same level (because of the prominent importance of individuality in ethics), now we have a society within which the singles live, so, posited that all men are equal, what most men believe just, that is definitely to take into consideration when deciding rules. Even when Kierkegaard stated the supremacy of the human single over mankind as a whole, he meant that the individual did not have to be disregarded as before in favor of general entities and tendencies (i.e. his personal experience was, above all, fundamental, and a fundamental subject for philosophy); indeed, being individuals so important, when they come to terms with each other, they have to be considered equally relevant, and a democratic society of equals is forced to find its foundations in the good of the majority. If an individual feels bad about the society he lives in, though, he has the moral imperative of trying to rationally improve it through the possibilities a fair society would surely grant him.

Individual natures within societies: harmonic clashes

Men have to pursue justice all the time and follow the rules they have been given. We have already stated what kind of good has to be pursued: there are, indeed, principles common to human nature (even if a vichian common human nature seems rather

impossible) most people feel they have to follow, as some of the ones stated by the Ten Commandments (“You will not kill”, “You will not steal” and so on). Individuals, thus, are still endowed with a freedom of choice sufficient to decide whether to follow the social rules or break them: individual viewpoints and egoisms are often quarreling with laws, as these prevent immediate private earnings. If men break the rules, they have to face a punishment in order to become again members of society. Until now, we have taken into consideration the perspective of the majority, as generally considered to be superior, but, within our minds, we are the most powerful entity and that is why we could feel allowed to break some rule as they seem unethical to us: they go against our personal good. We at least have now to be aware that our personal good is not justice in general. Something to be considered as “in general” needs a plurality of concordant subjects. So, we cannot feel ourselves perfect just within our personal justice, we have to be recognized as such by other people. That is why accordance to law is the means of judging a level of individual justice: social justice. We have to face laws and positively come to terms with them; often there are clashes of interest, but rules, if just, are made for the purpose of protecting our fundamental human rights. The fear itself of rejection from society should really convince people not to infringe rules. Perfection in justice will be reached when our individual ethical justice and the social one will coincide: perfect justice and perfect moral satisfaction.

Conclusion: a perpetual challenge

If we finally take for a last time into consideration the quotation from Aristotle, we clearly see that animals are our term comparison. Animals. We are commonly confident about our supremacy over animals, we take it for granted. We think Aristotle could at least have said “For man, when perfected, is a sort of god; but, when separated from law and justice, he is a bit less than a god.” Too easy, thinking this way: we have to constantly demonstrate our value in this world, even if we belong to the specie which developed most. The simple affection of a pet is surely thousands of times morally higher than the abysses of evil a human heart can reach. Aristotle was not actually denying our superiority, he was just challenging us, as presumption is a typical human feature: do you want to maintain your privileged moral status? Act fairly. It is terribly simple and difficult at the same time: we will always have to prove ourselves and be judged, and this, until we are still breathing, will never end.