



1. Platz:

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Thema IV:

We ourselves and our ordinary language are, on the whole, emotional rather than rational ; but we can try to become a little more rational, and we can train ourselves to use our language as an instrument not of self-expression (as our romantic educationists would say) but of rational communication.

(Karl R. Popper: The Open Society and Its Enemies. Vol. Two: Hegel and Marx. Routledge 2003, p. 482)

There is an old tradition to claim the supremacy of the ratio over emotion, which Popper carries on in his quotation. Actually, the very idea of philosophy as a subject is based on the premise that rational thought is capable of describing the world and that this rationality can be communicated, understood and logically tested. If an argumentation is rationally necessary we feel forced to accept it, and if it contains a contradiction, we stop describing the world in that way. How weak does emotion seem next to the importance of her so worshipped sister! She may induce empathy, but cannot persuade. She is not bound to the strict rules of logic and therefore condemned as a paradox. If I dared to write this essay in an emotional way, I had no chance to persuade anyone - but for the fact that I am a pathetic mind that has misunderstood the principles of philosophy.

But what exactly is the reason that formed our thoughts into believing in the rules of consistency in such an absolute way? It is evident that this question is one particularly hard to answer, as we are asking for a reason why we are reasonable. It is the problem that made Kierkegaard to write under pseudonyms: One has to follow the rules of examination in order to understand their borders – an inconsequence he left to his fictive authors.

Of course, there are good – logical- reasons to follow logical thought. It may seem evident to use rational sentences in order to describe the world, as all other sentences are per se inconceivable. We are just not capable of thinking a paradox, and whoever tried to think the liar's paradox consequently knows the mind's desperation in the sight of the unthinkable. As Whitehead's paradox expresses, we cannot reach any knowledge we do not believe in, but we cannot believe anything we cannot think: Our only hope is to find true knowledge in the realm of logic, so that it is better to search it there than to despair because of the mere possibility of truth lying beyond these borders.

However, whilst the argument is perfectly valid, it does not give any reason to prefer ratio over emotion. This flaw becomes visible when its parallel applicability for emotion is demonstrated: Only those sentences have a chance of being believed, that we want to believe. This premise might be surprising at first glance, but if we take the notion of the *will* serious, we will have to admit, that no one ever does anything freely without wanting to do

it in the first place. This thought, being stressed by Schopenhauer in nearly all of his works, is an analytical sentence following the definition of the notion *will*. Beyond all logic, our direct reason to believe a sentence is that we want to believe it, just as our direct reason to do something is that we want to do it. And who has not experienced tiresome discussions with followers of some ideology, who accept the superiority of the other's arguments but do not think this to be a sufficient reason to change their mind.

Our will is, however, based on nothing but emotion; it is, in a way, another word for emotion. It might be affected by reason in its evaluations, but whether a fact is agreeable or not is decided in the emotional dimensions of happiness and unhappiness, as we are not capable of wanting something and being unhappy about it. This is a possible formulation for an emotional Whitehead's paradox.

If we now admit that our only opportunity of finding truth lies within the sentences we can possibly believe, the consequence is that the borders of our emotions are just as forceful for this 'pragmatic' argument as the borders of ratio.

The relationship of ratio and emotion seems to be too complicated to be analysed concerning its hierarchy in such a comfortable way. The result of our contemplation is that only the section of both emotionally and rationally acceptable sentences can be consequently thought. Furthermore, this is the only function both aspects have. This might not be very surprising in the case of ratio, as it is always seen in combination with thought. The thesis, that the function of emotion can be reduced to its role in contemplation is of course more arguable, as our will seems to be important in every pragmatic action as well. But the notions of *consequent thought* or *belief* as they are used here do not remain theoretical. It is not possible to really believe that you want to do something without doing it, so that the emotions' task as dimension of thought includes all actions which are led by will.

This leads us to a surprising problem: If both equally define the borders of our possible thoughts and have the same role for our epistemology, we will have to find the difference fundamental enough to make ratio and emotion to separate concepts. Why do we even have two so different notions with so very different connotations and associations? Why are they not examples of the same principle, just as there are different types of syllogisms? It is bewildering, that mankind had the strange idea that their emotional feelings were not part of the rules of thinking in the way Aristotle's sentence of contradiction is.

The only quality difference between emotion and ratio is the possibility of movement. We can imagine a different emotion than we have right now and even have experienced such changes. There are many different and ever changing emotional states and decisions of the will, whereas a contradiction always remains unconvincing and the unthinkable will not be thought. Emotions are to be thought as contingent, as changeable and transformable, but logic remains stable. This does not mean that they are less strict for every single thought. But as it is possible to change them we can think about how they *should* be. It is possible to apply one's normative ideas on them.

The idea of changing emotion with one's own reason is a thought that has accompanied philosophy ever since Socrates was discussing it on the Agora. Plato's ideal of the wise soul can be understood in the metaphor of wisdom being the coach-driver controlling the horses of emotion and for Stoicism every emotion has to be permitted by reason; an autonomy a wise human being does never give up.

As we have seen above, no thought can be formed without us wanting to do so, and therefore these ideals cannot be understood as the tendency “to become [...] more rational” in the meaning of *less emotional*. They intend to *change* emotion so that it does not fight against the thoughts taught by reason, and their emotions are a very central part in that decision. This is the recursive structure of emotion and it fits perfectly to the thoughts we have had above. There we understood the area of thought on which we could possibly search for truth as a section of the two principles ratio and emotion. As we are now capable of changing one principle (which is emotion) to a certain degree, must it not be our hope to change it in a way that makes it cover every part of the area the fix principle covers in order to get the largest possible area? Therefore every true philosopher has to work on his emotions to change them in a way that prevents them from contradicting logical sentences in order to have a better chance of finding truth.

This is, as has been noted above, an argumentation that only works if the reader’s emotions are already covering enough rational area to be affected by such a – hopefully – logically persuasive train of thought. But maybe this is exactly the definition of what we call a philosopher.

However, Popper’s quotation goes further and asks us “to use language [not] as self-expression [...] but of rational communication.” He thereby fails to see the fact that rational communication can never be anything else than a philosophically prudent form of self-expression. Reducing emotion in the way he wants us to is a horrible imagination born of blind fear of subjectivity. In the metaphor we were using above, it would mean to even reduce the area covered by the relevant section, because we reduce the absolute area covered by emotion until we completely stop thinking. As soon as we were rational in Popper’s way, there was no consciousness left to recognize this fact.

(Arbeitszeit: 4 Stunden. Hilfsmittel: Wörterbuch. Der Essay wurde nach dem Wettbewerb durchgesehen.)

2. Platz:

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Thema II:

Must we have the desire to be moral?

This may appear to be a rather odd question, as one may assume that being moral is a wish generally inherent to mankind. No one in his right mind would want to be known for making decisions generally regarded as malevolent, as it is honest and honourable choices with beneficial outcomes which contribute to one's popularity. Therefore, one might argue, every human being has the desire to be moral; and while that may be true to a certain extent, this conviction does not answer the far more meaningful question of whether one *must* have the desire to be moral. It is this issue, the obligation of wanting to be moral, that I will discuss on the following pages, alongside the implications of the desire to be moral in general as well as the uncertainty of how to define morality.

a) Classification of "moral" and "immoral" actions

In order to classify the actions of others and oneself along with their consequences as "moral" or "immoral", one first has to be able to ascribe any given action to either of these terms. But so as to do so, it is necessary that the "judge", i.e. the individual that decides how to rate a certain action, assumes a strictly objective, impartial and unbiased position – which is, however, utterly impossible to man. No human being can truly abandon his personal beliefs of right and wrong in order to insert an action which is the object of inquiry into a moral "grading system" which decides over its moral value. And even if said individual were able to do so, if he or she could dispose of all of his or her bias – what objective point of view would that individual assume?

The problem which arises here is the following: mankind does not have the capabilities to achieve a universally agreed-upon and objective means of morally judging actions and their perceivable effects, as there is nobody who could certify that the agreed-upon "grading system" is, however impartial it may be, *correct*. In order to do so, one would have to grant a certain authority precedence over the entire concept of morality, and as said concept as it stands is a human invention, this authority would, for the purpose of utter neutrality, necessarily need to be non-human, possibly even divine. But as there are no hard facts suggesting the existence of such an authority which could determine the true definitions of what is "right" and what is "wrong", there is absolutely no means of deciding what ethical theory is true or closest to the truth, and therefore one is stuck with a highly subjective view of morality.

In fact, no one can tell for sure if "good" and "evil" or "right" and "wrong" truly exist, as those terms are a concept birthed by the human mind in order to classify the world and give it order. Therefore, one could *either* assume that humans were the first species to grasp the concept of morality which was already existent in reality, in the exterior world, yet obscured by animalistic ignorance in the early humans' interior world, *or* that, in truth, there is no morality at all, that reality is made up of a wide range of things that "are", and that any further investigation detracts from the actual state of the world. And if there were no morality, if morality were merely the highly subjective assignment of human standards to perceivable reality (contributing to the cause of making it easier to understand), there would be no absolute, unconditional definition of "moral" and "immoral" actions.

In our society, the generally agreed-upon definition of “moral” and “immoral” actions is “good” and “evil”, or, respectively, “positive” and “negative”. This attempt at a definition is vague and dependent on personal interpretation, however, and further underlines my above statement: that it is in no man’s power to truly know what is “moral” and what is “immoral” (for example, according to Bentham’s utilitarianism, many actions which a majority of people would despise can actually be deemed moral). One might shape one’s individual beliefs concerning the understanding of morality, but ultimately no one can transcend their own, very personal boundaries of their conception of the issue.

b) Defining “moral” and “immoral”?

Following this train of thought, there arises a further problem: it is unquestionably the wish of a vast majority of people to be viewed as a moral person who tends to make the right decisions (a few exceptions excluded, such as the mentally unstable), as it boosts our ego and gives us a feeling of confidence and self-assurance. And because the definition of morality is, as explained above, rather vague and up to individual interpretation, one can justify one’s actions in just about every case – be it via utilitarianism (“it benefited the greater good”), the categorical imperative (“it had to be done”) or even egoism (“I also have to keep my own interests in mind”). Therefore, every single human being on earth can claim to be a highly moral individual who only does what is good – and as there is a vast plethora of concepts of morality, that most suitable to one’s current situation is adopted, adapted and used to defend one’s actions.

The desire to be moral and be viewed as moral can quickly lead to skipping from one concept of morality to another, which in itself contradicts the cause of trying to be moral. If one aims to be so, one has to stick to a certain theory, whichever that may be, because *if* one notion of morality comes closest to universal validity at all (which we humans, however, cannot perceive or observe in any other way), then it is the best alternative to these “universally valid ethics”. As there is no means of identifying the ethical theory that corresponds most to actual reality, every single one of those has the right to exist and be adopted by certain individuals, just as it is equal among other notions of morality – but only one of those can actually come closest to reality, so skipping from theory to theory (with one’s personal benefit in mind) contradicts the cause of wanting to be truly moral.

c) The desire to be moral

As mentioned above, just about every human being has the desire to be viewed as a moral, i.e. good, person, because acceptance and praise among others are sought by nearly every individual. But apart from merely *appearing* to be moral (including justifying actions which oneself believes were actually improper), one also has the desire to in fact *be* moral. Bearing in mind that it cannot be determined which ethical theory comes closest to existing reality, the question of how one can succeed in one’s desire to be moral leads to several conclusions:

- a) Every theory could possibly be the one which comes closest to reality, so – due to a lack of further knowledge – every human being is, in his or her way, to be deemed moral.
- b) As it cannot be decided what morality really is, every existing theory has to be doubted and assumed to be far from *true and universal* morality; therefore no one is moral.
- c) As our understanding of morality is a rather uncertain one open to personal interpretation, morality as we think of it does not exist.

It is not possible to ascertain which of these possibilities is actually correct, as that depends on one's personal point of view. What *can* be said about the desire to be moral, however, is that the desire to be moral stems from every human's gift for reason.

The desire to be moral is preceded by the ability to distinguish between "moral" and "immoral". The ability to do so is itself preceded by rational comprehension of actions and their consequences, independent of personal judgement. And this skill, rational comprehension, has its roots in that which differentiates mankind from the animal kingdom: intellect (or reason). The "desire to be moral" is actually a misleading term, as it is less a desire but rather the intellect itself striving: moral stems from intellect and reason, and the "desire to be moral" is nothing less than reason's attempt to act according to its own principles and thereby be reasonable. The apparatus that judges our success in trying to be moral, our conscience, is therefore the voice of reason – our own intellect reflecting upon itself. "Ethics" may seem to be a highly emotional topic to some, but in truth it consists of a variety of highly logical, impartial and rational theories as well as lines of critical thinking applied to performed actions. Our desire to be moral is, in short, nothing less than our intellect contemplating and weighing up theories we embraced unconsciously in order to get closer to understanding the concept of true morality – the goal of our desire to be moral is finding out what exactly the moral guideline we should act according to is, and that is nothing short of *universal, general and neutral* morals.

d) The obligation of wanting to be moral?

Following this line of thought, there are two possible answers to the initial question of "Must we have the desire to be moral?", and those answers depend on how exactly one interprets the word "must".

If one decides to interpret it in terms of an *obligation* (along the lines of "You must have the desire to be moral, otherwise you're going to be in deep trouble!"), the answer is *no*. No one is obliged to feel a desire to want to be moral, it is (strictly theoretically) up to oneself if one can identify with the question of an inclination towards morality or not. As a water-proof definition of the terms "moral" and "immoral" along with their implications cannot be achieved, one cannot be imposed with an obligation towards something that is not even clearly characterised in the first place. Furthermore, an obligation always presupposes a figure of authority which imposes the obligation, and (as assessed above) neither can any human being assume this completely objective position nor does any undeniable evidence point towards the existence of some kind of divine being that could enforce the duty of feeling a desire to be moral.

If one decides to interpret it as a *near necessity*, however, the answer is clearly *yes*. One could (in theory) no doubt live and exist without said desire, but it would be a sad existence. As explained above, the "desire to be moral" is actually a misleading term, as it is rather reason's attempt to get closer to discovering the universal concept of morality, which in itself is nothing but reasonable, i.e. rational/logical. The desire to be moral is proof of that which distinguishes us from the animal kingdom and evidence of mankind's greatest tool: its intellect (animals don't care about morality, as they lack intellectual reason). As humans who possess the skill of rational doubt, logical deduction, critical thinking and philosophical reflection, trying to get a glimpse of the truth is one of the very basic elements of our existence and something which has enthralled individuals from the antique till the present day. If we did not have the desire to be moral, i.e. to act according to mankind's greatest achievement – to act reasonably, to do what our intellect proposes to do – an essential part of our being would be missing. As human beings, we ought to feel the desire to be moral and act

morally; otherwise we would not be humans. It is therefore not an obligation, but rather a kind of necessity that we feel said desire, as it points toward our possibly greatest feature.

e) The importance of the desire to be moral for the moral value of our actions

We need the desire to be moral to act accordingly, as only the mind which reflects upon the conceptions of morality in order to gain knowledge about morality itself possesses a scheme of what is “moral” and “immoral”. Without said desire, we just “perform actions” – others may grade these actions and their consequences by themselves based on their own individual notion of morality, but our deeds themselves are then void of any moral value, because they only gain moral value in the first place if we ourselves give them it.

If I rescue a cat stuck on a tree, for example, without any intentions whatsoever, my behaviour is a mere coincidence. Others may applaud my action, as they deem it moral, but to myself that rescue has no moral value and is thereby in itself amoral (detached from morality). If I rescue the same cat out of good intentions, however, i.e. if I do so because I am convinced it is the right thing to do (however emotional this decision may seem, it is still reason that deduces it is the right choice by reflecting upon theories of morality and moral standards), others deem my action moral as well as (more importantly) myself, and thereby I grant my deed significant moral value.

Therefore, without the desire to be moral, which undoubtedly a vast majority of human beings have (every person with a conscience, i.e. the voice of reason, in fact), there would be no morality as we know it. Our actions would all be voluntary coincidences, we would act upon our drives rather than listen to reason, and consequently there would be no theories about how to classify certain deeds under moral aspects. The importance of the desire to be moral is not to be underestimated.

e) Conclusion: Must we have the desire to be moral, then?

Yes, we must have the desire to be moral, but not in the sense that some figure of authority commands us to feel that desire – it is rather a crucial aspect of our being. It is not so much an obligation as a near necessity of our human existence, as the desire to be moral is proof of our intellect at work, reflecting upon our actions in search of universally valid, absolute and completely impartial moral standards – “true morality”, as it were. Without the desire to be moral, our conscience as well as our intellect would not be as far advanced as they are (animals, as mentioned before, have no moral guidelines, they simply perform actions regardless of their moral value), and at the same time, ethics would be a mere wisp of what they are now.

The only problem is that no one can determine how exactly to define the terms “moral” and “immoral”, or rather: what conception of morality, what ethical theory is truly and irrevocably correct and universally valid. This means that while we must have the desire to be moral (and the vast majority of us have this desire), there is a great surplus of conceptions concerning morality: we have the desire to be moral, but that desire takes on different shapes and figures. The “extension” is shared, but the “intention” varies. However, it is exactly this plethora of notions that allows the intellect to continue its journey towards moral certainty and truth by weighing up one notion against another.

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