The grounds of moral approval based on the study of contingent and excellent persons

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Abstract

This research intends to show that a morally perfect person should still feel negative moral emotions about him or herself, such as guilt, shame or humility. With this purpose in mind, we compare the feelings of the ideal person for Aristotle, to the feelings of the ideal person for Hume, based on the moral dilemma faced by Michael Berg, the main character of Schlink's novel *The Reader*. We conclude that whatever Michael's decision, he would feel negative moral emotions.

Keywords

Dilemma; ethical judgment; guilt; moral emotions; shame

Introduction

A long philosophical tradition teaches us about the intrincate relation between reason and emotions. Some thinkers, like the stoics and Kant, deny the moral relevance of emotions in ethical life. Others, such as Hume and Smith, claim that emotions, namely moral emotions, are the source of moral judgments. At the end, we discover philosophers like Aristotle for whom both reasons and emotions are important for ethical judgment. Education should provide us with moral training so that our emotions can agree with our rational response.

Contemporary debate seeks an answer to the question: should a person with excellent morals still feel emotions such as guilt or shame - Even if s/he has acted and thought the situation through well? In this paper we propose an evaluation of this question by comparing two models of a morally perfect person: Hume's vision of a benevolent person compared to Aristotle's vision of an excellent person.

Our hypothesis that a morally perfect person should feel guilt and shame will be tested by confronting the moral dilemma faced by Schlink's

main character, Michael Berg, in his novel *The Reader.* This is a story about a boy who falls in love with an older woman and later discovers that she is a criminal who is waiting in prison for her court decision. He knows a secret that can help her during the trial. Why doesn't he tell anyone about the mystery of his life story? Does this stem from hatred or from love? We sustain that the emotional love-hate ambivalence is the core of this drama and that whatever motive lies behind Michael's decision, he will feel guilt.

With this narrative in mind, we want to see if Aristotle's excellent person is morally superior to the continent person given that s/he does not feel any shame or internal conflict. This would mean that the virtuous person should not still feel humility, such as model Hume suggests.

Can we consider Michael inferior, in moral terms, for maintaining emotional ambivalence? Looking at the historical environment where he makes this decision, this emotional conflict is not strange, neither is the arrival of emotions such as guilt, shame and humility that, as we will see, are not so different.

The problem

According to Dodds, shame culture[1] is present in Greek societies where Aristotle lived and wrote his philosophy. In this context, the concept of virtue was linked to the concept of honour. The hero hopes to make a good impression when facing human or divine trial.

For the Greek philosopher, an action was thought to be virtuous not only because the act was considered to be good, but because it derived from a virtuous moral disposition. A virtuous moral disposition, or the good character of the agent, develops through good moral education that allows a person to enhance his natural faculties and induces him in the habit of carrying out virtuous actions.

The moral disposition is the result of the connection between reasons and emotions, i.e., the way human beings deal with their own emotions. Taking this point into account, Aristotle conceived a typology of six personality characteristics. Three kinds, namely, bestiality, incontinence and moral deficiency, should be avoided. Their opposites, super-human excellence, continence and moral excellence, should be pursued.

Excluding super-human excellence, which is a rare moral type, close to divinity, the higher positions are occupied by continence and moral excellence. The two positions present similarities. There is only an affective difference.

In the continent type, a person thinks and acts well. However, in her/his inner life, there is a struggle between bad wishes and good wishes. The

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1. Shame and guilt cultures are terms coined by Ruth Benedict.

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good ones are the winners. A person in such conditions still feels shame, because s/he criticizes her/his bad desires, and ambivalence given the emotional internal conflict. There is a disagreement not only between reasons and emotions, but also between emotions themselves.

On the contrary, an excellent type does not need self-control. The person is so used to practise good actions, that s/he no longer has bad wishes. She feels the emotion at the right time, for the right reason and in the right way. Therefore, she acts, thinks and feels well. There is an agreement between reasons and emotions. The person is free from shame and ambivalence.

In opposition to shame cultures, we find guilt cultures that do not look for fame but for the deepening of human conscience. David Hume created his philosophy in a judeo-christian society, common to a guilt culture.

Hume doesn't imagine a scale for moral development. He conceives the way in which a moral person should act. For David Hume, our moral judgments of approval are based on four moral emotions: love, hate, pride, humility. When we approve or disapprove our actions we feel, pride or humility, respectively and when we approve or disapprove others' action, we feel, love or hate, respectively. We are helped by three emotional capacities: self-love, sympathy and benevolence.

By sympathy, a quality that we now call empathy, we have access to the inner life of the agent. We sympathize with some people more than others. We feel a greater sorrow for the misfortune of a family member than for a tragedy in Ancient Greece. The esteem that sympathy gives birth to, is, nevertheless, the same. It belongs to the spectator taste and does not change. We approve or disapprove thanks to esteem.

When we analyse the conduct of our enemy, in virtue of our hate, we risk making an unfair judgment. To avoid this danger, we should appeal to benevolence. In Hume's writings, benevolence can be a virtue, a passion or a sentiment. As a sentiment, it allows us to be impartial judges of both the conduct of others and of our own. Although I feel a deep hate for my cousin, if I see in him useful and agreeable qualities, I put aside my feelings of hate and face the benevolent ones. Through sympathy, I can put myself in my cousin's shoes and see if his behaviour was meritorious.

The sentiment of benevolence is common to all human beings and it recommends an object or behaviour, called moral, for general approval. But not everyone can be a judicious spectator or impartial spectator, as Adam Smith later called it. There is a standard of taste, common to human nature, that can't be reached by everybody. Only the practice and training of sensibility can create in us such a taste.

To be a judicious spectator of our conduct, we appeal to self-love, an emotional capacity that avoids the risk of vanity when we evaluate our ac-

tions and it does not forbid self-criticism.

A person who is benevolent, even after having acted well, can feel humility due to self-dissatisfaction or due to the presence of hate or the emotional love-hate ambivalence that, for a passing passion can , originate a passion of humility. The hate, the humility and even the error are not strange to her/him, but the recognition of the mistakes and a fair judgment of conducts, point to a standard of taste, free from the influence of selfish feelings, a pattern that belongs to a judicious spectator.

Having observed Aristotle and Hume's models, it is now time to look at Schlink's novel. The story of Michael Berg has to be understood under a historical framework. Michael is a young man dealing with the guilt and the shame of belonging to a generation fathered by holocaust criminals. As a teenager he has a loving relationship with an older woman, Hanna, who suddenly disappears. Years later, he is a law student and finds her in court. She, and four other women, are accused, , of having killed a group of people. The highest responsibility for the deed would belong to the person who has written a report. Accused of having done it, Hanna declares herself guilty. At that moment, Michael finds out something that always seemed forgotten in their affair. Hanna doesn't know how to read or write. Ashamed to reveal this, , she prefers to receive a higher sentence to show her fragility. Should Michael reveal her secret?

Michael bears a collective guilt, a concept that Hanna Arendt classified as the price to pay for living in a community. Belonging to such an aggregation leads us to bear to responsibility for the deeds of our ancestors. In addition, he chose to love a woman he later discovers to be a holocaust criminal. For these reasons, we can include Michael in a shame culture. However, because he begins a process of meditation and deepens his conscience, we can insert him also in the guilt culture. Within this framework, Michael will have to make a decision that will show if he is a continent, excellent or benevolent person.

Finally, Michael decides to keep Hanna's secret. Whether this was an excellent solution or not, it is attached to an internal motivation.

The Dilemma

The question we can now ask is: what is the quality of Michael's dilemma? First, Michael's dilemma is a *self-imposed* dilemma because the origin of the internal debate is in the agent's behaviour himself, not in the constraints of the world. Furthermore, following the Aristotle division of action into voluntary, non-voluntary and involuntary acts, we consider Michael's action as voluntary. The action, as we can see, fulfils all requirements of a voluntary action: the action (of not revealing the secret) starts in Michael, he

knows that Hanna will be injured (she will spend more years in prison), he knows what he should do to avoid that (reveal the secret), how he should do it (talk to Hanna, talk to the judge) and he is acquainted with his self--purposes for not revealing the secret.

The novel doesn't tell us what would happen if Michael had revealed the secret. Thus, the discussion boils down to the reason why he stayed in silence. Did he do it for love or hate? The virtue, or the vice, of Michael's action is in his motives.

According to David Hume, love and hate are not complete in themselves. They are accompanied by benevolence, for the desire that our loved one is happy, or by cholera by wishing for her/his misfortune. They motivate action.

Since the moment Michael has the knowledge of Hanna's past, he has a feeling of hate in addition to the feeling of love that he already had. The emotional ambivalence that appears remains to the end of the novel, whatever the reason for his decision.

We can suppose that Michael's decision may be due to love, a sign of respect for Hanna's shame. In fact, a doubtful Michael, talks to several people, including his father. He has a conversation with him about the principle of beneficence and what and/or when to be benevolent.

For David Hume, benevolence is a central concept in his theory, the source of morality. However, it is not considered a moral decline when it coexists with cholera, the desire for the misfortune of others. On the contrary, Aristotle speaks of benevolence and cholera not as evils, since their expression is the correct one, but claims that their coexistence does not belong in excellence.

Michael's father gave his son a Kantian answer. He stated that the duty of love involves the respect for the freedom of others, an answer that calms Michael, for a while.

There is evidence that Michael's decision was motivated by hate. For instance, before he takes the decision, he visits a concentration camp and feels horrified by Hanna's actions. But even then, his love doesn't vanish.

In excellence, a person doesn't have bad desires and therefore s/he doesn't have emotional ambivalence. Only the person who is benevolent and the continent person may have it. Yet, it is strange to see Michael simply loving Hanna or just hating her.

David Hume describes the behaviour of passions, telling us what happens in emotional ambivalence. There are two possible solutions when two contrary passions find each other. Either the weaker passion becomes the dominant one, or the conjunction of the two passions gives birth to a third passion.

The first solution is shared by Spinoza, but while Hume is descriptive, Spinoza is normative, pointing us toward what we should do when faced

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with emotional ambivalence. His suggestion is for the human communion, the love, the joy's affection, should be enhanced to fight sad's affection, the hate. But is this a moral solution for the story?

The second solution, the emergence of a third passion, is shared with Freud. For Hume, the presence of hate, such as what happened in the emotional love-hate ambivalence, is enough to produce humility, a new passion. Freud believes that origin of conscience is in an ambivalent situation, a place where guilt is born. This is the treatment that seems more appropriate to Michael's life. Whatever the motive, he remains in silence the presence of hate will forever produce a feeling of guilt.

Hume, however, doesn't speak of guilt; he speaks of humility. In the same way, Aristotle does not speak of either guilt or humility, he speaks of shame. The three terms are, however similar.

The solution

Shame for Aristotle is the fear of be dishonoured, of losing respect before the community due to present, past or future vices. The Greek philosopher speaks of shame as an emotion and as a disposition, which can belong to the continent person but not to the excellent one. This is because the excellent person is not attached to the voluntary practice of evil. We feel shame not only for our vices, but for the vices of the people that are somehow connected to us, like our relatives.

Humility represents a feeling of dissatisfaction with ourselves because of a defect or disease. We feel humility in the presence of a disagreeable quality or vice of ours or of something or someone that is connected with us and that has the power to cause shame. However, we should not misunderstand humility for shame because to have humility doesn't mean to have a vicious character, rather it is the presence of something that we don't like to see in ourselves.

As the consequence of Michael's decision, Hanna is sentenced to life imprisonment and at the end of the novel she kills himself.

We can see in Michael several levels of guilt: collective guilt, guilt of loving a holocaust criminal, guilt for having betrayed her. The guilt that we are talking about in this study is the guilt of not having exposed his secret.

If the excellent person is free from shame, s/he is not free from guilt because guilt and shame are different concepts. However, it may be argued that such statements are not allowed because guilt is a notion that comes only with the judeo-christian tradition.

To answer to such an objection, we argue that shame, guilt and humility are similar notions. They share the fact that for the person who has such emotions, it is common to feel that one is polluted, spotted. The sha-

me cultures and the guilt cultures are united by the symbol of the stain, as was pointed by Ricoeur.

The kind of guilt Michael feels is very peculiar. It is similar to Hume's conception of humility, the sensation of not being satisfied with oneself. This is the guilt that an excellent person may feel, although she doesn't feel ashamed.

Conclusion

Whatever the reason behind Michael's decision, he will forever feel guilt because of the feeling of hate. We can thus conclude that Hume's model of a perfect person, the one that ascribes negative moral emotions about one-self, is the correct model. We can no longer consider the excellent person better to be superior to the continent and benevolent persons.

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