

Anthropological roots of ethics

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The necessary conditions for an ethically significant behaviour

According to Simpson (1969), for a form of behaviour to be considered ethically significant, there must be alternative actions to be able to choose from. Furthermore, man must be capable of judging these alternatives in ethical terms and must be free to make a choice. Similarly, Ayala (1987, 2001) sustains that three conditions are necessary:

- a) The ability to foresee the consequences of ones own actions;
- b) The ability to judge values;
- c) The ability to choose between a series of alternative actions.

Following this line of reasoning, one can say that self-consciousness (as an expression of abstract intelligence or psychism) together with freedom represent the necessary conditions for a behaviour to be considered ethically significant.

The abstract intelligence of prehistoric man is evident in project technology and the construction of tools and instruments. Abstract intelligence can be defined as "the ability to construct artificial objects and, in particular, tools used to produce other tools and the ability to vary their production continuously" (Bergson, 2002; Piveteau, 1993). This type of behaviour is neither automatic nor stereotyped. The technological products can become significant in everyday life and therefore can assume a symbolic value (functional symbolism). Of particular importance is freedom in the form of self-determination, which is evident in the variety of technological

products. The characteristics of the cultural behaviour of man are essential for ethics. These characteristics are as old as man himself because they are linked to man's cultural capabilities.

Ethical behaviour

The important ethical questions concern what is perceived as a value or negative value on a social or community level, also if they are not always found at individual behaviour. These ethical questions, according to socio-biologists, are not determined by genes, as the socio-biologists affirm. Nor are they governed by natural selection. "The moral codes are determined by cultural history and social considerations, not by the interests of our genes" (Ayala, 2001).

There are forms of behaviour which can be considered biological, but which assume value and significance for the life of man and therefore become or are perceived as values. They are linked to the needs and characteristics of man and are important for man's success (nutrition, reproduction, sociality).

Apart from these values, certain forms of ethical behaviour must be mentioned, such as altruism and cooperation which in man are qualitatively different from what can be seen in the animal world because of the awareness and liberty with which they are expressed.

a) Values connected to man

The bio-psychic structure of man is such that includes or postulates issues which are particularly important from an ethical point of view. They can correspond to the fundamental or

vital needs of the individual or of the species. But such needs on a human level assume an awareness and are perceived as values, which are essential to obtain and are pursued freely (family unit, education of offspring, sociability etc.). Other questions regard needs stemming from social living (e.g. disapproval of lies, murder, theft, incest, etc.) (Facchini, 1991).

Other values can also be added to this list, such as art, religious sentiment, gratuity, etc. These values, treated and considered in different ways by various populations, can be considered to be universal in nature or trans-cultural (Kluckhohn & Kroeber, 1982) and correspond to the human rights stipulated in the Constitutions of many modern countries. Humanity has arrived where it is today, because certain types of behaviour have been perceived and considered as values by the societies that preceded us.

b) Cooperation and altruism

Cooperation in a species represents a characteristic of living beings and it increases with the history of life. According to Novak (2006), it is a “fundamental principle of evolution together with mutation and natural selection”.

The author named five rules for the evolution of cooperation: the selection of partners, the selection of the group, reciprocity of the network, indirect reciprocity, direct reciprocity. These two latter forms, as they depend on cognitive capacity, are typical of humans and rely on culture. In man, conscience and freedom are important factors in cooperation.

In indirect reciprocity, reputation is important together with self-image which encourages cooperation with who behaves in this way. In direct reciprocity, cooperation is offered as a fifty-fifty exchange. Of particular importance is the social interaction in sharing and giving (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1980).

Some forms of cooperation are defined as altruism, when, with or without any form of sacrifice, a behaviour benefits others. It is well known that the concept of altruism in the

biological field is applied by ethologists to the animal world. This application is, however, erroneous because in the animals there is no “awareness” in the action of giving.

c) Cooperation in the evolutionary history of man

The forms of collaboration developed by man throughout our evolutionary history started from sexuality and the family and continued with subsistence strategies organised by the family unit and by the group to organise their territory and search for food and resources, in particular through hunting. It increased through language and, in general, through the symbolic systems of communication which are a characteristic of human societies.

There is evidence of the various forms of cooperation in the evolution of man in archaeological documentation. This can be seen through the production of the oldest forms of lithic culture and the organisation of the territory, which highlights the collaboration of more individuals in times dating back to *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus*. This cooperation increased in time through the hunting of the great mammals of the Middle Pleistocene, which would have been impossible without well organised groups. There is documentation of long or periodical stays of *Homo erectus* in various sites (Omo, Melka Kunturé, Okote, Arago, Torre in Pietra, Terra Amata, Bilzingsleben, etc.) with evidence of places for flint working and camps for hunting. There is also evidence of land clearance by the hunters of Isernia which dates back to 700,000 years ago.

There is even more evidence which highlights the cooperation in Neanderthal Man and in anatomically modern man. The documents increase during the Neolithic.

There are also documented cases of solidarity and care to weaker subjects (e.g. the case of the mandible with no teeth found at Dmanisi dating back to 1.7 million years ago and a Neanderthal at Shanidar with multiple fractures in the clavicle of the upper right arm).

In the study of the cooperation and conflict arising during the evolution of man, of particular interest are the varying levels of intensity in the

different periods of Prehistory. During the long period of the Palaeolithic, there was a lot of space available and low population levels which tended to reduce conflict. During the Neolithic, on the other hand, conflict increased due to the acquisition and defence of territory and a demographic rise. However, it must be said, that the Neolithic was also characterised by a growth of sociality and cooperation (Facchini, 1994).

d) Altruism in Man

In man, altruistic actions are undertaken in full awareness and are freely carried out. They cannot be generalised and cannot be connected to automatisms or genetic factors. They should be considered as significant ethical behaviour which is qualitatively different from the altruism found in the animal world. Human altruism cannot simply be considered as cooperation and is not linked to recognition and reciprocity. Human altruism is characterised by gift and not necessarily exchange. It cannot be seen as a duty and cannot be imposed. Two characteristics of human altruism should be underlined which are linked to awareness and freedom: gratuity (even if it does not necessarily exclude reciprocity) and motivations, which depend on social or religious ideals and not just simple reciprocity.

Cooperation has played a significant role in hominization. However, altruism has also been important, especially in aspects of humanization

(Martelet, 1998), such as a growth in socialization and in the quality of human life.

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