

## REVIVING SOME BASIC CONCEPTS IN ETHICAL REGISTER

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**Abstract:** Being sensitive to the challenges placed before us in a globalizing world, it is obviously that the ethical benchmark became one of the priorities in our individual and communitarian life. An in-depth knowledge of both the axiological and normative dimensions of ethics can open an important way for an adequate approach of today's problems. By rethinking the foundations, we may reach accuracy as regards what does really matter in life. So, a call to revive some value-laden concepts coming from the ancient Greek moral philosophy represents the aim of this paper, to emphasize the support given us by healthy roots for reflection and understanding, in part at least, our present problematic situation in the world.

**Keywords:** ethics, virtue, *phronēsis*, *sophrosýne*, *philia*

Nowadays major problems the mankind faces – poverty, famine, war and migration as a side-effect, human rights, inequalities within and across nations, great discrepancies in education, epidemic diseases, environmental change, excessive consumerism, etc. – claim the ethics' offer in its long history, especially being attentive to wise ideas coming from Antiquity as concerns the awareness of the moral dimension of human existence. Undoubtedly, living in a world radically different to that of the Ancients, we must continuously reinterpret their lessons. But, paying attention to them – that is what we aim to highlight; and we try to do it in respect of the given ideas, realizing that the authors' "intentionality merely undergoes changes, but it is not cancelled out".<sup>1</sup>

By rereading the ancient Greeks we can much better understand the need for "spiritual capital" – a question of growing interest in recent years – in its ethical and moral aspects to enhancing individuals and

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<sup>1</sup> Gh. Vlăduțescu (2007). *Istoria filosofiei ca hermeneutică / History of Philosophy as a Hermeneutics*. Bucharest: Romanian Academy Publishing House, p.185.

communities' capacity for advancing the common good. A moral vision and basic moral standards, a particular knowledge, reflection and practice are at stake as important sources of transforming and enriching the quality of a meaningful life, from personal to societal level. By reference to "resources of the human spirit, ...shared meaning, shared purpose, shared vision of what most deeply matters in life, and how these are implemented in our lives and in our behavioral strategies"<sup>2</sup>, the spiritual capital theory points out the "emergence of the missing moral core" and the opportunities of morality and life satisfaction, more than ever in today's business and economics crisis; it links to the call for a "virtuous enterprise", to find the ethical compass (in diseased corporate culture), "rebuilding our character" and remedying the "evils in modern-day consumerism", to eventually regain the sense of virtue in society<sup>3</sup>.

Considering *ethics* in a holistic meaning, as moral philosophy and normative guide of human conduct, our concern moves on toward some nucleus values and principles that circumscribe the human beingness as *moral experience* in the complexity of the world we get access.

In an overview, the fast movements and long-term challenges - under the auspices of the information technology and the genetic revolutions, on the one hand; no less, under the auspices of the moral and ecological crisis of the last decades, on the other hand - claim an ethical culture in accordance with the global evolution of our humanity looking for cooperation, trust, safety, sustainability, protection of individuals and groups, care for the future, communication and responsible action oriented towards a viable cross-cultural civilization.

A range of topics in the ethics' territory can give us support in thinking about a global architecture abiding by the equilibrium between "differentiation and integration", assuming a nuanced understanding and finding "effective responses to the global threats and risks", in the effort of overcoming our common vulnerability and affirming our potential to getting a fulfilled human life; perhaps passing through "a new tapestry" woven around *homo empathicus*,

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<sup>2</sup> Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall (2004). *Spiritual Capital: Wealth We Can Live By*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., p.41.

<sup>3</sup> See Samuel D. Rima (2012). *Spiritual Capital: A Moral Core for Social and Economic Justice*. Farnham: Gower; Theodore Roosevelt Malloch, Jordan D. Mamorsky (2013). *The End of Ethics and a Way Back: How to Fix a Fundamentally Broken Global Financial System*. Singapore: John Wiley & Sons.

working together for an extended “new pledge” in a context when the “Age of Reason” seems/needs to be “eclipsed by the Age of Empathy” - as a “critical test of our species’ ability to survive and flourish on Earth in the future”.<sup>4</sup>

It is important - for our education in accordance with long-term impact of ethical values and norms in the socio-cultural and natural environment - to revive some of the Ancients’ philosophical concepts. Thus, a moral philosophical culture can operate as a healthy *propaideia* to inscribing ourselves on the positive trajectory of the globalization process we are facing.

Above all, we tackle the problem of *virtue* that deserves to be reevaluated as a force of human being to comprehend the priorities, the possibilities and necessities in a global evolution. At the same time, the question of *virtue* guides in learning to harmonize the proper aspirations and ideals with the characteristics of the real context in which man/woman has to find the route of reaching the *human well being*. At stake is the *virtue* in a variety of manifestations like: wisdom, temperance, courage, justice, respect, tolerance, trust, solidarity, mutual understanding and support, sympathy, benevolence, friendship, etc. Acting as veritable beacons of our life, all of these are eloquently to sustain the *virtue*’s role for human plenitude and health, for self-fulfillment and accomplishment together with the others, for a dignified affirmation on the basis of freedom and self-creativity.

Turning to the ancient philosophers, a comprehensive definition of *virtue* is to be disclosed in Aristotle works. According to the author of *Nicomachean Ethics*, “the virtue or excellence of man will be such a moral state as makes a man good and able to perform his proper function well”<sup>5</sup>. Over the centuries, this understanding of the *virtue*’s concept – the *areté*, as the Greeks used to call it – has been approached and highlighted imposing itself as “the vehicle of moral conduct” and “the bedrock foundation of human society and culture”<sup>6</sup>.

Embracing many forms, *virtue* represents a climax notion for ethics, upholding the total moral expression of the human being. It functions

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<sup>4</sup> See Jeremy Rifkin (2010). *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin – Cambridge Polity Press.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a20.

<sup>6</sup> Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (2000). *Logos and Life*. Book 4: *Impetus and Equipoise in the Life-Strategies of Reason*. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, p.598.

as a generic concept in defining, at the highest level, the human becomingness. *Virtue* enlightens the trajectory followed by man from a state of fact to an eternal project of metamorphosis, balancing between an ascertained, an estimated and long-expected dimension of existence, pertained to the real, but also to the ideal – an aspiration and an exigency alike. The understanding of this moral-philosophical concept decisively counts for the interpersonal relations, for the relations of men with the institutions and the laws, and also for the relationship between men and the geo-cosmic environment. In such a view, it is clearly that the education for virtue(s) is very important in structuring an appropriate behavior of individuals and communities within the spread of globalization in both its positive and negative aspects. It really helps for the development of the goodness of globalization; and no less for the stopping or diminishing its evils. *Virtue* appears like an essential instrument able to give a *human* meaning to life, to significantly mark the existence into progress through the experience of equilibrium in psycho-somatic, cultural-societal, and spiritual-natural order, leading to the wellness of man and of mankind, eventually.

Some of the faces of virtue have to be revived especially for improving the sharing-in-life of humans in a global existence. We here refer to: practical wisdom, moderation, and friendship. Certainly, these are intertwining with many other embodiments of virtue; and their action is most efficiently merely when all of them are working. Such concepts get a major significance for our present ethical register of living.

Reminding the Greek terminology, the concepts in discussion are: *phronēsis*, *sophrosýne*, and *philía*.

*Phronēsis* or the *practical wisdom* is the one that makes possible the “virtues of character”, having a determinant role for the moral behavior. According to Aristotle, *phronēsis* shapes the moral virtues: “As soon as man possesses the single virtue of practical wisdom, he will also possess all the rest”<sup>7</sup>. *Phronēsis* unifies reason and desire, it combines will with skill, and produces goodness sustaining us to attain the mean between deficiency and excess with regard certain contexts. Rightfully it became “the most necessary virtue of modern times”,

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *op.cit.*, 1145a1-2.

being conceived “as the lucid and wise desire”<sup>8</sup>. Articulated in unity with the speculative wisdom / *sophía*, it operates like a master character trait to be used in personal and professional choices we have to make. Circumscribing “the right way to do the right thing in a particular circumstance, with a particular person, at a particular time”, practical wisdom is “something essential” for the own well-being and the social progress; it is “a key to happiness”<sup>9</sup>.

Close to wisdom, *sophrosýne* or the *moderation / temperance* designates the capacity of clear judgment and the sense of measure. As one of the cardinal virtues in the European Antiquity, *sophrosýne* involves the manifestation of self-discipline, self-control, foresight, right thinking, reasonable decision making. Referring to *sophrosýne*, Plato considers that this value is able to attract all the other parts of virtue: *dikaíosýne*, *àndréia*, *sophía* and *phronēsis* / justice, courage, speculative and practical wisdom, facilitating the way through which one acts for the achievement of a personal good, and also for the social good<sup>10</sup>. Especially for the present situation when it seems to be lost, *sophrosýne* must be brought in our life – as the Ancients give us a wise learning. We realize, for instance, that it is a necessity to temper the culture of excess displayed by the consumerist society and to insert moderation in the individual behavior, to create a more balanced life. Making from *sophrosýne* a dimension of the personal and communitarian conduct, it means to comprehend and follow the law of harmony, to get the sense of the moral equilibrium, to engage an increased responsibility and to deeply activate the potential of accountability, reaching the human well-being finally.

But such values as *phronēsis* and *sophrosýne* need to be correlated with *déon* / the *duty* that comes with the power of the imperative and the regulating function in the framework of social interactions. Without the action of *déon*, any great thought remains just an ideal one. Or we need to understand how to transform the ideal into reality. From Democritus and Aristotle, the conscience of *déon* has been crystallized in the European culture, and Immanuel Kant underlined the importance of an ethics of duty, establishing the “categorical imperative” that enlightens our acts into the achievement of personal

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<sup>8</sup> See André Comte-Sponville (1995). *Petit traité des grandes vertus*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

<sup>9</sup> See Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe (2011). *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do Right Things*. New York: Riverhead Books/Penguin Group Inc.

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 432a.

and public life. It is eloquently, for example, the present multitude of professional codes to serving different types of organizations, wherein *duty* is a central concept to be valued.

Another concept we are interested is *philia*. Usually translated as *friendship*, it modulates our existence in a healthy and pleasant way, bringing us together in the endeavor of realizing the common good of life. As one of the forms of *love*, this facet of virtue receives a peculiar status in structuring the *communion* as a basic principle of interpersonal life. Marking the unity generated by the harmonization of distinctive individualities, *philia* is a good foundation for lasting relationships, and it contributes to the *syn-bolemaical* affirmation in an onto-ethical horizon, assuring social cohesion and the necessary order for development together. Rooted in the desire for a complement, *philia* supposes ‘relationship within and towards virtue’, as ‘love aiming the good’ - this is the path of friendship revealed throughout the Platonic dialogue *Lysis*: a quest of being familiar to the *good*. By *philia* we grasp the importance of opening to the other, that of cross-cultural encounters, grounding the interpersonal dimension of existence on respect, tolerance, pluralism and solidarity; building our *communitarian life* for which the emphasis should belong to the “positivity” of the “interchange between individuals”, because this kind of love (an ethical love) counts as a “productive force” to acting for “a common objective and purpose”<sup>11</sup>. And such a value needs to be largely experienced in times of crisis we must deal with; the more so as we could operate on the side of an “empathic civilization”, in terms of Jeremy Rifkin.

The approach of the above-mentioned concepts leads us to reconsidering the issue of *measure* – the Greek *metron*. It allows us to assume the revival of *àreté* as tension and harmony, as a mean between two extremes, as reconciliation of antagonisms. In other words, the functionality of *virtue* as the “golden mean” comes to the fore. We must just remind the Aristotelian account for virtue: “the midst way between excess and deficiency”, a “mean between a too much and a too little”<sup>12</sup>. The *measure* resumes all the *virtue*’s facets. By such a view, we reach the integrator meaning of a central value and principle of ethics, that of the ‘right measure’: the Greek *mesótes*, respectively

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<sup>11</sup> Angela Ales Bello (2008). “Self-Cultivation and Educative Responsibility”, in *Analecta Husserliana*, Volume XCV. Dordrecht: Springer, pp.284, 285.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *op.cit.*, 1106a30; 1106b30-1107a.

the Latin *aurea mediocritas*, which can guide either persons or organizations through the meanders of the nowadays evolutions. Conciliating between polar couples: man and nature, present and future, civilization and environment, tech-scientist success and humanist advancement, efficiency and satisfaction, rights and duties, the *virtue-measure* assures a balanced play of opposites, carrying on what is ought/is to be desired for the existential progress. As a pathway of avoiding the fall in any type of damaging extremes, by mixing desire and need, delight and imperative, preferences and rejections, choices and refusals, *measure* fully deserves to be promoted and applied in any context of living. It is one of the “crucial requirements” in overcoming “the disarray humanity now finds itself in” to make from *measure* “a common indispensable denominator, ... a point from which to gain purchase on reality”, displaying a responsible commitment toward all-is-alive.<sup>13</sup>

On the ground of an ethical *organon* containing revived basic concepts like those we outlined, man can lead himself towards authentic values that have to be inoculated in the daily practice; and so, there are real chances to surpass any difficulties and to wisely meet the challenges of a more and more globalized world. It remains a call to availing ourselves of the Ancients’ teachings in the effort of activating dialogue and sharing basic ethical values able to provide conditions for vital *communion* in a peaceful and productive, better world.

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<sup>13</sup> See Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *op.cit.*, pp.615-639.

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