

Determinism and Responsibility. A Critical Inquiry

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Abstract

The present paper explores the tensions between the concepts of responsibility and determinism. The attitude of being responsible requires both a space of freedom for the agent and an adequate understanding of the others, at whom the response is directed and who are influenced by the agent's activity. The concept of determinism represents a feature of knowledge that subsumes facticity and the comprehension of the others to general rules, norms and principles. In the first section, I focus on the philosophical meanings of responsibility and on the social conditions of the agent, aiming to reveal their specific tensions. Afterwards, in sections II and III, I highlight several modes of understanding the others, which are critical of the determinist feature of knowledge, a failing of the mainstream in contemporary societies. I attempt to argue, based on Levinas's ethics and the moral of the Eastern Christianity, that responsibility is activated if the others are understood as unique individuals, before applying any rules and norms of comprehension. Moreover, responsibility is activated not with respect to norms and rules (as is the case with justice norms), but as a personal effort at practical comprehension on the agent's part, in a hermeneutical manner. Finally, in view of all these aspects, I propose the reconsideration of human interactions as a social and ethical exigency.

Keywords: responsibility, determinism, the other(s), facticity, comprehension

1. Preliminary distinctions

Responsibility is a much-exploited term nowadays, yet often uncritically and without any concern for its adequate meaning, while the proper use of the term would prevent its devaluation. Its status in philosophy and in contemporary discourses is rather ambiguous, although it is a concept that may reveal something essential about human beings and shed

light on a particular way of relating to the others, to the life-world, to one's actions and decisions¹. Obviously, clarifying it is neither an easy nor a limited task; nevertheless its connotations are too important to be ignored. Therefore, in the first part of this essay I intend to circumscribe the challenges it poses and grasp its practical relevance, while highlighting the areas of divergence in which it plays a part.

A preliminary meaning of responsibility may be suggested as the attitude of responding on one's behalf for any actions and decisions taken (an act which, literally, involves the understanding, explanation and justification of one's actions). Philosophically, this concept is situated at the junction of several important dualisms, which were and still are active in the exercise of the Western philosophy, yet which have not been adequately highlighted. More specifically, it is to be found between the theoretical and the practical, justified only practically, by means of effective and visible actions, yet supposing an engagement or project that guides it, a prior understanding, a comprehensive ensemble, and explanations. This means that it is never a spontaneous act, comparable with instincts; it is not simply momentary, but rather must reflect continuity and loyalty in one's commitment to one's actions. From another point of view, it is difficult to situate it in only one pole of the modern triad, reason – will – feelings (Kant conceived it as springing from will, guided by reason), not only because the triad is somehow revolutive but also because the nature of this type of human attitude has not been elucidated.

The dualism of liberty and determinism is also relevant for understanding responsibility: to be responsible, one must first be supposed to act as a free agent, able to assume one's decisions and actions as springing from one's own free will, not as consequences of certain causal connections or dynamic structures determining them. From this perspective, the

¹ Paul Ricoeur speaks about „*the sort of perplexity I was left with following an examination of the contemporary contextual uses of the term „responsibility”. (...) On the one side, this concept seems well delimited in its classical juridical usage. But on the other side – or, rather, from several other sides – a kind of vagueness invades the conceptual scene. (...) the current proliferation and dispersion of uses of this term is puzzling*”, *Le juste*, Paris: Éditions Esprit, 1995, pp. 41-42.

conflict or the borderline between these two concepts determine the status of responsibility. Indeed, the relations between the concepts of responsibility and liberty are very ... intriguing. Emmanuel Levinas argued that the responsible subject is a “hostage”, using an expressive metaphor to suggest an opposite of freedom. In the same manner, many philosophers have exposed through history that freedom must not be understood as independence from any implications, engagements or connections, that such sense of freedom is fundamentally erroneous². According to Kant, for example, freedom is dependent on the acceptance of the categorical imperative, the duty, i.e. one’s responsibility towards the other.

In order to be responsible for the other, the others and society at large, ample room and freedom of movement are needed. This is because the notions of merit and blame (the primary polarisation used to evaluate actions) lose any significance without freedom and assumed decision. Nevertheless, this responsibility seems to diminish the degree of freedom that the responsible subject has, due to its requirements and exigencies. The classical Hobbesian social contract involved a diminishment of freedom as the price paid for life in a community based on duties and rights and provided security in life, therefore ultimately safer, although diminished, freedom.

With the advent of modernity, the social environment has become an increasingly amalgamated web of interactions which combines social, economic, political and moral functions. Against this background, the concept of responsibility was comprehended in a sense similar to the Kantian sense of duty and of rational constraint. Accordingly, human actions are associated to laws, norms, rules (mainly moral, political and legislative) that determine the frameworks of responsibility. Within these boundaries, certain “imperatives” operate and acting subjects are expected to respond to them – people are responsible under the law,

² *De facto*, freedom understood as freedom from any constraints and connections is not freedom, but chaotic, anarchic behaviour.

accountable for their political choices (if they are elected representatives), have duties towards the social and economic entities that they are members of, and not least for actions which produce effects for the others. All these “expectations” are described using discursive formulations such as laws, rules and norms.

Responsibility is also linked to moral imputation or moral guilt to use Karl Jaspers’ terminology. Whereas the former meaning refers to objectively stable norms (the laws of a state, involvement in government and the community, active moral rules inside a community), the latter one, historically influenced by Christianity (at least in Western European culture), focuses on how conscience or the subject relate to responsibility, the way he internalises the failure to obey the demands of responsibility. This second meaning provides a “partial truth”, in the sense of a “negative affirmation” of responsibility: the fateful consequences of not obeying moral norms.

Both meanings mentioned above may be interpreted as representative of negative responsabilisation. This negativity that I intend to underline emerges from the activation of responsibility under threat of sanctions (be it legal punishment, social exclusion or, why not, the damnation and hell for Christians). Promoting such attitudes had as grounds, along history, the anthropological premises of a human nature that is modestly capable of positive affirmation of responsibility. The projects of the “intellectuals”, often guided by elitist and pessimistic ideas, upheld political and anthropological theories built on the authority of reason or on state and institutional authority. From this perspective, the Enlightenment emerged as a call to responsibility, addressed to “the masses” and to the ordinary members of communities. It is worth recalling here Kant’s remarks:

“What is Enlightenment? Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. (...) Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large proportion of men (...) remain immature for life. For the same

reasons, it is all too easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians”³.

Therefore, Kant observed that his contemporaries had not become mature in civic terms. Civil immaturity was an indication of their self-incurred obedience to the decisions of others, instead of taking control of their own actions and life. This situation brings to mind the legend of The Grand Inquisitor from Dostoyevsky’s novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, where the Inquisition leader asserts that people would rather live receiving only a piece of bread daily than take control of their own lives and take advantage of their freedom, supposedly too difficult a path to follow.

Yet what does it mean to become mature? For Kant the answer was, firstly, to be able to think for oneself (to perform the act of thinking), to learn how to think and, interestingly enough, not to stay: “*I need not think, so long as I can pay*”⁴. This mercantile possibility of practical attitude is cancelled by the second demand of “achieving maturity”, a moral one par excellence: to think by putting oneself in the place of others. These demands are coupled with a third one: always to think in agreement with the self⁵.

Learning how to think implies achieving (moral, political) education. It means learning how to participate in the social life, to understand the actions that benefit the commonwealth. Kant’s premises for a positive historical development were education and the condition that people should take on their own the exercise of thinking. The type of education needed focuses essentially not on scientific but on practical knowledge, ensuring an adequate place in society and highlighting personality and character as determinative features of conscience. Against all this, the historical development offered powerful counterattacks, both philosophically and socially. The technological-economic development and the ever-increasing complexity of societies

³ Kant, I., *Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?*, A. Philonenko, *La théorie kantienne de l’histoire*, Paris: Editions Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1986, p. 50.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

have produced specific types of knowledge of new social relations.

Philosophy, too, proved to be highly intricate in the 20th century. Husserlian phenomenology attempted to reposition philosophy in relation to historical becoming as a source of meaning that predates the fields dealing with the life-world (*Lebenswelt*), i.e. psychology, sociology, all human sciences in general. Heidegger, in his turn, eliminated the embarrassing complications of the Husserlian representationalist account. He proposed a kind of subjectivity which, rather than knowing (a corpus of knowledge), understands (*Verstehen*) its position in the world and, rather than achieving noetic certitudes, is sensitive to affective moods (*Stimmungen*). Gadamer took over the Heideggerian project, adjusting it to a hermeneutics of facticity, explicating human status as practical exposure to the effects of history.

Modern rationalism, as well as the development of societies mentioned above, the first stemming from the dogmatism of theory, the second from the autonomy obtained in respect with the philosophical tradition, have generated powerful reactions leading to the deconstruction of the modern subject, either axiologically and anti-rationally – Nietzsche, or ontologically and hermeneutically – Heidegger, or reflecting the relation knowledge-power in social becoming – Foucault. The deconstruction of the subject caused instant inquiries into the issue of responsibility. Briefly, we can understand these deconstructions as attitudes of denouncing rigidities (dead metaphors) which had overtaken the understanding of human nature, rejecting them and opening new ethical perspectives in the new context.

Meanwhile, social sciences, as they methodologically reach new heights in explaining human relations, are institutionalised by governing entities (State, justice, etc.), establish the couple knowledge-power (as emphasised by Foucault), which became the paradigm of the comprehension of the human nature. Whereas sociology at the beginning of the 20th century, with Max Weber and Durkheim, was comprehensive and aimed at investigating the life-world in order to reveal accurately the effective social relationships, the institutional turn of sociology modifies the purposes of

research towards efficient social administration and social management so as to assure the functionality for the social system. Additionally, the research methodology and the meanings elicited by these sciences have an underlying controlling and administrative side, which the sciences generally fail to account for.

The economic – technological - institutional development increasingly drew the interest of the neo-Marxists and neo-rationalists, as they developed a social ontology which functions dialectically. The Frankfurt School distinguished itself based on its strong social critique, paying special attention to the objectifications that determine the human beings in the scientific-institutional paradigm (Habermas was the most prominent continuator of this school of criticism; I shall use his ideas later on in the text).

As a conclusion, rather than being on a path towards emancipation, the contemporary subject increasingly consists of rights and duties institutionally established. Ricoeur highlights the deficiencies of this all too passive position of the subject:

„[...] many philosophies of natural law presuppose a subject, complete and already fully endowed with rights before entering into society. It results that this subject's participation in community life is in principle contingent and revocable, and that the individual – since this is how the person has to be called under this hypothesis – is correct in expecting from the state the protection of rights constituted outside of him or her, without bearing any intrinsic obligation to participate in the burdens related to perfecting the social bond”⁶.

These reproaches focus accordingly on the vectoriality of the contemporary “knowledge-based societies”. They seem to intrinsically determine a management of inter-human relationships which secures social order but still remains minimalistic – and by way of consequence is the premise of an individualistic morality⁷ (see Alain Renault – *L'Ere de*

⁶ Ricoeur, P., *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990, p.213.

⁷ *“A liberal society ought to remain neuter regarding fulfilled life and to limit itself in order to assure that, however they see things, citizens treat each other correctly, the state being obliged to treat them all*

l'individu). This procedural focus has important consequences: contemporaneity favours the optic of minimising the importance of the individual as singularity, to reduce his/her personality to the social aspects that are economically relevant, to minimise the decisions taken in own name that fall outside the efficient social scenario. The knowledge-based society is a sustained development of information concerning the processes and structures that involve the individual, in order to secure social functionality. Each social area requires to be comprised epistemologically, moreover in a pluri-dimensional manner.

For example, a social fact like unemployment has been explored extensively in specialist literature, focusing on its economic, sociological, political and psychological facets. Thus, institutionally, an unemployed person is a complex epistemological intersection, discouraging if someone were to attempt to understand the situation of that individual. One might say that there is an "inflation" of "data" concerning such social facts. This image indicates, in the unemployed – institutions relation, an obvious asymmetry in terms of comprehension and action opportunities. Nevertheless, the official aim of such institutions is to guide that particular unemployed person, striving to build a better social order.

In order to express social problems, a positive path seems to be the identity recognition movements of the individuals united by a characteristic that constitutes them in a minority or a discriminated group: homosexuals, feminist movements, national or race-focused minorities. These are just a few examples; one may add "*people who are systematically handicapped by poverty from making the most of their citizenship rights are deemed in this view to have been relegated to second-class status, necessitating remedial action through equalisation*"⁸. Admittedly, the individuals referred to in the last example do not seem to have enough power (especially after the disasters wreaked by 20th century ideological revolutions) to make themselves heard, break the routine of their life and expose the injustice being done to them.

equally", Taylor, C., *Politica recunoașterii (The Politics of Recognition)*, Secolul XX, 10-12/1999, 1-3/2000, p. 508.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 499.

It is worthwhile noting that even if Western countries have made considerable efforts to legally and institutionally compensate for social deficiencies and discriminations, what those groups demand is a recognition at the level of free inter-subjective relations, at the level of the common life which is not regulated legally (as it was and is the case of African-American people in USA). The type of relationship controllable in the liberal societies is, from this point of view, merely a procedural one. However, it cannot substitute, by itself, the connections that tie together a community, which leads to the idea that the inter-subjective space (which Husserl called *Lebenswelt*, a term used both by phenomenology and hermeneutics) is much more complex than perceived and acknowledged by institutions, and, no less importantly, that functions according different rules.

Habermas, analyzing post-industrial societies, reveals a significant aspect: the technocratic bureaucracy segregates itself from the rest of the social body (forming the Foucauldian rapport: governors - governed), and dominates it from the heights of the institutional shelter where it activates. The consequence is that the influence of free individuals or free groups over the social centres of decision is minimised. A good reason is precisely the deficiency of means of influence, due to that obvious asymmetry that I mentioned earlier.

Let it be called a "variable" a person that can occupy a position in an institution. Theoretically, the success of occupying that position depends on professional skills that need to be proved. Once the position gained, the mode (the possibilities) to act of that person is determined by those of the place of that function in the institutional structure. The focus here is on the game between the power of decision of that function and the power of the person, in other words, the free decision space of the person, in relation to the institutional determinations of the function occupied. Let this space be called responsibility. The reason is simple: one cannot answer for a fact, an action, a process that he/she cannot influence in personal assumable manner, with an

influence that would not be predicted in the “logic” of the structure⁹.

Returning to our unemployed, he cannot influence the decisions of the institutions and of the socio-economic entities. The lack of influence means a lack of alternatives to act, therefore lack of liberty. At the other pole, decision-makers, an example offered by AFL-CIO¹⁰ shows how the American CEOs need to be over-remunerated (up to 67% increases in salaries, bonuses and long-term compensation) in order to summon the courage to dismiss an entire factory. What is paid here is their willingness to take responsibility for a decision, even if, or rather especially, its effects are negative.

Can we talk here about responsibility? We can ask ourselves to whom the agent of such decision answers, having in mind the weight of that decision in the destiny of the dismissed and for the public institutions that must intervene to support them. We may consider that these dismissals occurred in the name of accountability for the economic entity (implicitly the preservation of the other jobs). Yet this does not meet the requirements of the first group, the dismissed one, and ultimately solutions come from personal effort or from public institutions. Again, to whom is he answerable? He is not accountable to his superiors, because it was they who sanctioned important financial compensation in return of the lay-off decision (one may even argue that compensation rises with the seriousness of the effects). Is he then accountable to the ones he dismissed? Socially and economically speaking, this form of accountability is impracticable. Could he, therefore, be held responsible by the public institutions? In the paradigm of capitalism and free market, politics does not exert powerful influence over the economic¹¹. A definitive answer eludes us.

⁹ Evidently, that person has as professional task the activities specific to the function occupied in the system, but this responsibility is negative by just maintaining the system active.

¹⁰ American Federation of Labour – Congress of Industrial Organizations. The example is from Bruckner, P. *Misère de la prospérité : La religion marchande et ses ennemis*, Paris: Grasset, 2002.

¹¹ We can exemplify this situation with the case of the relocation of the Nokia factory from Germany to Romania

What we have highlighted so far is guiding us towards a sort of social determinism, as a combination between economic and technocratic-institutional autocracy. Obviously, this is an important criticism of society, i.e. that it dominates inconsiderately the destinies of its citizens. It is not easy to establish the extent of this domination. What is unambiguous is that there are strong social forces that direct the becoming and the choices of individuals. We can trace decision-making powers, which may affect communities, and expose the polarisation of society, the emergence of what Habermas termed the technocracy, detached and powerful over the other pole – the social body. Decision-making, be it in any field, requires nowadays competences (institutionalised professions) that often leave aside the participation of the regular members of the society.

The latter can only react to consequences, to the effects decisions have on their lives. They are marginalised from the decision-making process, therefore are not able to influence the destiny of society. The responsibility they have is merely not to break the established order, to respect the rules of a game they do not decide. Community cohesion and solidarity are therefore only a pretence, without the polarisation less strict. The technocratic pole imposes itself by exploiting its position and knowledge, producing the social rules and overseeing their observance. The technocratic tendency, according to Habermas, is to minimise the political and ideological character of decisions and institutions, highlighting in turn the necessity to maintain functioning of the giant mechanisms such as the states and the economic systems. The resulting image is that of a giant vehicle that needs to be kept running to avoid systemic collapse. As a consequence, the technocrats become indispensable and impervious to political, moral and social criticism. They have the advantage, compared to politicians, of not being dependent on legitimacy or representativeness. Habermas asserts:

(<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,529218,00.html>), when 2,300 German workers were fired. The German public institutions reacted strongly, both nationally and internationally, yet could not stop the relocation.

„For as our civilisation has become increasingly scientific, the dimension within which theory was once directed towards praxis has become correspondingly constructed. The laws of self-reproduction demand of an industrially advanced society that it look after its survival on the escalating scale of a continually expanded technical control over nature and a continually refined administration of human beings and their relations to each other by means of social organisation. In this system, science, technology, industry, and administration interlock in a circular process. In this process, the relationship of theory to praxis can now only assert itself as the purposive-rational application of techniques assured by empirical science. The social potential of science is reduced to the powers of technical control – its potential for enlightened action is no longer considered”¹².

Given these compelling social macrostructures, a difficult question emerges: How and in what forms can the responsibility manifest itself? Recalling the ideas mentioned above, responsibility needs freedom and to be assumed in one's own name. There is further, subjective feature worth pointing out: responsibility connects the individual actions to that certain individuality. Even if we do not discuss about moral but about high level professional responsibility, we must connect the activity and the personality of the subject, particular actions and decisions linked to individual will (capacity to abide by a certain way to act), to assumptions and to comprehension¹³. Isaiah Berlin argued:

„(...) to try to reduce the behaviour of individuals to that of impersonal 'social forces' not further analysable into the conduct of the men who ... make history is 'reification' of statistics, a form of 'false consciousness' of bureaucrats and administrators, who close their eyes to all that proves incapable of quantification, and thereby perpetrate absurdities in theory and dehumanisation in practice”¹⁴.

His position expresses a riposte against determinism and social objectification, effects realised by the technocracy, using methods of knowledge evidently influenced by scientific goals.

¹² Habermas, J., *Theory and Practice*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1973, p. 254.

¹³ In turn, the individual initiative that improves the efficiency of the system, improves the economic benefits, is at high rank, being well rewarded. Such initiative is not likely to be a responsible one, intending at improving the lives of the others.

¹⁴ *Patru eseuri despre libertate (Four Essays on Liberty)*, Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996, p. 46.

As a matter of fact, it was acknowledged starting with the 19th century (Dilthey) that is inadequate and destructive to comprehend the humanist areas with methods and exactness specific to the natural sciences. Such caution seems to become obsolete in our time, although the social praxis suffers further and more severely of the same illness. The consequences of this scientific domination of the social *status quo* are unacceptable. The lives of the individuals are guided by an ignorant progression of the history itself, specifically by the auto-preservation of a technocratic system aiming for increasing return ratios and social control. The lack of responsibility of the individuals situated outside the elitist decision areas represents lack of dignity and respect.

It becomes obvious that a different paradigm of comprehension of the society is needed, in the direction of positively including those individuals, appealing their implication. What “positive” should mean is the responsibility that springs not from social rules to be obeyed, but from those individualities themselves. It should mean to take into account, in full seriousness, their beliefs, feelings, experiences, even if they do not correspond to quantification and social efficiency. It should mean reconsidering the principles and premises of the social praxis and of the types of knowledge involved by it, reconsidering the ways we understand ourselves and the others.

In the following pages, I intend to focus on several aspects regarding a distinction which I consider to be increasingly important in current discussions: the distinction between neutral reason (or indifferent reason, as it has sometimes been considered) and oriented reason. The term “reason” is most frequently used to denote a definitive human faculty, as a logical way of thinking or as a discursive form of knowledge. It may also have the meaning of essential character of human behaviour (or even of the human mode of existence). Its meaning has often been debated in metaphysical discussions. As we know, several relevant meanings of this term have been carefully distinguished for a long time: *ratio cognoscendi* & *ratio essendi*, *ratio fiendi*, *ratio particularis* or *vis cogitativa*, as

well as *recta ratio* (the equivalent of the Greek *orthós lógos*) or, in a different respect, *ratio facilis* & *ratio difficilis* etc.

The distinction above, between neutral and oriented reason, draws our attention, from the very beginning, to the fact that not every rational behaviour is oriented (or significantly oriented). Thus, the statement that man is a rational being (corresponding to the Greek phrase *zōon lógon échon*, interpreted in Latin as *animal rationale*, creature endowed with reason)¹⁵ does not mean that man is always and implicitly oriented. Neither does it imply that man always aims, by himself, at really significant standards from a spiritual point of view. Some neutral acts, without having clear targets, may be rational. As it has been said, the rules of logic are indifferent to ethics. Similarly, some indifferent human acts may ignore any superior moral standards. It is known that the Latin term *ratio* may denote, in different contexts, completely neutral things: calculation, list, business, number, report, rule, proportion, plan, sketch, etc. Consequently, any act which follows a technical rule may be considered rational. However, such an act is not necessarily oriented, even if the rule which was followed is technically efficient. This act may ignore the important cultural standards of a human community. For example, when Suetonius, in *De vita Caesarum*, speaks about *rationes imperii*, denoting the state affairs, he refers to the calculations made and the measures taken by the state in order to preserve its power and its functions. As we know, the logic of power may be completely indifferent to the life of individuals or to the life of human communities.

Obviously, such observations are not new, but they are to be viewed from new perspectives, some of which really paradoxical. First, I will try to develop several ideas which I introduced in two articles and in the first section of a book

¹⁵ The Greek sentence refers above all to the act of speech – or, more exactly, to that of dialogue – as a defining one for the human being. This sentence appears, for example, in Aristotle's works "Politics" and "Nicomachean Ethics". The Latin interpretation of this sentence is, in many respects, questionable (*cf.* Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, § 34), but it has been accepted by the whole Western world.

published in 2008¹⁶. Then, in the second part, I will refer to the writings of Constantin Noica, the philosopher who supported, with many arguments, the possibility of recognising the idea of oriented reason and practising it as a mode of life or existence.

2. Insights into the responsible experience – Levinas

The first section consisted in a gradual exploration of the concept of responsibility, which we deemed necessary due to the absence of a widely recognised thematisation of the subject. The aim was to identify the place of the respective concept in the social facticity, to recognise the situations where it is active and to reveal the present social deficiencies in this direction. As a complementary and antithetical concept, determinism (mainly in the social field) revealed negative influences of social knowledge, applied in scientific forms and efficiency-based principles. The negative aspect consists in transforming responsibility into conformism and, secondly, in ignoring what happens outside the self-reproducing economic and social system, precisely those unquantifiable affective and effective aspects of the individual lives.

In this context, I shall quote Jacques Derrida, who argued in *The Gift of Death* that : “*Such is the aporia of responsibility: one always risks not managing to accede to the concept of responsibility in the process of forming it. For responsibility (we would no longer dare speak of “the universal concept of responsibility”) demands on the one hand an accounting, a general answering-for-oneself with respect to the general and before generality, hence the idea of substitution, and, on the other hand, uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence nonsubstitution, nonrepetition, silence, and secrecy. What I am saying here about responsibility can also be said about decision*”¹⁷. Ergo, the only

¹⁶ Cf. Ștefan Afloroaei, *Our Daily Metaphysics. About the Speculative Disposition of Thinking and Its Natural Presence Today*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008, especially pages 49-92; *Distinct Ways of Thinking and Distinct Experiences of Truth*, an article published in JIRRS, no 2, 2008, pages 157-188; *Mircea Eliade. Two Unavoidable Interpretations: Literal and Spiritual*, in the volume coordinated by Sorin Șelaru, *The Dialogue between Theology and Philosophy*, II, Basilica Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, pages 39-95.

¹⁷ Derrida, J., *The Gift of Death*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

properly called responsibility challenges the subject beyond established normative boundaries. The question re-emerges: How and in what form can the responsibility be achieved? Where are its roots? In what particular understanding of the human can it be situated?

What needs to be explored is the source capable of sustaining and motivating positive responsibility. The response cannot come from the established social procedures, where the actions of the individuals are integrated in complex systems that control social attitudes. Responsibility means to answer to someone or to the others. And it means being answerable for own actions, as these actions impact other people. Responsibility is activated firstly as answer to the others. Refocusing on the example offered by AFL-CIO, we realise that complex social mechanisms dissipate answerability, due to the major discrepancy between enormous social entities and individuals related to them. The others who expect an answer have different degrees of consistency and become less and less visible (being reduced to numbers, percents) as the inter-human relation is increasingly mediated institutionally or is more theoretical.

Levinas asks the following rhetorical question: "*But how could universal, that is visible principles be opposed with this same pride to the face of the other, without recoiling before the cruelty of this impersonal justice!*"¹⁸. The universal principles represent, in an extrapolated manner, a theoretical level where not the actual others matter, but the grand schemes of functioning of the society, of the economy, of politics, and ultimately of thought itself. The fundamental deficiencies of these contemporary universals are their distance from concrete life and normalisation (in the sense used by Foucault, i.e. obedience to norms – the lives of individuals and their comprehension are subject to institutional and technocratic norms, working together with the social sciences – the *connaissance-pouvoir* couple).

Levinas argues that the only source of responsibility is the concreteness of encountering the other, characterised by the

¹⁸ Levinas, E., *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, p. 335.

elusive phenomenon of his face. A living human face is something that cannot be grasped and escapes conceptualisation. This resistance of the other to conceptualisation means firstly that the comprehension of the other may be achieved only in a concrete and direct relation. Secondly, one cannot merely build a scheme that could provide knowledge of this concreteness, if the encounter does not occur. What the face of the other reveals is his human vulnerability and this is what makes a practical subjectivity responsible.

The activation of responsibility occurs as radically concrete experience of the other's alterity, as (phenomenologically grasped) encounter that goes through and exceeds the pre-understanding that one has about the other. Consequently, the encounter is translated into a kind of experience lacking the safety afforded by what is "known" and an exposure to a type of alterity that is not conceptualised.

This encounter produces an ethical "awakening", as the un-conceptualised other presents himself as unique (what is concrete is the particular, not the general) and vulnerable (being mortal and exposed to sufferance) and asking for help. Levinas argues that if we were to conceptualise the encounter, then the access to the other would be suspended, indeed alterity itself would be suspended. Therefore, the only adequate alternative to comprehending the other is the radically concrete experience of the encounter.

The exposure to alterity is simultaneously phenomenological - the other appears, yet his appearance cannot be circumscribed, framed (the face); ethical - the other presents himself as vulnerable, asking for help, therefore awakens the responsibility of the ethical subject; and metaphysical - the unrestricted nature of experience leaves the alterity open-ended, which Levinas instantiates as the alterity of the other and alterity in relation to the being as infinity or transcendence.

Levinas seeks to maintain his philosophy within the boundaries of concreteness of experience and aims towards a phenomenology of sensitivity, which explores otherness and is opposed to noetic phenomenology. This focus on the

concreteness of experience ensures a proper relationship with the other, and the latter demands responsibility of the subject. The dismissal of the conceptual in the ethical relation produces vulnerable subjectivity, "traumatised" by the encounter with the other, "hostage" to the other's demands and without opportunities for escape.

This constitution of the subject is non-formal, and the responsible action dealing with one peculiar situation is not previously recorded in the "universal rationality", it cannot be theorised. Instead, rationality comes into play as soon as a third other appears, needing help in his turn. The comparison of these incomparable (unique) individuals, required for effective and responsible intervention, represents a betrayal of the concreteness but is unavoidable in social praxis. This exercise of establishing priorities corresponds, for Levinas, to the emergence of justice, of politics and of institutions.

As a consequence, Levinas recognises the necessity of regulation, of thematisation, of conceptualisation, of norms and laws, but subordinates them to the direct and exposed experience related to the other. From his point of view, Western rationality betrays the concreteness due to an excess of regulatory conceptualisation and eliminates the alterity prematurely, dominating it. There emerges a debate on the relationship between responsibility and the formal and regulatory character of actions. According to Kant, conforming to a rule does not necessarily mean appropriating it. Such behaviour is rather indicative of a regulation of actions in order to conform to established rules, therefore a negative responsibility, as it does not go beyond normative frameworks.

One obvious example is the decision process in the justice system, where each action represents the convergence of regulatory norms with a concrete situation, with the contingent unfolding of inter-personal relations. Aristotle, when he described the concept of *phronesis*, referred to this conjunction between particular situations and, on the other side, norms, and principles of action. The regulatory level represents an abstractisation of these inter-personal relations, a theoretical draft of possible situations, which cannot include the details of particular situations and is perpetually

amendable. The decision process in justice emerges as an interpretation of an agent's actions with reference to existent laws. But how insightful can this interpretation be in understanding the premises and the motivations that guide individual actions? How can we evaluate the influence of the ethos and of the life experiences? To what degree can we explore the mental complex that directed to one specific decision? The positive responsibility would be, in this case, the involvement beyond these already established rules, either as to ameliorate them, either by acting beyond them, towards the other(s).

The *aporia* which emerges here may be outlined as follows: if an area of activity is more procedurally determined, personal initiative is diminished accordingly and actions will tend to conformism. This does not imply that the ordering of social actions or the system of laws are negative in themselves, but that the attitude towards these should not be merely conformist, and *Lebenswelt* should not be dealt with only as a procedural and administrative system. The procedural has the defect of not being capable to place itself as source of responsibility, therefore requiring other basis to provide it.

Levinas, as counterclaim, provides an influential source of responsibility – the radically concrete relation with the other (radical because it rejects the theoretical comprehension and exposes the subject to the other without the shield of rules). The need of such a source is obvious if we look back to what the discussion above. Social determinism was characterised by the enclosure of individuals in complex systems of action, and inter-human relations are filtered by science-based knowledge. This scientific paradigm considers itself to be ideologically free, yet it fails in dealing with the concrete life, by imposing quantifications that prefigure the flesh and blood individuals, imposing labels and masks.

The type of inter-individual relationship promoted by knowledge-based societies cannot supply by itself the community bonds that are necessary for its life. Charles Taylor calls this level “the intimate sphere”, underlining its importance by assessing that the forming of identity depends on the relations with the others:

“We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us”¹⁹.

The appeal to this concreteness in which we live and form ourselves is necessary and its contents need to be explored and understood. Yet if this research is conducted having as standards the rigors of the social sciences, it will only accomplish an augmentation of the social control, therefore a diminishing of responsibility. A different approach is required, one that attempts to remain adequate to the peculiar conditions characteristic to persons and actions, so as the decisions may be made in proper awareness.

3. The experiential radicalism of the Eastern Christian morality

This section intends to present some insights of Eastern Christian morality in order to reveal its specific view on inter-human relations. This intention is consistent with the overall purpose of the text: to show that the practical approach to responsibility means a rejection of the scientism of knowledge (manifested in society as determinism, objectivisation and ignorance of the personal value) and based on this to research modalities of comprehension that safeguard human dignity and concrete life.

Christian morality needs to be nowadays understood better and more broadly. Its profound meanings are congruent with ideas of the contemporary French phenomenology (and even influences them) but also with those of political philosophy. In the context of Romanian culture, Christian moral can revive convictions which for centuries animated Byzantium; it precedes us as we as a people are part of this great heritage; it can strengthen our dignity and provide an insight into the inter-subjective and spiritual life, uncontaminated by the procedural bias of contemporary society (which seems to forgo or deride morality).

When we say “nowadays”, we have in mind a time of moral disorientation, of mistrust in moral-political theories and ideologies, of prudence after the totalitarian experiences

¹⁹ Taylor, C., *Politica recunoașterii (The Politics of Recognition)*, Secolul XX, 10-12/1999;1-3/2000, p. 496,

of the 20th century, of a cosmopolitan trajectory of capitalism and democracy. “Nowadays” is also widely secularised and one can ask if Christian morality constitutes anymore (and if it does, in what form) a basis for the active motives that guide contemporary life.

Before settling on a position on this issue, I intend to point out some of the fundamental data of Eastern Christian morality. Following the example of the Church Fathers who explored experientially the depths of Christian life, the key here is the understanding of the human being as person.

However, we must first underline that in Christian doctrine God is a person and the Holy Trinity is also referred to “the divine Persons”. By the act of creation, the man was made in God’s image and likeness²⁰. The patristic word for person is *hypostasis* (meaning “what stays beneath”), while *ousia*, as essence, substance stands for Being. The Holy Trinity can be understood using this difference between *ousia* and *hypostasis*; the divine Persons are co-substantial: “*and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds (eons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father*” (the Creed), they have the same being, but they are different by *hypostasis*. This is why Christian theology can assess that God is at the same time One and Trinity. Dumitru Staniloae says: “*the most accurate image of the Holy Trinity is the unity of being and the distinction of the human beings*”²¹. It must be stressed that from the point of view of the Christian dogma the triple hypostasis does not diminish the perfect unity that is God. Staniloae says: “*Each Person manifests the common characteristics of the being from his own position*”²²; this own position is the *hypostasis*.

²⁰ “*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness*”, “*God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him*”, Genesis, 1.26-27.

²¹ Stăniloae, D., *Tratat de dogmatică ortodoxă (Treatise of orthodox dogmatics)*, Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1996, vol. I, p. 300.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 308.

To facilitate intuitive understanding, Staniloae adds: “*It is like another ego that is interior to my ego would be the holder of everything I am, while I would remain also the holder of what I am, and this is used as the perfectly identical content of a dialogue, the dialogue of giving and receiving, or of an untiringly love*”²³. It is necessary to see the divinity as simultaneous unity and relation, as relation inside unity. Neither unity must be divided in favour of relation, nor must relation be cancelled in favour of unity. The Holy Trinity is beyond the difference between unity and relation, as we, human beings, can understand it²⁴.

Therefore, according to the Christian dogma, God is unity (*ousia*) and relation (between *hypostasis*). In its fullest meaning, the person means relation. Having in mind the distinction between the perfection of the Divine relation and the incomplete character of the human relations, but also taking into account that there does not exist “un-hypostasised nature”²⁵, the person appears as the real mode of subsistence of nature. In this manner, each time unique and situated, the being is able to be in a state of relation. At a deeper level still, the essence of the relation between the Divine Persons is love. „*Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love*”. „*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us*”²⁶.

Therefore, God is love and “*when we talk about the unity and the communion of the three Divine Persons we refer to the mode in which God is, meaning the morality – the ethos - of the divine life*”²⁷. In other words, the personal relation constituted essentially by love is the core of the Christian morality.

We will further explore what means for a human being to be situated at a personal level, what means that someone is a person, a *hypostasis*. Firstly, the idea that man was created in God’s image and likeness must be understood properly – man is not God’s image because he has the same nature or common

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 316.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 309.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 306, note 188.

²⁶ John 4: 8-13;

²⁷ Yannaras, C., *Libertatea moralei (The Freedom of Morality)*, Bucharest: Anastasia, 2002, p. 2

or analogous proprieties with the divinity, but because he is a free *hypostasis*. It must be emphasised here that the *hypostasis*, for the Divine Persons and for any person, is each time the same, meaning that the Son never exchanges His position with the Father or with the Holy Ghost inside the transcendent unity; the positions are not inter-changeable, they are not simple forms with variable content.

Hence, each man is a unique and situated hypostasis, a unique and unrepeatable pole, "*the non-repetitive expression of his bodily structure, of his speaking, of his thinking, of his creative capacity and of his love*"²⁸. However, this constitution of the person is always positioned in a relation; we could not speak about a person if we have in mind an individual with no connection to the others. The solipsist position of a person is impossible, for men as for the Divine Persons. Etymologically, the word person is derived from the Greek term "*pros-opon*" – to be situated face to face with something or someone; therefore it is understood as "*determination of a direct, immediate rapport, as a determination of a relation*"²⁹. At the personal level, man is in relation with God and with the other people. In Christianity, Jesus Christ's embodiment is of foremost importance for understanding the relation of the man with God.

One widely known assertion says that owing to Christ's embodiment, belief in God shifted from the morality of law to the morality of love. We shall discuss this matter, based on a philosophical view on the emergence of morality. The presuppositions of morality can be either authority or convention. The first is characteristic both to the social-political systems (the authority of the emperor, later of the State) and to a divine authority, a divinity that morally dominates human actions. The second, the convention, is distinctive mainly for modernity, for social emancipation (theories of the social contract, the democracies). Both alternatives suppose the presence of norms and procedures, the submission to moral rules and punishment (by a social or divine instance) in case of disobedience.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 10

²⁹ Yannaras, C., *Persoană și Eros (Person and Eros)*, Bucharest: Anastasia, 2000, p. 21

It seems proper to have moral rules in a society, yet just as compliance with laws does not necessarily presuppose moral conviction (one's motives can vary: self-preservation, protecting life and status, etc), not breaking moral rules does not make one strictly moral. I will have another look at Kant's distinction between actions made in conformity with duty (as morality) and actions made by duty. The difference is made by assuming the moral duty, instead of mere conformism. The objection that can be made here for Kant's assertion is that we cannot verify if a peculiar action was performed out of moral sense, i.e. verify its assumption. This is the key for understanding moral relations, contained in the following paradox: if there are possibilities to evaluate and obtain objective knowledge concerning moral actions, then there are objective paths of action and morality is transposed into a program with norms and pre-established rules³⁰. However, the more human actions are translated into such programs, the less active personal responsibility and the free moral dimension of the human activity will be³¹.

In the advanced contemporary societies, there is an impressive amount of juridical, social, political, and economic epistemic data focusing on individuals, their rights and duties, their relations with the others and with the institutions, their possibilities of obtaining information and development. This epistemological trajectory from formative and evaluative knowledge towards the individual pre-determines and also ignores the zone of free inter-subjective relations, the "intimate sphere".

In a culture of analysis, classification, typologies and verifiability, the concrete inter-human relations constitute an inexhaustible source for psychological, social and

³⁰ In this case not only the morality is objectified but the agents themselves too.

³¹ We can only imagine what an inter-personal relationship relation such as marriage would look if all the actions, deeds and gestures within the relation were pre-established, set by rules. This does not mean that there should not be any rules, only that they alone are insufficient. If rules are observed (e.g. loyalty, sincerity) does that make a relation fulfilled or will this required a positive implication going beyond such rules?

anthropological theories, for successful patterns of actions (in affective relations, in profession, in society), for various modalities of handling and dominating the social reality. As a riposte to such models, Yannaras says: “*There cannot be communion (personal relations that ground a living community) when the truth is given and is objective, when there aren’t singular, personal approaches of truth that would permit the manifestation of the personal alterity and liberty, the possibility of the relation*”³².

Yannaras considers the personal relationship to be “*an ethical indeterminacy incompatible with any formal and juridical definition of the communion*”³³ and sees the Christian morality as “*the most radical and revolutionary overturn of the ethical rules of behaviour, the dynamic indeterminacy of life ... freed from the slavery of the objectivity and individualism*”³⁴.

We can trace these ideas in the legend of The Grand Inquisitor from Dostoyevsky’s novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. There we find a moral conflict between Christ and the Inquisition leader; between a morality of radical human freedom and a morality of obedience, i.e. failing to take control of one’s own life. The Inquisitor blames Christ for the threat posed by his morality to the *status quo* of dominating authority. Moreover, people supposedly would not prefer to be free, but rather live according to frameworks established and controlled by others. Christ on the other side asks too much from men, as He is the embodiment of a highly difficult and radical morality. According to Apostle Paul, Christ is the end of the law and a release from law³⁵. He says: “*if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!*”³⁶ One may recall in this context the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector: although flawlessly respected the laws, the Pharisee is blameable for his vanity and his actions are morally deficient. The Pharisee does not “*justify his existence as personal event of*

³² Yannaras, C., *Libertatea moralei (The Freedom of Morality)*, p. 213.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 224

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 228.

³⁵ Romans 10: 4.

³⁶ Galatians 2: 21.

communion and relation”³⁷. Christian morality is an “unspeakable overturn of the classifications that we use to quantify virtue”³⁸.

As premises for actions, a morality with clearly set frameworks and paths is easier to follow than one largely undefined, which goes beyond well-known boundaries. According to the biblical passages quoted above, it is not the law (the rules, the objective norms) that constitutes Christian morality or provides references for justice. What references, then, are to be used for justice and for morality? The most direct answer that Christ gives is *love*. In another biblical passage, Christ, referring to a prostitute met in the house of Simeon, says: “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little”³⁹. The law existent at that time, the Mosaic Law, punished prostitution with death. Therefore, the social norms and criteria are not adequate, are insufficient as references of this morality. „By observing the law no one will be justified”⁴⁰.

The law (the rule, the norm) in its proper sense cannot properly reflect uniqueness – reason is almost suspended by the (logically universal) assertion: each man is unique. We can find common and specific characteristics for human beings (biological, psychological, anthropological ones) using our reason. Yet these characteristics are situated, for the Eastern Christianity, not in the *hypostasis*, but in *ousia*. *Ousia* contains the common features of beings, but each *hypostasis* is „the non-repetitive expression of his bodily structure, of his speaking, of his thinking, of his creative capacity and of his love”. No law can give an adequate account of this uniqueness, only the immediate human relationship understood as a concrete and constant understanding of the other’s life and uniqueness. The *hypostasis* as individuality in Christianity is an ex-tatic one, is givenness of self that means, when is traversed entirely, to love the other. However, uniqueness is, on the other side, hard to defend and sustain, both at the level of understanding and of living. This may be the reason why the Inquisition leader says

³⁷ Yannaras, C., *Libertatea moralei (The Freedom of Morality)*, p. 55.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 56.

³⁹ Luke 7: 47.

⁴⁰ Galatians 2: 16.

that freedom of the conscience is a heavy burden, which few people can cope with.

4. Conclusions

To review of ideas discussed so far, this paper represents an investigation into the concept of responsibility, which was necessary due to the inconsistency in the use of this notion. On one side, responsibility requires elbowroom, fully accepted as such by a responsible agent. Thus responsibility and determinism emerge as conflicting notions, which demands that their boundaries be more clearly defined. This discussion led to a critical approach of the contemporary social life, aiming to identify paths of responsibility and comprehension of human beings. On the other side, responsibility means being answerable (meaning understanding, explanation and justifying one's activity) for personal actions and decisions. What required is a comprehension that includes the agent's actions, their effects on others but also the agent's personality (motivations, character).

As for the concept of determinism, its content can be subsumed to the Kantian understanding expounded in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, which analyses the difference between determinative judgment and reflexive judgment:

*"If the universal (the rule, the principle, the law) is given, then the power of judgment, which subsumes the particular under it [...] is **determining**. If, however, only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found, then the power of judgment is merely **reflecting**"⁴¹.*

„We deal with a concept dogmatically (even if it is supposed to be empirically conditioned) if we consider it as contained under another concept of the object, which constitutes a principle of reason, and determine it in accordance with the latter. But we deal with it merely critically if we consider it only in relation to our cognitive faculties, hence in relation to the subjective conditions for thinking it, without undertaking to decide anything about its object. The dogmatic treatment of a concept

⁴¹ Kant, I., *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 66-67.

is thus that which is lawful for the **determining**, the critical that which is lawful merely for the **reflecting** power of judgment"⁴².

In this respect, the social determinism that I accounted for above is a dogmatic attitude concerning knowledge (mainly institutional but not exclusively, due to its effects on people's lives) that subsumes the actions of concrete agents to rules and procedures.

Determinative judgment used in order to understand the other causes injustice. More adequate for the practical life is reflexive judgment, which starts from the concreteness and attempts to find modes of understanding the concrete life. In doing so, it operates with provisional rules, a specific method used also by the hermeneutics of facticity, from Gadamer to Ricoeur. In the second and third section, I have outlined some modalities of understanding this inter-subjective concreteness (Levinas's ethics and the Eastern Christian morality) and the need to start from concreteness as the only proper alternative for understanding the other(s) without causing any injustice.

Only in such a concrete approach are the other(s) adequate instances, to which responsibility relates. The need of free space of action for responsibility requires also an open understanding of the possibilities of actions, an understanding that lies also in this concreteness and may be explored hermeneutically.

This hermeneutical concreteness of life (*Lebenswelt*) is never conceptualised inasmuch as to justify its elevation to a mere regulatory status. If there are rules, the decision process should mediate between concreteness and regulatory, in a way that would keep concreteness as permanent guide all along the process. The hermeneutics of facticity works with provisional understanding (presuppositions, prejudices) and questions them using contextual and contingent details, the lived concreteness. Presuppositions are intelligibilities that cover the facticity of life with data from the belief and comprehension areas.

The alternative to a determinist type of knowledge, socially translated into procedures and conformism, is a phenomenological-hermeneutical approach of human

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 266.

relationships. Phenomenology, as Levinas pointed out, succeeds in opening horizons of meaning that permit the approach of the other's singularity; Eastern Christian morality calls for this kind of justice, considering it of utmost importance in society. Responsible actions cannot be predetermined, as each situation requires a unique and implicative (the action is made for the other) answer that is not already written in the universal book of reason. Lack of procedures and rules does not mean less thinking; maybe thinking is already dormant when procedures are set up. Maybe an eminent meaning of thinking is to think by exploring the limits of what is already settled.

If we intend to situate the responsible action in the society we cannot ignore the technocratic-institutional administration of the contemporary societies, which mediates and regulates human relationships. I described this institutional feature using the terms regulatory or procedural and further acknowledged its functionality and usefulness. However, this procedural nature is the cause of a double potential negativity, which opposes responsibility. It distorts firstly the comprehension of the other and secondly the decision process, by providing only the regulatory solution.

The resources of responsibility cannot derive from the procedures, but rather from a perpetual exercise of comprehension that accompanies decision-making, fully taking into account the others as concrete persons influenced by one's actions. Therefore, for a better society we need not only better institutions and rules, but also a new mode of understanding interpersonal life, reflecting how decisions are made and how people understand each other. I argue that a hermeneutics of facticity, building on the insights of Levinas and of Eastern Christianity, can develop a proper understanding of *Lebenswelt*.

Only by observing these guidelines, can responsibility effectively mean a response given on one's behalf (and hermeneutics built on facticity may provide tools for the understanding, explanation and justification of one's actions) and addressed to the others, who are no longer viewed as mere abstractions or statistics. That is why, even though the

Enlightenment ideal of education has not been fulfilled, responsibility requires good practical education, in the Kantian meaning of the term outlined in the first section of the paper. To understand and explain one's own situation and decisions in relation to the others is a responsible goal in itself; furthermore, the various institutionalised social functions should be explained in terms of how they relate to the concreteness of inter-human relations, indeed, this may be a future task for the hermeneutics of facticity.

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