PERSONHOOD BETWEEN CLASSICAL AND MODERN VALUES

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Abstract:
The human personality is an anthropological structure which is always defined by conscience and moral values. Moral conscience or the laws of morality are the main attributes of maturity. The dynamics of individual moral values are geographically, historically and also culturally and spiritually conditioned. They shape the personality from early ontogenesis of personality. In the Orient, the mature moral ego integrates the spiritual and religious sense rules.(2)

Based on the concept of personality, the concept of personhood is specifically human and it starts to appear in the 18th century when, under the influence of Kantian philosophy, Man is considered “a person” because he is free to follow and respect the imperatives of morality. However, the term personhood derives from the Greek word “prosopon” which means the outward appearance or manifestation of the individual which is, of course, going to be assessed by others. Thus, the appearance and personal manifestations may hide or mask the true thoughts, emotions and intentions of the individual and outline the duplicity of the human being who must harmonize his subjectivity with the expectations of the people around him and with the norms of community life. (1)

This dominant duplicity is held in check by his conscience because he is capable of self-reflection, is free to live life intentionally, and also to adhere to the cultural and spiritual values of the community. Therefore, he is capable of self-awareness and self-respect, as well as understand and respect the people around him. This supreme level of maturity is the result of a complex process of self-conceptualization and self-determination, which unites in its various stages, subjectivity and rationality, reflexivity and intuition, involvement in activities, and also self-transcendence. All of the above are connected to traditions and customs, to religion, to moral and common sense rules.(2)

Thus, personhood appears as a biological, psychological, social and spiritual structure that adapts itself specifically to life's roles, having also a true and predictable conduct in interpersonal relationships. The authenticity and predictability of personal conduct are connected to one’s moral conscience. It harmonizes self-reflection with reflection on other, it extrapolates and customizes for each individual the concepts of “good” and “bad” and promotes “goodness” as a supreme existential ideal. As a result of education and involvement in community life, moral conscience promotes the sense of duty and responsibility, as well as the principles of punishment and reward.

The moral dimension of personhood is central to one’s character and dominates the rational, spiritual and value components of the human being, conferring dignity to his behavior. From a personological perspective the individual moral values are called virtues, moral or character features, and are found in the myths of mankind which have themes and symbols that are common to all cultures.(3)

Throughout history, the existence of Man has followed the laws of nature. In this context the individual and collective unconscious archetypes developed. Individual self-determination and self-assertion have as models gods, heroes and shamans, because the sacred world integrates the moral law and has absolute authority. Thus, people’s virtues must identify themselves or be like those of the gods.(3)

The classic virtues took shape in the world of the Greek city states – cradle of Western civilization. These are courage, kindness, self-control, and the sense of justice. At the beginning, Homo Sapiens was simultaneous with Homo Spiritualis and Homo Elictus and was able to use the freedom of speech in the Greek Polis, placing it among the supreme virtues. The Ancient Greeks considered that each man is responsible for his own welfare before offering welfare to the others. The steps taken for this purpose required courage and piety. These were considered mandatory virtues, both for the common people and the upper classes. The most important moral goal was the integration of virtuous souls in the cosmic fire regarded as an archetypal form of the matter and of life.(2,10)

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In the Arab world, the supreme virtue was the prophecy that confirmed faith over reason, according to the glory and absolute power of God. The moral man had no freedom of choice, as he had to submit to the supreme divine authority, but a virtuous life ensured immortality. In the 11th century the Ethical Self meant also self-confidence, self-assertion and the power to support anytime the cause of truth.

In the Indian Orient three categories of virtues were promoted according to the three categories of people – those who prayed, those who worked and those who fought. The inner and outer personal reality were one and the same, and each decision and action had a moral significance. Only the inner virtues were promoted, among which were wisdom or inner peace, which means the contemplative understanding of reality. The supreme virtue was to live one's faith each day. Religion became a conscious unification with the divinity through love.(4,9) A moral person must postpone final redemption in order to serve and love others sincerely and with tolerance. He must be guided in the spirit of justice in thought, language, and conduct, and develop his abilities within Neo-Buddhism and yoga techniques. The supreme virtues in yoga are the return to self-knowledge and altruism, as well as universal compassion explained through the theory of metempsychosis.(9)

The Chinese thought that evil can be defeated only through knowledge, and human virtues are a result of the integration of common sense and moral rules. They also give the first definition of “the superior human” that is to say, of the one who leads his life in a rational manner.

Man comes into the world with inborn virtues such as compassion, shame, politeness, ability to differentiate right from wrong, that give substance to the cardinal virtues of common sense and wisdom. In society, the major virtues were considered to be kindness, – generosity, and respect for family, ancestors and traditions. The most appreciated personal virtues were balance- or the ability not to have tumultuous feelings and manifestations, and harmony- or the ability to have both of them, but at the right moment. The supreme moral virtue according to the Taoist philosophy was to be one with Nature by giving up desires, and according to Buddhism direct enlightenment, total and spontaneous illumination.

In the 12th century, in a moral sense, it is considered that although there are good and bad people at birth, but even the good ones are negatively influenced by material life. In the 13th century, morality, independent of their social class, was tied to the human environment and to the Cosmos. On the other hand, according to Chinese communist morality, knowledge meant in fact that human beings need to understand the world in order to produce the necessary things to survive in everyday life.

In the Japanese morality the religious spirit – Buddha – is an integral part of each human being, and personal enlightenment is considered a must to be experienced spontaneously and totally, as in Zen Buddhism, not through meditation. Consequently, the dominant moral values of the orient, are, contemplative understanding or wisdom, inner balance and harmony, the spirit of justice, respect toward classic values and ability to differentiate right from wrong – with reference to the harmful contribution of material values. The 13th century promotes the concept of the superior human being which is the rational human being.

The Oriental person is a spiritual and religious human being, religion being the foundation of his moral values. Self-assertion is always conditioned by the relationship with the Divinity.

In the Classical World, under the influence of Neoplatonism contemplative wisdom was also promoted and people had to aspire for moral perfection. The Classical individual was educated, moral, a defender of the laws of the 'polis', and creator of pre-Christian columns, considered symbols of culture. He was free to choose his path by differentiating the inclinations of his nature from the rational ones, and he also knew that religion provides descriptions and explanations which are inaccessible to reason, searching direct knowledge of God. With the birth of Christianity, we have the advent of “the inner man”, who is a superior being that the believer discovers within, enriching himself daily by opening himself to God whose greatness he feels each moment.(2,5) To know yourself means to know the spiritual being within you in which there is always the supreme force that limits your freedom of choice. Human dignity and moral superiority are seen in one's ability to respect all things without judgment and expectations.

Influenced by a dynamic social history, the moral traits of the Western World are fundamentally dominated by emotion, but they also involve need and reason. The oral and written stories of the of the European novel played a major role in the shaping of individual morality since they promoted daring, opportunism, decisiveness, wisdom, as well as astuteness and thirst for power which must be conquered and savored. There is a path from Christian humbleness to humanistic pride, “sometimes it is better to seem good than to be good”, and also “it’s much better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both”.(7) Thus, personal welfare or happiness may also be obtained through bad actions, but true personal happiness means being guided by one's conscience and common sense. The sense of justice and truth are the only guides for a moral behavior which becomes an emblem of personal maturity.

The Western individual becomes a true person by assimilating and observing the laws of morality which ensured freedom in the 18th century, and which have at their core personal happiness and the happiness of others. Morality also implies volition because “the human person is what he wants to be”. The relations between one's will and one's character explains why the knowledge of the latter is a predictor of individual behavior, but also makes correction possible when the actions are aimed against others.

We can claim that the individual's moral values are conditioned by the richness of his inner life, by beliefs, by common sense – the supreme good – by his own volition, and by the quality of his interpersonal relationships. Thus, it is said that “a person is what he is to the extent that he is also what the others are”, emphasizing the moral value of the collective conscience. Therefore, a significant place among the individual's moral values, is occupied by the freedom he has in choosing an authentic and responsible life.

It is obvious that the contemporary world integrates the attributes of the hyper-consumerist society and that is – the overproduction of goods and services, the unequal distribution of material values, the unconfined development of the means of communication and “the
authority” of the mass media.(8) At the same time it integrates post-modern characteristics which promote relativism, the arbitrary, and unconditioned experiences, as well as idols, doctrines and ephemeral values. Traditions and symbolic manifestations of status are ignored, the paranormal is mystified, and pseudo-beliefs in extraterrestrial life are promoted. Communitarian ethos is neglected or commercialized and Eastern syncretism is given excessive media coverage, competing with the traditional religions.(2)

Contemporary man may be likened to Nietzsche's “Superman” who, at the same time confronts and praises life and its hardships. He has “the will to power” with a dominant affective narcissistic-type support, and always imposes new ideals and values whose importance he considers to be absolute. To the same extent, he ignores the Divinity and he proclaims himself the master with unlimited powers over the world and the moment.

Therefore, he tries to impose his personal will like a barbarian – “make way”. Consequently, he develops egocentric traits such as pragmatism, ingenuity, spontaneity and perseverance, competitiveness, and selective sociability.

The contemporary individual personality has as dominant structural attributes an absolute need of subjective recognition and a self-oriented emotional life. They make him feel happy only when he has access to material goods of high quality, and to higher social rank. At every moment he feels the need for hedonistic pleasure, seeks novelty and immediate and intense satisfaction.

The contemporary Homo democraticus has a duplicitous moral structure that incorporates narcissistic type attributes and behaviors, as well as which are prosocial ones, but which are inauthentic and ephemeral. Thus, he cultivates his extroversion and agreeability, while at the same time he constantly promotes himself, which is his ultimate goal. He is subjective in relating to others. Consequently, he develops egocentric traits such as pragmatism, ingenuity, spontaneity and perseverance, competitiveness, and selective sociability.

The moral and spiritual values of Homo Democraticus are mutually conditioned. Thus, even though he often has limited abilities of self-transcendence, he may develop wisdom, dignity and humor that, through self-assertion, also become moral values which optimize and confer depth to the relationships with fellow men. On the other hand, the norms of common sense are observed to the extent to which they may favor his self-esteem, but also his public image. Often nonconformity may coexist alongside gratifying talents and abilities, creativity and esthetic sense. Homo democraticus may also be a believer but he does not know or cannot truly know God, and he lets himself be carried by formal rituals.

In the contemporary world the individual tries to enhance his value and he often does it by ignoring the moral norms to which he gives a particular or personal significance that disadvantages the social harmony. Thus, he sometimes feels unfulfilled, is vain, and is often ignorant of what is important in life. While he looks for support in the diversity and the lack of substance of daily life, he can only find it together with those around him in moments of collective solidarity in a professional or cultural context, in periods of creative effervescence, in sincerely sharing successes and failures with others.

Under the circumstances discussed above, the chance of reshaping the moral self becomes possible since the contemporary individual accepts and understands the fact that the most important things which give meaning to life cannot be reached on his own. He must come closer to the supreme moral value – the desire for a better life shared with others.

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