

**Why be moral?
On the ultimate *ground* and the ultimate *sense* of the “moral point of view”
(with and beyond Apel)**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to inspect whether the foundation’s strategy of Discourse Ethics proposed by Karl-Otto Apel can actually succeed. My thesis is that it should be defended, even if it has to be radicalised beyond Apel’s intentions in order to be brought to completion. Apel distinguishes between two meanings of the question “why be moral?”: the *epistemological* and the *existential* one. The first concerns the logical ground of morality, while the second has to do with the existential sense of morality itself.¹ In the following I maintain, contrary to Apel, that it is not possible to answer the question in the first sense without tackling the second aspect of the question. I will argue that, if one wants to give an answer to the question “why be moral?”, as Apel does, one should explain, as the author instead refuses to do, why human existence (as well as all forms of existence that can be considered as addressees of moral principles) is ultimately valuable and what this value consists of. Otherwise, it would not be possible to understand which is the reason for being of moral principles, i.e. which are both the *ground* and the *sense* of the “moral point of view”. I maintain that a justification of the value of human existence and of existence in general can be given using Apel’s transcendental-pragmatic way of arguing against the nihilistic position, which neglects that such a value exists, i.e. that there is, in general, something valuable. Results achieved in this way will act as a starting point to ground a conception of the highest good and human dignity, which I will try to sketch at the end of the paper. In doing so, my intention is to show that, in the absence of a (*thin*) conception of the good, Discourse Ethics would not be able to give a foundation as well as an orientation to moral action.

Key words: foundations of morality, sense-postulate, value of existence, dignity, highest good.

1. The limit of the *Letztbegründung*: What is the *value* of the human being as a rational being?

As a first step it is necessary to schematically retrace the argument that Apel uses to justify the basic moral principles of Discourse Ethics. The foundation strategy, introduced in 1973 in *Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*, which has remained almost identical in its structure for years, is divided into two stages: the first, as known, consists in showing that one or more basic moral norms can be deduced from the presuppositions of argumentation;² the second consists instead in bringing to light that such norms don’t aim to rule a specific activity in which one can take part or not, because every human action that pretends to make sense is virtually connected with

¹ Cf. Apel 1988: 348.

² Cf., e.g., Apel 1973: 400; Apel 1988: 36.

argumentative rationality, which assumes then a transcendental character. Therefore, it is not possible to face the question “why be moral?” without trying to give an answer to the question “why be rational?” (assuming that argumentative discourse is the primal *modus* of rationality). Since the second step, in my opinion, is harder to justify than the first one, I would like to focus on the way Apel faces this latter question.

The first strategy adopted by Apel for this purpose consists in showing that everyone who puts the question “why be rational?” has “always already” taken the choice for rationality and its presuppositions.³ It is nonetheless still possible to reply to this answer, as Habermas did,⁴ through the objection of the refusal of discourse, according to which one can always renounce taking part in discourses in order to show with her own action that rationality is not really “uncircumventable”. Apel thinks, however, that the refusal of discourse cannot for sure be understood as an argument against the *Letztbegründung*:⁵ the author’s debate with Popper shows, indeed, that argumentative discourse cannot be understood as a language game among others from which one, when one wishes, can eventually step out, because every action that pretends to make sense is virtually connected with argumentative discourse.⁶ In fact, it is a basic thesis of the theory of communicative action that every action that claims to be meaningful must be virtually justifiable against at least virtual discourse partners. Insofar as we claim to act meaningfully, therefore, we are bound to rational argumentation, and it is not possible to conceive of the human form of life without such a claim of making sense of actions. Indeed, if one renounces taking part in discourses at all, one renounces at the same time her own identity of human being and therefore condemns herself to her self-destruction as an individual, falling in a sort of “existential self-contradiction”.⁷

In this way Apel believes to have shown the “uncircumventability” of rational argumentation and, at the same time, to have offered an adequate foundation of the moral principles obtainable from the presuppositions of discourse. It seems to me, however, that there is still something presupposed in this argument that has been neither recognised nor questioned. It is not yet clear, namely, why one has to reject self-destructive consequences: to acknowledge that self-destructive consequences have to be rejected means to admit, indeed, that human existence has a *value* as such and that our personal integrity is *worth* being protected. This presupposition, however, could for sure be questioned: even when one recognizes that it is not possible to deny that rational argumentation is inescapable for the human form of life, namely that it is a matter of fact that we are rational beings, one could still ask, ‘which is the value of such a fact for us?’⁸ Or, similarly, ‘which is the sense of the human form of life as a constitutively rational form of life?’ A sceptic about the values could, in fact, deny that it would be legitimate to give value to the human being and, more generally, to the world she lives in, while a nihilist could maintain that the claim to make sense of one’s existence is ultimately groundless. In the case the sceptic or the nihilist were right, every attempt of grounding morality would appear unsuccessful: if human existence does not have any value or does not make sense, there is no reason to protect it through moral principles. Thereby, I now intend to propose a

³ Cf., e.g., Apel 1998: 179.

⁴ Cf. Habermas 1983:108-9.

⁵ Cf., e.g., Apel 1998: 692.

⁶ For Apel’s confrontation with Popper’s decisionism, cf. Apel 1973: 326ff and Apel 1998: 76-8.

⁷ Cf. Apel 1980: 239.

⁸ This is precisely the question that Korsgaard tries to answer with her transcendental argument in favour of the ultimate value of rational autonomy (cf. Korsgaard 1996). For a discussion of this argument, see, e.g., Schönrich 2017.

radicalisation of the *Letztbegründung*, which makes it possible to use the method of transcendental-pragmatic reflection not only against a generic amoral sceptic, as already done by Apel, but more specifically against the sceptic about values or against the nihilist.⁹

2. For a *radicalisation* of the *Letztbegründung*: the sense-postulate and the value of human existence

The first move in this direction could consist in showing that the sceptic/nihilist's act of saying that nothing makes sense or nothing has value would not make sense if the propositional content of this speech act were true. Indeed, in the transcendental-pragmatic perspective, every speech act presupposes a meaning claim or understandability claim, i.e. the claim that what is said makes sense, which is neglected by the nihilist insofar as she says that nothing makes sense. This argument is an application of Apel's usual way of reflection, based on the concept of performative self-contradiction, to the meaning or understandability claim. One could reply that what is at stake here is the mere linguistic meaning of the words pronounced by the hypothetical nihilist, not the sense and the value of existence that she puts in question. Thus, since both the nihilist and the transcendental-pragmatic philosophers use two different meanings of the word "sense", the argument does not succeed. It is, however, possible to answer this objection by saying that the way in which Apel intends the understandability claim makes it possible to avoid this problem. Indeed, following the author, the understandability claim is not only, as it seems to be for Habermas, the minimal claim of saying something intelligible in light of the syntactic and semantic rules of a given language. In order to make sense of this, a proposition should not only be understandable from a syntactic and semantic point of view and not be contradictory in a logical sense, but it also has to be pragmatically consistent, i.e. to avoid contradicting the pragmatic presuppositions of the utterance.¹⁰ Therefore, the meaning or understandability claim in this strong interpretation provided by Apel is identifiable not only with the claim of avoiding logical contradictions and correctly following syntactic and semantic rules, but also, and first of all, with the claim of avoiding performative self-contradictions. But the fact that a speech act contradicts itself in a performative way does not only mean that its propositional content turns out to be false, but also that the speech act on the whole is meaningless. Namely, the act of saying removes itself as an act: it is not only the meaning of the nihilist's words to dissolve, but the sense of her acting as a speaker as well. That's why I think that not only the linguistic sense of "meaning" is at stake, but also the existential one, since the sense of acting is at stake.

At this point, the next move of the sceptic/nihilist could consist in renouncing to argue, in order to escape the necessity of presupposing meaning claims through speech acts. As already shown before, it is now possible to argue that this would involve an existential self-contradiction, i.e. a pragmatic contradiction that has not to do, as the performative self-contradiction in the narrow sense, with the *clash* between what is explicitly said and what is presupposed by the act of saying,

⁹ Jon Hellesnes also attempts a refutation of a hypothetical existential or metaphysical sceptic starting from a transcendental-pragmatic point of view. However, Apel's ultimate foundation does not seem decisive in his critique of the position of the "pessimist", which is based on a different order of considerations (cf. Hellesnes 1993).

¹⁰ The different interpretations of the understandability claims by Apel and Habermas are clarified in Apel 1998: 689-90, footnote 55.

but with the analogous *clash* between what is done and what is presupposed by the action itself. Indeed, even the act of stepping out from argumentation in order to avoid presupposing a meaning claim dissolves its sense, since such an act cannot avoid presupposing this claim insofar as it pretends to make sense. The same argument can be raised against the one who, in order to escape the game of acting on its whole, comes to commit suicide, pretending to demonstrate with her own choice that human existence does not make sense or has no value at all. Indeed, committing suicide is still an action, which, as such, claims to make sense. In all of these cases, the actor, whether or not she performs a speech act or an act not mediated through language, commits a pragmatic self-contradiction, be it performative in the narrow sense or existential. This means that every actor cannot avoid presupposing a meaning claim and recognizing that it can, in principle, be redeemed.

As far as speech acts are concerned, redeeming a meaning claim would mean, according to the premises of universal or transcendental pragmatics, that the discourse partner accepts the meaning claim, since she recognizes that the speaker, among other things, is not committing any performative self-contradiction by raising any validity claim. Something analogous can be said with regard to non-speech acts: a meaning claim is redeemed insofar as other agents recognize that one's act is not existentially self-contradictory in the sense mentioned before (and that such an act is not in contradiction with other actions). Thus, raising an (uncircumventable) meaning claim implies presupposing that the claim is, in principle, redeemable, and this means that every action, whether or not it is mediated through language, insofar as it cannot avoid presupposing a meaning claim, presupposes a sense-postulate, i.e. the postulate that acting in a meaningful (or valuable) way is possible. In particular, in the light of the above-mentioned criteria of meaning, acting in a meaningful (or valuable) way is possible insofar as one respects the ban of the pragmatic and logical contradiction, which is the basic norm of reason. Saying that acting in a meaningful way is possible, therefore, is nothing different than saying that it is possible to act according to reason, namely in a reasonable way.

One could react to this argument by maintaining that the sense-postulate introduced this way is not really relevant, since it has to do with the sense of action and not with the sense of human existence on the whole. In fact, living is obviously not only a matter of action and choice, but also of "enduring" what happens to us and is not in our power. One can, however, answer to this objection by arguing that postulating the possibility of acting meaningfully implies already postulating the possibility of living meaningfully in a wider sense. In order for an action to be performed, there must be some existentially favourable conditions for the agent: for example, the agent has to be psychophysically healthy enough to perform a conscious action and there must be no contextual obstacle to inhibit the action. In a word, the context of action has to be reasonable enough in order to make a reasonable action possible. Hence, if it is possible to act in a reasonable (meaningful, valuable) way, a reasonable (meaningful, valuable) context of action must be possible as well. Since living meaningfully, as we said, means at the same time acting and enduring, and it is not only possible to act meaningfully, but also to find oneself in favourable contexts of action, then the sense-postulate implies not only that it is possible to act meaningfully, but also that it is possible to live meaningfully in the whole sense of the word "living".

From here it is possible to deduce a further consequence, which is fundamental for our current aims: admitting a sense-postulate in this strong sense implies that human existence is meaningful and valuable in itself, since it is possible for the human being to live a meaningful (valuable) life. As we are, as rational beings, open to the possibility of sense or, one could also say, open to value,

our existence is, in itself, valuable. Our openness to value implies, furthermore, that not only human existence, but also the world in which the human being lives is made in such a way that it makes this openness to value possible and is therefore, in turn, valuable. Very strong implications are at stake here, which should certify that transcendental arguments (as it is the one we used to “radicalise” Apel’s *Letztbegründung*) are strong enough to have important implications on the ontological level even in the field of morality, as far as the problem of the “reality” of values is concerned.¹¹

3. Preliminary remarks on human dignity and the highest good

It is now the moment to ask ourselves which conception of value comes through from the reflections we have led so far. Through a radicalisation of Apel’s ultimate foundations we have shown that human existence can be seen as a value in itself. This implies moreover that existence in general has a value for the human being: since the world is made in such a way that it makes it *possible* for human beings to lead a meaningful life, the existence of the world itself turns out to be valuable for them, even if, of course, not *everything* can be conceived as valuable, namely as “good”. We now have to illustrate what the value of human existence consists in, sketching both a conception of dignity and of the highest good for the human being. A big task is at stake, which cannot for sure be scrutinized in a sufficiently deepened way: my aim here is just to introduce some rough suggestions in order to develop them at a future point in time.

Let’s start with some considerations about human dignity: saying that every human being has a value in herself, since it is logically and metaphysically possible for her to live a meaningful or valuable life, means to confer a dignity to the human being, which consists in the – at least potential – ownership of those capacities that make it possible for her to live such a meaningful life. I refer first of all to reason, which we can consider to be our guide in the orientation of existence, since it offers the necessary criteria of meaning. As we said before, living in a meaningful way is not different from living in a rational way. The centrality of reason in the idea of human dignity for which I am searching puts us clearly in the Kantian tradition. In particular, as far as the contemporary debate is concerned, I sympathize with Christine Korsgaard’s idea that rational autonomy has to be seen as the source of value, since everything that is chosen through rational autonomy turns out to be of value to us.¹²

These considerations already give us some indication about what a theory of the highest good for the human being has to look like. From the previous reflections, we can see that the ideal of a meaningful life can be considered as a sort of “ultimate value” for the human being: I conceive of a theory of the highest good for the human being as a theory that shows us how such an ultimate value, so to say, transfers value to its conditions of possibility. Since reason is a condition of possibility of a meaningful life, it has to be considered a fundamental value, which articulates itself in further values, namely those that correspond to the different validity claims that a discourse partner cannot deny without performative self-contradictions. I refer, namely, to the values of truth, justice and authenticity, which are presupposed by a transcendental-pragmatic approach. In order

¹¹ An overview about the relation between transcendental arguments and the problem of moral realism can be found in Illies (2003).

¹² Cf. Korsgaard 1996.

for a life to be worthwhile, however, appealing to reason is not enough. Or, better yet, in order to live a meaningful or reasonable life, some empirical conditions have to be fulfilled, such as psycho-physical health, the realization of one's own goals, good interpersonal relationships, adequate material-economic conditions and so on. Those goods that are, in a way, "naturally" attractive for us, become, namely, values, insofar as they are recognized as values by reason, since they make it possible to conduct a meaningful life. This implies that none of these goods can be considered as an absolute value, since each of them is a value in relation to the ultimate value of leading a meaningful life. These goods, considered as values, represent the content of those material moral norms, such as "do not kill", "do not harm others", "do not steal", or even "help the other" and "contribute to the well-being of the other", which cannot be derived directly from the presuppositions of discourse, since they contain values that are supposed to pre-exist the practice of discourse, even if they have to be recognized by reason in order to be considered as values. In this way, we have sketched a conception of the highest good or, one could also say, of the good life, which is centred on the ideal of a meaningful-reasonable-valuable life and includes its conditions of possibility, namely those values that make that ultimate value possible. Such values can be either inherent to reason, as for instance the values of truth, justice and authenticity, or in a way external to it, such as health, friendship, love and so on, which have, however, to be recognized as values by reason.

The one at stake here is for sure a *thin* conception of the highest good, since it does not require the adherence to a full "comprehensive doctrine", but it is, at the same time, substantial enough to give an orientation to action. A too *thick* conception of the highest good, as the one that, for example, could be derived from some passages of Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, in particular where he identifies the good life with the "contemplative life", cannot be justified, since it is likely to favour a particular conception of the good that cannot be universally valid. In order to avoid this danger, Apel, together with Habermas, refused to elaborate a conception of the good life, paying the price, however, for not being able to bring to completion his attempt of foundations of ethics. Indeed, moral norms have precisely the role of protecting, or even promoting, what is good or valuable for the human being: without a conception of the good, there is no content for moral norms. Discourse Ethics, as maintained by Charles Taylor,¹³ cannot avoid presupposing a conception of the good in order to be coherent and faithful to its intentions of grounding a universalistic moral theory. What we have tried to do here is exactly to articulate the conception of the good that Discourse Ethics implicitly presupposes and should defend in order to be coherent.

It is now necessary to avoid a possible misunderstanding: the concept of human dignity that we mentioned, focused on rationality, does not imply that only human beings have to be considered as worthy of moral consideration. I want to avoid here that anthropocentrism that follows from the premises of Discourse Ethics under which human beings have to be considered as addressees of moral norms, since they are all virtual partners of argumentation. Similarly, in our perspective, human beings have to be considered as addressees of moral norms, since they are virtually capable of rational autonomy, which makes it possible to live a meaningful-valuable-good life. In both perspectives, the dignity of the human being is traced back to a capability which characterizes only the human being. Which is, then, the advantage of our proposal? I maintain that, by making clear that rational autonomy can be considered the core of dignity *insofar as* it makes it possible for us to

¹³ Cf. Taylor 1986; Taylor 1993.

live a meaningful life, namely a valuable and good one, we can put a bridge between us and other living beings. Indeed, we are not the only beings that are capable of living a valuable or good life: even if we are the only living beings that have the *concept* of good and value, this does not prevent us from attributing to other living beings the capability of living what we call a good or valuable life. Since we are all living beings, we all assign something like a value to the possibility of living a good life,¹⁴ even if the human beings are the only beings that are able to recognise reflexively that something of this kind is at stake, and can therefore coin terms like “good” or “valuable”. It does not seem to me, instead, that the attempts of Discourse Ethics to go beyond its anthropocentrism are equally convincing: it is known that Habermas uses the argument of the *analogy* between our being virtual partners of argumentation and the animals’ capability to communicate in a certain way.¹⁵ It is not clear to me, however, why this capability must be privileged in spite of others. After all, even focusing only on the horizon of human beings, if one refuses to use the language of the “good”, one cannot explain, as emphasised by Taylor, why a certain characteristic has to be considered as more important than the others in order to ground human dignity. That’s why those who refuse to speak in terms of values, like Apel and Habermas, cannot avoid presupposing implicitly a conception of value. Since it remains implicit, however, the reasons for giving priority to a capacity instead of another cannot be explained, as it comes through in Habermas’ reflection on animal ethics. Regardless of these last considerations, which need to be deepened and better justified in other contexts, my hope is that the perspective I have developed here could help in going beyond the limits of Discourse Ethics, laying the foundations for an integrated moral theory in which the normative and the evaluative dimension are seen as intrinsically connected. Only in this way, in my view, is it possible to answer the question of the title “why be moral?”, giving a sense as well as a ground to the “moral point of view”.

¹⁴A convincing attempt at arguing in this direction can be found in Korsgaard 2018. See also Schönrich 2015.

¹⁵Cf. Habermas 1991: 225.

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