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Ethics and the principles of environmental education

Abstract: In this paper we want to introduce the ethical reformulation of the principles of environmental education as they appear under Brazilian law.

Key-words: ethics of environmental education, principles of environmental education.

Introduction

I will present a schematic version of my approach to Ethics (see Lopez Velasco 2003).

I propose that a moral and ethical obligation only occurs through language by answering the question “What must I do?”.

Moral and ethical obligations have a different linguistic form. The norms of the term “moral” are simple imperatives (examples: “I must respect old people”, or, “It's acceptable to let old people die”).

The norms of Ethics are Quasi-Causal Arguments (QCA), are constructed by:

a)- An obligation

b)- The normative operator “because”, and finally-

c)- A statement (These statements may be simple or complex, in accordance with classical logical analysis. The syntagm which appears after the verb “must” in the obligation integrates the statement).

The grammar of QCA is the following: If I agree to the truth of the statement, I am committed to the obligation; if the statement is false the obligation is denied in a strictly argumentative way, and there is no such commitment.

One example: The following QCA is a candidate to be a norm of Ethics:

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“I must respect old people because the respect towards old people makes society more cooperative, and I want to make society more cooperative”.

I propose a new interpretation of the truth-operator called “conditional” (and different from the “entailment”). This operator builds a complex sentences of the type;

($p * q$) which is to be read as “p is a condition of q”.

The truth table of the operator of conditional is:

p	q	$p * q$
t	t	t
t	f	f
f	t	t
f	f	t

With this logical means I am prepared to deduce an answer, since the grammar of the question “What must I do?” opens the space between Ethics and Morality, and the three norms of ethics are able to hold an intersubjective and universal validity (at least in ‘western culture’) in a strictly argumentative way.

The only presupposed fact is that people want to produce with a happy outcome (in the sense of John L. Austin, 1962, IV) the act of speech involving the question, “What must I do?”.

The first norm of Ethics

The question “What must I do?” is conditioned by the possibility that one can choose between a minimum of two alternatives. To choose between alternatives supposes freedom of decision. Freedom of decision is a condition referred to the position of a subject who is performing the speech act “What must I do?”, and participates in the grammar of this act of speech.

I can say:

a) I have freedom of decision, which is a condition of performing more than one action, or different kinds of actions.

b) I can perform more than one action or different kinds of actions as a result of asking the question “What must I do?”.

c) Because the “conditional” operator is in respect to the transitive property, so

$((p * q) . (q * r) \rightarrow (p * r))$ are tautologies]: “I have freedom of decision” is thus a condition of the question “What must I do?”.

d) I want to ask the question “What must I do?” (in a ‘happy outcome’ of this question, in the sense of Austin 1962).

Then, I have deduced the first norm of Ethics: “I must ensure my freedom of decision because I ensure my freedom of decision is a condition of asking the question ‘What must I do?’”.

The first norm is the ethical basis of the critique and in all instances, absence of freedom from decision, particularly when they result in alienated intersubjective rapport and in the individual with himself.

So this norm is the fundamental ethical one, because it is deduced from the grammar of the question which installs the ethics in the first place, and it is also a deontological-normative principle which operates as a foundation to the critiques and essays related to a historical overcoming of the absence of, or illusion of, freedom in decision-making.

The individual who accepts/wants to produce a positive answer to the question “What must I do?” is implicitly committed to the obligation established by the first norm; if the person later discovers that his/her freedom of choice is limited he/she will re-discover this obligation in its historical dimension as a self-obligation that commands them to struggle in overcoming these limitations.

Given the human condition (that is, the social condition and ‘wickedness’ of the Id discovered by Freud) we could say that there is never an instance of the question in which “What must I do?” will have entirely “happy” outcome; but, at the same time we have to commit to this question as the place where the instauration/confirmation of our promise to our freedom of decision and our obligation to the struggle to get this freedom to reside.

The second norm of Ethics

Now the question is: Is the individual freedom of decision, established by the first norm, unlimited?

Inspired by Karl-Otto Apel (1973) and by Oswald Ducrot (1972), I propose that the grammar of the speech act of “questioning” includes the following two principles as conditions of its satisfactory outcome: a) the individual who asks a question believes that his/her object will answer saying what he/she believes is the truth or the right answer; or b) the individual who puts forward a question and assumes with this act an attitude of collective and consensual search for the truth or of what is right. (Note that the violation of some of these two principles is possible, but in this case the speech act of the question shall be affected by an “infelicity”, in the sense of Austin 1962).

I had supposed too that, when a question is put forward at the ethical level, the answer must be a QCA. On this basis, and assuming that somebody who makes the question

“What must I do?” is opening, by means of this speech act, the interconnection with everybody who understands this question, comes the second norm of Ethics: “ I must in consensus search for an answer for each case of the question ‘What must I do?’, because the answer to the question ‘What must I do?’ is conditioned on ‘being happy’”.

This norm puts limits to my exercise of my freedom of decision, established by the first norm of Ethics.

I think that people who defend dissent against the consensus are confused. At first I remark that the fact of writing a paper about the importance of dissent is good proof of the importance of consensus, because the individual who writes a paper wants to create consensus with respect to the importance of dissent. The simple opposition against consensus seems a ‘performative contradiction’ (saying the opposite of the elocutionary content produced by the act of speech, for example, somebody who commands ‘Don’t obey me!’). Consensus and dissent are in a dialectical relationship. I search consensus because I am in dissent, and dissent is transformed into consensus by argumentation. But especially in the case of the norms of ethics, consensus is always provisional, and can be transformed into dissent at any time, when the statement of the norm in the QCA is falsified in an argumentative discussion. There is not a real problem in the supposed problem (Jürgen Habermas), in the difference between factual and legitimate consensus. Each consensus is always a provisional consensus. The norms of Ethics are historical, and history is always open to revision. But, the second norm confirms the first one in the sense that we must fight for a social-environmental order in which all persons are to be free as much as possible in their decisions taken via consensus (created and re-created at any time by an argumentative discussion).

The third norm of Ethics

Which are the conditions for the existence of the question “What must I do?”.

First, the speech act of “questioning” must exist. For the existence of this speech act the existence of a human language is necessary; therefore a human being is necessary.

But what characterizes a human being? (not including language, in order to avoid a “vicious circle”). We can answer with Karl Marx: Labor. Work is the interaction between that part of Nature that is a human being and the rest of Nature, through which human beings are engaged in the activity of their historical self-production. Work supposes nature in its three components: the subject (the human being in this case), the object and the instrument, all natural beings, directly or indirectly. But, what kind of Nature are we referring to? The answer is: a healthy Nature where work is sustainable, which is the condition for the survival of human beings.

Now I can propose the argument:

First Premise: Nature is healthy from a productive point of view and is the condition for "I am a human being".

Second Premise: "I am a human being" is a precondition for the question, “What must I do?”.

Conclusion: Nature is healthy from a productive point of view and is a condition for asking the question “What must I do?”.

At this argument I can associate the argument's formula
$$\frac{p * q ; q * r}{p * r}$$

and this formula is correct because we know that the sentential formula

$((p * q) . (q * r) \rightarrow (p * r))$ is a tautology.

Thus we have found the third norm of Ethics: “Preserving healthy human and non-human nature from a productive point of view is a condition for asking the question ‘What must I do?’”.

Perhaps this norm is not the final answer in environmental ethics because it contains a clear utilitarianism over nature. But, I think that this norm is a minimal basis to have an argumentative grounding for the vital activity of preservation-regeneration of

Nature, making part of the struggle for a social and environmental order in which this attitude should be participative at all times of our economic production.

The principles of environmental education in Brazilian law

The most important Brazilian law about environmental education (N° 9575/1999, called PNEA, National Policy of Environmental Education) established eight principles:

I. The insightful humanistic, holistic, democratic participant.

II. The conception of environment in totum, considering the interdependence between the natural environment, the socioeconomic environment and the cultural environment from the point of view of sustainability.

III. The pluralism of ideas and pedagogic conceptions, with an inter, multi and transdisciplinary approach.

IV. The connection between ethics, education, work and social praxis.

V. The guarantee of continuity and permanence in the educative process.

VI. The permanent and critical evaluation of the educative process.

VII. The articulate approach of environmental questions at local, regional and global levels.

VIII. The recognition and respect by the individual for cultural plurality and diversity.

Ethics and the principles of environmental education

The three fundamentals norms of ethics are the grounds for an environmental education. We propose to apply these three norms to the first principles of the environmental education defined by the Brazilian law PNEA, reformulating this principle as a Quasi-Causal Argument (QCA), so that it takes on this form: "We must perform an environmental education with a humanistic, democratic and participatory insight, because that insight allows us to develop the freedom of decision of the subjects involved, and the first ethical norm required from each human being is to develop his/her freedom of deciding choice".

This QCA takes on the form “I must x because (p . q)”. And we know that the legitimacy of the obligation depends of the truth of “p . q”, and this demands the truth of both “p” and “q” . At the present situation we may analyze the content of the first principle of the environmental education (EE) as follows:

As far as the very important term “freedom” we are reminded that Kant (1788) defined it as “the independence of the will with respect to the imposition of the impulses of sensibility”, and as “the ability to give the beginning by one's self to a series of events”.

With Freud we may affirm that we are most free when the Ego is most independent with respect to the Id and Superego. And we know that the first norm of ethics requires, precisely, that we must fight for our freedom of decision and choice (with respect to the Id and the Superego).

Then we may show that humanistic, holistic, democratic and participatory insight promotes the freedom of decision of the subjects involved in the process of EE., and that this is not so difficult.

First, Lalande (1977) says that “humanism” is the “reflexive anthropocentrism that, starting with the knowledge that the human being wants the *mise en valeur* of being a human being, excluding all the situations that are alien to him or that are used by him in infra-human form”. Or, precisely, that this approach is guaranteed by the first and third norm of the ethics.

In the other hand, the democratic and participant insight promotes the freedom of decision since the old Greek definition of “democracy” reprised by Lalande “the political situation in which sovereignty belongs to the totality of the citizens”.

The adjective “participatory” is used to demonstrate that the “representative” mechanism is not enough for democracy because is necessary that each one participate in each decision (as is required by the first norm of ethics).

Now lets go to the “holistic” insight. For us “holistic” means “systemic approach” (with Bertalanffy 1968). And even as we recognize the historical human being, with his capacity for changing any system, it is no longer a matter of discussion that human beings, like any other animal, are an integral part of the ecosystem. We think that the “holistic” insight sustains and is required by the third norm of ethics. To highlight this approach in the first principle of EE we may reformulate it as follows: “I must perform an EE with an holistic insight because the third norm of ethics requires an holistic approach by requiring the preservation and regeneration of a healthy human and non-human nature”.

So with all these explanations we may conclude that for our QCA: 1. The sentence “q” is truth (“the first norm of ethics required is that each human being develop his/her freedom of choice”), 2. The sentence “p” is truth (“a EE with humanistic, holistic, democratic and participatory insight that allows to develop the freedom of choice among the subjects involved”, and, 3. The conjunction “p . q” is truth (“A EE with humanistic, holistic, democratic and participative insight which allows to develop the freedom of choice of the subjects involved and is the first norm of ethics”).

So to begin the QCA with “I must perform an EE with an humanistic, democratic and participatory insight ” is a legitimate obligation; and so the first principle of the EE in Brazilian law has achieved ethical demonstration and legitimacy.

We should make a similar reformulation to the other seven principles.

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