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NEW ETHICS — DESIDERATUM OF REASON AND TASK OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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EXPOSITION OF THE PROBLEM: ETHICS AND THE CRISIS OF MODERN CIVILIZATION

Let me try to throw a philosophical spotlight on the topics of value change and new ethics in modern society by pursuing the question: in what sense and why is it symptomatic of the situation of the sciences and higher education, that both express the need today for a new ethic, i.e. an ethic of unlimited responsibility for the planet and for the future on the one hand, but deny or doubt the rational foundation of such an ethic?

1.1.

Critique of scientific rationality as instrumental reason: does such an ethic founder on the alternative of the *Zeitgeist* (ethically neutral rationality or arational subjective ethics)? After physicists “were introduced to sin” as a result of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (J R. *Oppenheimer*), their most distinguished thinker, Albert *Einstein*, read the writing on the wall: “We have to revolutionize our thinking, revolutionize our actions and have the courage to also revolutionize the relations among nations”. To what end? So as to act in accordance with the highest ethical norm, the “moral imperative”, which calls for the “solidarity of all mankind”.

On the other hand Einstein—in a certain analogy to existentialism as the philosophy of private, purely subjectively binding but (logically speaking) non-rational value judgements (and thus also analogous to the opposition or complementarity of subjective ethics versus ethically neutral rationality, an opposition given authority in the Western world by Max *Weber* and Karl *Popper*)—subjectivizes the ethic called for by regarding it as an act of faith of the individual and traces it back to the variety of religious personality or “moral genius”. He does not offer sufficient grounds, but rather only refers to the separation of what is and what should be, of facts as the object of the sciences and norms as the concern of

ethics, as established in accordance with *Hume*, *Crusius*, and particularly *Kant* (as compared to the tradition of the *Aristotelian* natural ethics). On the contrary he doesn't take the possibility of practical reason and thus the possibility of a rational foundation of ethics into consideration. In doing so he tacitly reduces reason to an ethically neutral, theoretical and technological rationality. This rationality can only serve all sorts of intents and purposes without being capable of judging these intents and purposes rationally. In a certain sense Immanuel *Kant's* concept of practical reason was directed against this inability. In contrast to Max Weber it was expressly criticized in Max *Horkheimer's Critique of Instrumental Reason*, continued for example by Joseph *Weizenbaum's* critique of the amoral spirit of calculation of computer science and presently substantiated by the transcendental, pragmatic program of a rehabilitation of practical reason by reflection on argumentation (*Karl-Otto Apel*, see above).

With this last remark I have outlined the critical ethics of practical reason, which, as the ethics of discourse, attempts to give an undogmatic and rational response to the moral and political predicament of our high-tech civilization („geistige Situation unserer Zeit" as coined by Karl Jaspers):

— a critical answer to the philosophy of our scientific civilization: intersubjectively valid but "value-free" or rather ethically neutral rationality or arational ethics and (solely) subjectively binding determination of values, *tertium non datur*;

— a normative and indirectly ethically oriented answer to the crisis of modern civilization, which is at the same time a crisis of reason, a crisis of life and a crisis of freedom.

1.2

Changes in values and norms against the background of the *Zeitgeist* (the moral and political predicament of our high-tech civilization).

I would like to offer the following terse answer to the question posed at the beginning:

The peace movement, ecological movement, civil rights movement — in short, an ethics-oriented crisis of consciousness is growing ever more rapidly in the sciences and higher education and even more strongly to be sure in the public eye. There's a growing awareness of the fact that the non-morally oriented, or rather sheer *abandoned use of scientific, technological rationality* or unlimited implementation of the means-ends rationality serving political-economic systems ("free market system of the West" and "actually existing socialism in the camp of progress and peace") has brought mankind to the brink of planetary catastrophes. I interpret this situation and the growing awareness of this situation philosophically speaking as the *outer challenge* of the present crisis of our civilization *to reason* for one to become practical in an ethical as well as a political sense.

This challenge is being articulated in public movements, which we can elaborate on with the means of an "understanding sociology" under the heading of "changes in values". A world-wide protest *against* the morally

blind rule of instrumental reason and *for* a “return to life” (motto of the German Evangelical Church Conference, Hannover 1983) has been afoot since Hiroshima and the resulting moral engagement on the part of *Einstein* and *Oppenheimer* via *Albert Schweitzer* up to the Easter March and peace movements as well as “the ethic concerning the reverence for life” put forth by *Albert Schweitzer* and initiated by the appeals of the “Club of Rome”, the analyses of the “Report for the President—Global 2000” and since the experiences of ecological catastrophes such as Seveso, Harrisburg, oil spills, e.g. off the coast of Brittany and in the Persian Gulf.

The observed change of values is removing itself from a belief in scientific and technological progress, by which the modern civilization in east and west, but also in the south, has been governed. It is going in the direction of an orientation towards universalistic principles of responsibility for life. So much for the description of the situational experience and of the resulting change in values, which is simultaneously a *change of norms*, because it not only offers an answer to the question of values “What do we really want?”, but also to the normative question “What *should* we do or rather want?”

Philosophically speaking, we can reconstruct the dilemma that has determined the answer to this challenge. This dilemma has arisen because the alternative outlined above, “subjective ethics or intersubjective instrumental reason”, has yet to be overcome.

1.2.1

On the one hand this protest, partially general, partially within the scientific community, supposes or formulates the understanding that an intersubjectively binding ethic of a responsibility for mankind and the environment has become the condition for survival of man and external nature. This assumption is based on the understanding that the incongruity between *homo faber*, who can accomplish more instrumentally or technologically speaking than he can comprehend or most importantly answer for, and *homo sapiens*, who inquires about rational criteria for what should be (norms, maxims) and what one wants (values, interests), that this incongruity has been taken to an extreme in our high-tech civilization, because for the first time in history the technological or technologically induced actions of man have taken on a global dimension as far as their impact on the future is concerned*.

In contrast to this the old ethics only dealt with the problems of the social microcosm of the interaction of individuals and groups in the family and in day-to-day living. The postulate of the *new ethics* corresponds to the new situation:

— firstly that there are specific ethical problems in the *macrocosm* (e.g. the question of atomic energy);

* For example, putting a single atomic power plant into operation involves the risk of radioactive fallout for half a million years and means enacting laws and regulations for the safety of approximately seven thousand generations!

— secondly that ethically relevant *decisions in the microcosm* (such as the supposed problem concerning the privacy of birth control as an issue of the international discussion on overpopulation and global famine) *as well as in the mesocosm* of international relations (e.g. the classical questions of national prestige and *raison d'état* as a problem at disarmament conferences) *are becoming ethical questions of the macrocosm*, that is of world-wide responsibility for the future;

— thirdly that human life can even be annihilated in the planetary aftermath of technological activity, be it through the military use of the weapons of mass destruction, be it through the use of civil technologies which can cause ecological catastrophes. The apocalypse is technically feasible and so poses a real threat.

Thus on the one hand there are many important reasons for an intersubjectively binding ethic of a practically unlimited responsibility for mankind and for the future.

1.2.2

On the other hand a scientific consciousness is still predominant in the sciences and in higher education, so that the foundation of intersubjectively binding ethics seems altogether impossible, because the equation “reason = logic” has been in force since Francis Bacon. To put it more accurately: the absolutization of the cognitive form of the sciences as a paradigm for rationality has resulted in:

— a *rational foundation* being equated with a formal logical *deduction* of sentences from sentences in an axiomatized, syntactico-semantic sentence system (theory); and

— the *intersubjective validity* of arguments being equated with objectivity along the lines of a “value-free” *statement* (description and causal explanation) *of facts* or rather a formal logical conclusion.

I look upon this reverse development of reason “from judgement to calculation” (J. Weizenbaum) as the *internal challenge* to *reason* for one to reinstate or rather establish oneself as an authority of practical judgement. The assumption of this challenge is, as I see it, the first and foremost task of science and higher education on the way to the year 2000.

1.3.

To this moral and political predicament of our high-tech civilization is to be added a political and ethical conflict of norms: the dilemma of a post-conventional morality between a legalistic orientation to the social contract, which includes the *citizen's loyalty* towards the constitutionally valid resolutions and laws of his country (stage 5 according to Kohlberg 1981), and a moral orientation to the universalistic principle of ethics along the lines of a universalizable reciprocity which can include a moral *responsibility for all concerned* by some activity and can accordingly justify a *moral duty to offer resistance* to the state if need be. (Cf. Kohlberg's stage 6

and Kant's categorical imperative on the one hand, the postulation of a stage 7 by Habermas 1976 and of a communicative discourse ethic by Apel 1978, Böhler 1982 and 1983).

1.3.1.

This conflict has manifested itself in a multitude of ways: in the person of Mahatma *Gandhi*, in the person of "the father of the atomic bomb", J. *Oppenheimer*, in the person of Martin Luther *King*, in the acts of civil disobedience on the part of Bertrand *Russell*, the Easter March, the peace movements and the civil-rights movements.

1.3.2.

This conflict mustn't be regarded only as a conflict between the individual and the state, e.g. from the perspective of political theory. It is already incorporated in the modern states themselves: by virtue of their recognition of universal and inviolable human rights, which they have at least demonstrated by their entry into the UN (Charter of the United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights), they have assumed a supranational duty to observe and practise human rights and have thus subjugated themselves to the basic norms of the universalistic political ethics of principles. In doing so they have accepted the *possibility of practical reason* and have tacitly recognized it as an authority of the critical examination of their political actions. It is this normative base (and its articulations, from national declarations of human rights to the UN Charter and the Final Accords of the CSCE of Helsinki) that present resistance movements cite.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1.3.3.

The assumption of the possibility of practical reason (and thus the possibility of intersubjectively binding norms) by the normative foundation of modern states shows the political need for an *ultimate logical foundation* of a normative ethic.

1.3.4.

The scepticism concerning the foundation of cultural relativism or historicism and decisionism does not disprove this possibility. It cannot appear in the form of a meaningful or rather veracious argumentation, as it confuses *de facto* genesis with logical validity, context of discovery with context of justification, when it is formulated as a principle ("everything is relative"), it fails as an assertive act, as it doesn't represent a meaningful

move in the argumentation of the language game. For in the proposition (p) "everything is relative" it contradicts its own claim to validity of the corresponding performative act "I assert that p is valid" (and thus not "relative" but "true").

2.

Intersubjectively binding intrinsic (or directly oriented) ethics are logically speaking impossible and are dogmatic in their potential effects.

2.1.

Intrinsic or material ethics (e.g. teleological ethic in terms of nature and the natural right of Aristotelian Thomistic tradition or as an actualization of this tradition), which orient themselves by the *greatest good or what is most valuable* (G. E. Moore, M. Scheler), don't supersede the subjectivity of value judgements or the arbitrariness of the speculatively prescriptive precepts of a natural theology which surreptitiously obtains its normative principles by means of *petitio principii*. They cannot justify the intersubjective obligation of what one should do morally speaking.

2.2.

The latter also applies to ecological nature of ethics which proceeds from the assumption that every living being wants to live or rather strives for survival, either in the sense of an enlightened utilitarianism of (survival) *life* or in the sense of a religious relationship with nature ("reverence for life"). But the *norm* which would require that we are committed to supporting this struggle cannot be derived from this. In the face of the ecological crisis and the world nutrition crisis (that is essentially only a crisis in the system to date of the exploitation and distribution of natural resources) one could just as well come to the conclusion: "Save your own skin if you can".

2.3.

In addition to this an ethic of "the principle of life" is definitely compatible with a limitation or even a suspension of a practical condition for argumentation: free communication can be dispensed with in favor of an authoritarian system to assure survival and fair distribution (along the lines of the "life principle").

3.

PRACTICAL REASON AS A UNIVERSALISTIC ETHIC OF DISCOURSE AND COMMUNICATION

3.1.

The reflective foundation and the application of an indirectly oriented ethic of communication which reconstructs the constitutive rules of the language game of arguing is practically speaking necessary, logically speaking possible and undogmatic in its consequences.

3.2.

To this end this ethic reconstructs the normative foundation of the sciences as disciplines of theoretical argumentation but also of modern constitutions or charters as the embodiments of practical argumentation.

3.3.

This cannot be achieved from a theoretical perspective. Theoretical statements are principally fallible. This ethic inquires about the conditions for the possibility and validity of argumentation as communication from a philosophical, reflective perspective.

3.4.

As form of argumentation science and reasoning are altogether internalized modes of communication. Thus they are not only based on the rules of logic and linguistic or syntactical structures, but also on rules of the variety of *social norms*, which assert rights and duties in the form of reciprocity.

3.5.

When such constitutive, normative conditions for argumentation are not observed, then the *reciprocal relationship of recognition and obligation* which structures the common basis for argumentation is destroyed. This happens for example when in stating the proposition which denies the possibility of intersubjective validity — as is done for instance by historicists, relativists or decisionists and existentialists — the individual arguing retracts the claim made in the assertive act. For he thus nullifies the recognition of the others involved in the argumentation as having equal rights, as well as his own obligation to offer good reasons for this assertion and to accept the others' possibly better counterarguments. (cf. 1.3.4.).

“I” can recognize such a destruction only if “I” transform my

“knowing how to argue” into a “knowing that” the necessary social conditions of argumentation are directed at this. Such a transformation of argumentation is only possible by becoming aware of *what the reciprocal relationship of argumentation demands of me* through reflection, i.e. by “taking the role of the other”. That means: “I have to achieve reflectively a position of “knowing” what “I” owe the others in my communicative role as one member of the community in which arguments are being brought forth. (Cf. the distinction made by Gilbert Ryle: *The Concept of Mind*, London 1949).

3.6.

The autonomy and cooperation rule.

Whoever argues that by doing so he has implicitly recognized the rules of this game, above all the first rule of all games which requires: “When playing you are to adhere only to the rules of the game being played and not say other rules, extraneous to that game, and accordingly play fair”. When carried over into the language game of argumentation this means: “When arguing you are only to offer pertinent arguments, not points extraneous to the argument, and you are to cooperate accordingly with the others arguing as with those having equal rights”.

3.7.

The duty to approximate the best argument and the best possible body for argumentation (in accordance with the regulative principle of consensus in an unlimited body for communication and argumentation):

The claim contained in the assertive act for validity of an argument involves the willingness to strive in each case for the argument and consensus that would stand up under ideal conditions. This effort is at the same time a self-critical effort on the behalf of one’s own argument and a socio-critical effort to obtain the best possible public for discussion.

This community does not only have to include scientists or rather experts, but basically all those who would possibly wish to participate in the discourse on the meaning of needs (who can voice them as existential rights). For the meaning of needs can only be ascertained in a communicative manner. And needs are elements of situations in the world which are presently being scientifically investigated.

3.7.1.

The duty mentioned above thus includes the duty to strive for the conditions for discourse which increasingly approximate the best possible world public for discussion. This duty is valid as a moral principle as it is not obligated to take, say, only the demands made in each case by those participating in the discourse seriously, but also *to ascertain and to voice the*

possible demands of those who are affected by the results of scientific discourses and by the impact of plans initiated by them. All future generations, however, belong today to those possibly affected.

3.7.2.

In this respect the afore-mentioned obligation contains the following *moral criteria*: “If those living now or to come who are affected learned about a planned measure M and its consequences, would they be able to present good arguments against it?”

3.7.3.

What can be reasoned (not deduced) by transcendently pragmatic reflection on argumentation proposed here are only *metanorms for discourse*. They have the status of criteria for intersubjective validity.

4.

ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST AND COMMUNICATIVE DISCOURSE ETHICS

4.1.

The moral criterion mentioned in 3.7.2. is of the nature of a regulative criterion for validity. But whoever insists with regard to practical politics that it is “purely a regulative” principle has not grasped the qualitatively new situation of mankind: in the face of a planetary destructive potential of our civil and military technologies the existence of all mankind is threatened — so that survival interests are becoming or have become *universal* for the first time;

— so that for the first time the interests of self-preservation can no longer be realized exclusively particularistically or *strategically* speaking, i.e. as self-assertion at the expense of others, but must be realized at the same time *morally* speaking, thus in regard to communicative reciprocity and in accordance with the criterion of interests capable of being universalized.

To the extent that enlightened self-interest recognizes that securing peace and human needs as well as preserving the ecosphere is possible by means of world-wide cooperation in the domains of security, distribution of resources and the environment, it *converges with morality*. And this enlightened self-interest is beginning to understand that in the new situation of mankind regulative moral criteria like the criterion formulated above are also important for the — nevertheless still possible — survival of the human race beyond the year 2000.

4.3.

The ecological crisis and the potential threat of an atomic self-annihilation of all mankind show that conditions for the survival of mankind themselves are now such that the following *alternative* presents itself; either an increasing approximation of practical politics and economic programs with a social orientation to the moral postulate of a responsibility for mankind *or* destruction of civilized man as the result of struggles to assert particularist self-interests at the expense of others.

4.4.

The moral task of the future of higher education on the threshold of the year 2000 is at the same time a dual task, a politically and scientifically ethical task, to show through reflection and argumentation and to convey in an educational manner

— that this alternative is the choice of all mankind; and

— that resolving this alternative morally along the lines of a universal ethic of communication is not an irrational act of faith, but moreover a rational act of arguing in a meaningful (logical and pragmatically consistent) manner and thus an act of reason.

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