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Ethics And Morality: The Philosophical Dilemma of Human Actions

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ABSTRACT

Since the origins of civilization, human behavior has been a matter of concern; behavior has deserved the most profound and rigorous studies, to such an extent that sciences have been created to study this anthropological phenomenon; in fact, psychology is the science that studies behavior. But this human phenomenon has not only given rise to sciences but has also led to the emergence of a philosophical discipline: Ethics. In the present research we have taken the academic parameters of philosophy to explain the difference between ethics and morality. At the end of our research, we have concluded that Ethics is a philosophical discipline, and, like all such disciplines, it has an object of reflection: human acts: positive and negative; in other words, ethics is a philosophical discipline, while morality is the object of philosophical reflection.

KEYWORDS: ethics, morality, philosophy, human acts.

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INTRODUCTION

In different academic and social contexts, it is common to observe that people often use the terms “ethics” and “morals” incorrectly, which leads to confusion in the recipient's understanding during the communication process. In more than one written or oral discourse, we have observed that the use of these terms is incorrect. In different areas of human knowledge and social coexistence, we have observed a significant lack of understanding between what moral philosophy is and what human acts are accepted by a society as part of ancestral or everyday customs. That is why, based on our knowledge, we have set out to explain the difference between ethics and morality, in order to help people who, when making a judgment, correctly direct their statements that contain the expression of their knowledge in their mental state.

To understand precisely and completely the meaning of the human activity called ethics, as well as the also human activity called morality, it is necessary to refer to certain anthropological principles characteristic of human beings, understood as individuals who are part of a whole called society. Thus, when we reflect on the underlying structures of human behavior, we find that

Ethics and morality are found in the same field: the moral behavior of human beings. Ethics as an eminently intellectual activity (not excluding the practice of thinking) and morality as a practical activity (not excluding theory or normativity). However, morality is a unique activity, as it is characterized by being conscious, free, and deliberate: not just any activity, but one that studies ethics. (Ronquillo, 2018, p. 25)

As we can see, the two terms refer to human activities, but they are by no means similar in connotation. The cited source also shows us the relative nature of human actions, actions that make up morality.

From an anthropological analysis, we can infer that human beings as a species have not been, are not, and will not be perfect. Similarly, human beings have not been, are not, and will not be exactly the same, since one individual is not exactly the same as another or others. Similarly, one society of human beings is not exactly the same as other societies.

These existential differences lead some people to practice customs or human acts that are accepted as good or positive by a group of individuals who make up a particular society; but, at the same time, human imperfection represents a kind of “margin of error” in human acts, as they will always be present. This margin of error is what causes us to classify certain human acts as positive and others as negative; the former are classified as moral acts and the latter as immoral acts.

Moral acts are those acts accepted and permitted by the rules of coexistence derived from the good customs of a given society, while immoral acts are rejected. Seen in this light, we clearly understand that

Social morality consists of a set of rules of behavior, most of them unspoken, accepted without question. The actions of each individual in the social sphere could not be carried out without various rules that indicate how they should behave in each situation, from simple courtesy to those that indicate the obligations and prerogatives corresponding to each social position, stating what is expected of each role and prohibiting harmful behavior. (Villoro, 1997, p. 174)

Today, due to natural anthropological imperfection, every human society is naturally prone to its members performing positive acts with varying degrees of probability, but also negative acts; because, in line with this imperfection, as in the past, today, if we consider a single individual, throughout their lifetime, they will commit positive and negative acts in a decisive and inevitable manner. These two types of acts are inherent characteristics of every individual, for we cannot find an individual who, throughout their existence, has committed only positive acts (because they would be a perfect human being), nor can we find a human being who has committed only negative acts (because we would be dealing with a beast).

Of course, at different moments in history, the observation and acceptance of the alternation of these positive and negative attitudes led to human acts becoming elements of philosophical reflection. As in the past, today, as thinking beings, we ask ourselves: why are human beings like this? Why does Homo sapiens' behavior encompass these two contradictory possibilities? Why do human beings have this dual nature in their behavior, torn between good and evil?

To provide some answers to these and similar questions, it is necessary to refer to certain historical data. History as a science show that there have been a number of intellectuals who have devoted much of their lives to reflecting on, analyzing, and criticizing human behavior. Fables and myths have even been created with the aim of presenting human beings as perfect, but this has been nothing more than a fantasy.

In historical social reality, what has been done is to try to mitigate negative acts and encourage positive ones. To this end, among other measures, legal laws have been drafted and moral norms have been established, but it has never been possible to create any legal or other mechanism that would make it possible to completely eliminate negative acts by human beings. Therefore, societies, at different times and in different places, have only been able to create legal and moral frameworks to cope with or coexist with this human imperfection. However, since human beings are imperfect, all their creations will be imperfect, including legal and moral norms, which have been, are, and will always be imperfect.

Faced with this immutable reality in space and time, different social events have led human beings to question the reasons behind the occurrence of different social phenomena, including those of a negative nature. Social events have demanded answers not only because they are cause for concern, but also because they simply inspire wonder at the particularities of this or that social phenomenon.

In fact, ways of explaining what has amazed humanity have developed in various ways. However, the most appropriate and accurate reflection has been that carried out by philosophy, as a strictly rational discipline linked to the truth contained in discourse.

It should be noted that philosophy, understood as one of the types of rational knowledge created by human civilizations, is divided into different disciplines, or philosophical “branches.” This plurality of philosophies exists because the phenomena, facts, or realities that amaze human beings are also plural; that is, the realities that present themselves to each of us are very varied.

In this sense, the philosophical act, born of human rational curiosity, can direct reflective thought toward different entities, whether physical or metaphysical. Thus, for example, if a philosopher reflects on scientific knowledge, the discipline that emerges from that philosophical act will be epistemology; on the other hand, if an intellectual reflects on the human being, then we will have anthropology or the philosophy of man. Many philosophers have even reflected on nothingness, generating a rational discipline called the philosophy of nothingness.

It is precisely from anthropology that we are motivated to exercise our reflection based on the following philosophical question: why does man, in his ontological nature, have the possibility of committing positive or negative acts that are necessarily alternating? Why can't human beings, who have invented so many amazing things, invent something that allows them to eliminate the negative acts present in their very being?

For example, in this case, the question indicates that the object of our philosophical reflection is human acts, which can be positive or negative. However, what motivates our rational and, therefore, philosophical reflection are mainly negative acts, as these are the ones that astonish, concern, demand an explanation, and urge us to seek some kind of solution.

Since negative and positive acts are characteristic and inherent to human beings, they have become a source of concern, reflection, and philosophical inquiry in the present day. This rational and, at the same time, reflective context indicates that we are dealing with the philosophy of morality, understood as one more object among the many others that make up the field of philosophical reflection.

Thus, the philosophy of morality, by reflecting rationally on human actions, is also called ethics, because ethics is a philosophical discipline and, like any discipline of this type, has a specific object of reflection, in this case human actions: positive and negative. In other words, ethics is the philosophical discipline, while morality is the object of philosophical study.

However, in an academic context, expressing an idea or thought using the terms ethics and morality correctly requires a precise knowledge of the meaning of both concepts separately. Since, by rigorously understanding the connotation of each, we can establish their boundaries, that is, differentiate one word from the other in order to use them appropriately when expressing our thoughts or opinions.

In addition to the differences described above, there are other criteria for semantic demarcation: the word ethics derives from Greek, while the word moral derives from Latin. This historical fact also indicates that there is a significant difference between the two terms, a difference that many people do not take into account when expressing them or including them in speech, leading to the incorrect and erroneous use of the terms, depending on the case.

Confusing ethics with morals may seem like an insignificant detail, but in reality it can have significant consequences on how human behavior is understood and how decisions are made, both individually and collectively. One of the main disadvantages of this confusion is that judgments are made that express points of view through statements without distinguishing that one term refers to the philosophical discipline, and the other term refers to the object of reflection on which that rational discipline deals. In other words, one term refers to morality, the other term refers to the philosophy of morality (or ethics).

METHODOLOGY

The core content of our research stems from having conducted a philosophical reflection on this very topic. This is because, as researchers, we have drawn on theories and sources of interest to us in order to clearly explain the difference between ethics and morals.

In fact, in our results we present the differences in a schematic way, from which we explain that morality is the object of reflection, while ethics is the philosophical discipline that reflects on the moral act and then translates that reflection from a mental state into human expression through writing; more precisely, through philosophical writing. In much of this research, then, we present the results of our reflective attitude toward the terms that designate ethics and morality.

The philosophical act or ethical act

The ethical act can only be performed by a philosopher, who has the ability to reflect rationally on human acts and is therefore capable of philosophizing about human forms of behavior and making judgments. On the other hand, the protagonist of the moral act is any human being with normal intellectual abilities.

Moral act (*holistic act*)

In this sense, a moral act can be performed by a person who cannot even read or write. On the other hand, a person who cannot read or write cannot philosophize and, therefore, cannot be the protagonist or participant in an ethical act. To understand the nature of human behavior, it is necessary to accept that

Moral acts are means to an end. And what counts is the end. Morality is the assistant of existence, guided by the reason that governs it. Morality is what a reasonable being would choose, as a being and as a reasonable being. A moral attitude is what a calculating person prefers when doing the math. Calculation precedes morality. Or must morality be justified in terms of something other than itself? Does it cease to be morality once it feels the need, or is forced to apologize for what it has suggested? (Bauman. 2009, p. 77)

It is in this context of the thematic content of our research that morality can be understood as the set of human acts that are accepted and permitted by a given society because of their positive and, therefore, utilitarian value, according to established customs. In other words, they are practical norms that regulate individual or collective behavior based on what is considered “good” or “right” within a specific culture or social group. In contrast to what has just been stated, we agree that

A moral fact, like a physical fact, is a “truth maker,” that is, a state of reality that allows us to assign truth or falsehood to the propositions expressed by our moral statements. Since a moral fact supervenes on a physical fact, we must delimit the nature of the moral fact based on the difference between what is and what ought to be, related to the moral motivation of the agents, because the resolution of this problem establishes the delimitation of a moral fact from moral naturalistic realism (...) through the distinction between normativity and prescriptivity. (León, 2022, p. 14)

We can therefore infer that it is the set of social facts that constitutes morality in a broad sense, since the set of accepted social norms refers to the set of norms, values, and beliefs that a society transmits to its members in order to guide their behavior. These norms are learned from childhood through family, culture, religion, or education, and are therefore social, dynamic, and often relative in nature, given that moral norms are not universal, as they vary from one society to another and can also evolve over time. Moral acts, then, are those that society values positively, being relative in space and time.

It should be noted that customs considered morally acceptable by one community may not be so in another, and what was once approved may be questioned over time. Therefore, morality is neither static nor universal, but rather responds to the context in which it is formed as a set of norms that govern the behavior of a given society.

In contrast to moral action, ethics consists of rational reflection on these moral norms. Unlike morality, which is inherited or learned through tradition, ethics involves a critical attitude that seeks to understand the basis of our actions, evaluate their consequences, and determine whether they truly respond to fair and consistent values. While morality dictates what should be done

according to customs, ethics raises questions about why one should act in a certain way, whether that action is right from a deeper perspective, and whether it reflects respect for others and for oneself.

Immorality (*negative human act*)

Immorality is, to a large extent, a consequence of the imperfection inherent in human beings. As such, each individual commits both positive and negative acts throughout their life. In this context, we illustrate our reflection based on the following question: what is the teleology or role of ethics? To attempt to answer this question, let us consider the following analysis:

A positive act is a moral act.

A negative act is an immoral act.

From a moral philosophy perspective, a positive act is a human action accepted by the society in which an individual lives, while a negative act is an act rejected by the members of a given society. Between this dual dynamism of human acts, it is the negative act that generates unease, concern, and astonishment, as it is the one that demands an explanation, a response, a solution that comes from the realm of reason, from the realm of philosophy.

In order to present a clearer and more rigorous understanding of what we have been philosophizing about, we rely on the formal language of logic. Let's see:

First atomic proposition:

A positive act is a moral act: p

Second atomic proposition:

A negative act is an immoral act: ~p

Without a doubt, we are now in a position to express our rational reflection through the following question: which of the two propositions is, in practical reality, the object of philosophical reflection?

It is the second proposition, because if we take human acts as the object of reflection, which are truly of concern, it is the negative ones that invite analysis, which are astonishing, that demand answers, that demand solutions, and it is around these acts that many forms of philosophy have been written in different spaces and times, as in the following reflection:

The specific or particular characteristic of an action or a thing will be that quality which serves as a reference to distinguish or differentiate that action or thing from others. We say that we fulfill our duty when we obey the mandate of a moral norm. And we call the actions we perform in fulfilling our duties moral actions. Actions produced by the violation of the aforementioned moral norms, by the failure to fulfill one's duty, will be recognized as immoral actions. (Piscoya, 1999, p. 147)

In fact, philosophizing about negative human acts has led many intellectuals to write hundreds of books in an effort to explain, to some extent, the reasons behind negative human acts and their adverse consequences for society.

Seen in this light, then, why do philosophers not talk about the philosophy of immorality, knowing that, in reality, they philosophize about negative acts? Rather, philosophers theorize or talk about the philosophy of morality, taking it for granted that morality is understood as an object of ethical reflection, understanding that positive acts are reflected upon. A priori, we also understand it this way.

A posteriori, the explanation we can provide is that morality is understood as an object of reflection, by a meaning obtained by dialectical contrast, in the sense that the object of theoretical reflection is p, but that, in practical action, the object of real reflection is ~p; since ~p is what concerns us, what amazes us, what has motivated the writing of hundreds of books throughout history.

This meaning of terms by dialectical contrast is not only observed in philosophical activity, but also in the work of some sciences, such as the health sciences, which are guided, among other things, by the following grammatical constructs that can be formalized:

First proposition:

The patient is healthy: p

Second proposition:

The patient is not healthy: ~p

What concerns scientists is not p, but ~p; although those trained in health sciences actually combat disease, this is the object of study. This same logic of semantic meaning through dialectical contrast can also be observed in the legal sciences, in which social scientists are trained in law, but what concerns them is crime, which will always be the object of study.

Now, we believe that it is clear why we do not speak of the philosophy of immorality, but rather the philosophy of morality; it is also clear why we speak of health sciences and not disease sciences; why we speak of legal sciences and not crime sciences.

Having aligned ourselves with the semantic conception of morality through dialectical contrast, we can now affirm that the philosophy of morality, in simple terms, qualifies what is good and what is bad. For its part, ethics makes profound and rigorous reflections to classify a human act as positive or negative; moreover, ethics also allows us to understand that human beings, by nature, consciously or unconsciously commit negative acts alongside positive ones; that is human nature, impossible to change. Therefore, attempting to eliminate negative human acts, apart from being useless, would be like attempting to denature Homo sapiens, which is also impossible, because eliminating an individual's negative acts would allow human beings to cease to be human

and become a superior entity. A God, being eternal, has no origin or end, while human beings show their imperfection in their origin and finitude. So, what can be done?

We can create different means to mitigate negative acts and conserve and preserve positive acts. We can punish negative human acts committed with intent and premeditation, whose consequence is harm to another person or group of people. This is where legal punishment, present in most societies, comes into play.

In short, morality is the organized set of values and norms that govern coexistence in each social group, that is, they determine the way in which its members relate to each other, depending on the historical moment in which a society exists.

We also believe that it is extremely important to explain that morality is not invariable; on the contrary, it evolves over time and is influenced by factors such as culture, religion, and education. Each community develops its own moral system, which reflects its beliefs and priorities, which can lead to significant differences between societies.

This social construction of morality not only guides individual behavior, but also establishes a framework for justice and collective responsibility. Thus, moral norms arise from community practice, so it is society that determines which ones are accepted and which ones are rejected; customs that arise from positive acts are accepted, and those that are the product of negative acts are rejected. The subject matter just discussed allows us to reiterate that morality is relative in space and time.

Philosophy of morality

Given the need to understand the fundamentals of human behavior, ethics becomes necessary. As a philosophical discipline, ethics focuses on human actions as the object of rational reflection. Unlike morality, which refers to socially accepted norms and customs, ethics involves critical and rational reflection on these actions, which are neither all positive nor all negative, but rather alternate between the two. Thus, from the perspective of moral philosophy, the aim is to analyze why human beings act in certain ways, to question the dual nature of their behavior—between good and evil—and to seek and identify universal principles that guide behavior. Ethics, then, does not dictate immediate practical rules, but rather problematizes and substantiates, from a philosophical perspective, the reasons behind human actions. Therefore, it is essentially a reflection on morality.

Furthermore, ethics is concerned with reflecting on the foundation and nature of morality. It is a philosophical discipline that seeks to understand and analyze the principles that guide our decisions about what we consider right or wrong. Unlike morality, which can vary between different cultures and societies, ethics seeks to establish universal criteria that allow us to analyze our actions and their consequences. This reflection allows us to question not only our own beliefs, but also the norms that govern our environment. Ethics invites a deep examination of the values that underpin our choices and the search for a more just and coherent life. Through this process, it encourages the development of critical thinking that helps us navigate complex dilemmas and make more informed and ethically responsible decisions.

RESULTS

After presenting our reflections, which are consistent with the data provided by our selected sources of information and following methodological parameters, we present the most essential data that we have been able to find and distinguish during the process of preparing this academic paper. We present the main results in a schematic summary, as follows:

Table 1. Indicators that allow us to establish the differences between ethics and morals

Human act	Protagonists	Role in philosophical writing
Ethical	Human philosophers	Expressing wonder in writing
Moral	All humans	Object of reflection

Source: Own elaboration

As can be seen from the data contained in our results, not everyone can be a protagonist in ethical acts. This is because, in order to perform an ethical act, it is necessary for the person to be able to fulfill certain philosophical tasks, such as reflection and problematization around an object about which they decide to philosophize. Therefore, a person who meets the basic requirements to be qualified as a philosopher will be the person who performs the ethical act, first at the level of their mental state and then in the realm of writing, at which point the philosopher externalizes their amazement to leave it written on a physical or digital medium.

For its part, the moral act can be practiced by all people who fully enjoy their physical and mental capacities. There is no doubt that every day people are protagonists of human acts, some of which, especially the negative ones, come to be considered objects of reflection by moral philosophy.

DISCUSSION

In the introduction to our research, we mentioned that in different academic and social contexts, many people use the terms “ethics” and “morals” incorrectly. In most cases, they are given an arbitrary meaning so that the two terms are considered synonymous. This

leads to confusion in the recipient's understanding during the communication process. Furthermore, in different areas of human knowledge and social coexistence, we have observed a significant lack of knowledge between the philosophy of morality and what are considered acceptable human acts by a society, as part of ancestral or everyday customs.

What is more, confusion in the use of the two terms in question is not only committed by natural persons, but also extends to legal persons, such as institutions. We can corroborate our statements with an illustrative example.

Among the various legal bodies of the current Congress of the Republic of Peru, there are various types of committees, one of which is the Parliamentary Ethics Committee, which is governed by a legal instrument called the Parliamentary Code of Ethics. Title I, Article 1 of this legal instrument details the purposes of the Parliamentary Ethics Committee. Let us look at paragraphs 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 of the aforementioned articles, which read as follows:

1.1. These Regulations develop the ethical standards and principles that guide the conduct and work of the Congressmen of the Republic, hereinafter referred to as "Congressmen," in the exercise of their functions, contained in the Parliamentary Code of Ethics, hereinafter referred to as "the Code."

1.2. It establishes the procedure for processing and investigating complaints filed.

1.3. It regulates the functions and powers of the Parliamentary Ethics Committee, in its capacity as the body responsible for ensuring compliance with the Code.

In fact, the literal wording of the legal norm refers primarily to legal duties and sanctions. Therefore, this congressional body conducts its actions within the realm of science, more precisely within the realm of legal science, and not within the realm of philosophy. We know that law is a social science that studies laws and enforces them according to its powers and the needs of society.

None of the three sections of the congressional rule refers to ethical acts, therefore, it does not refer to philosophy and its respective discipline responsible for reflecting on morality: Ethics. Moreover, the members of said Commission do not meet to philosophize, much less to reflect on moral acts, as they have not been elected to philosophize, but rather to legislate, that is, to manage laws and enforce them, among other powers inherent to their political office.

It should also be clarified that the members of the Parliamentary Ethics Committee are politicians, not philosophers; for a professional in philosophy does not become a philosopher through popular vote, but rather by having undergone rigorous training in reflective, critical, and analytical thinking, etc.

Our criticisms and arguments are not unrelated to philosophical rationality; on the contrary, they are supported by the words of Peruvian philosopher Luis Piscoya Hermoza (1999), who presents us with a lucid conception of the Philosophy of Morality: "Ethics is the philosophical discipline responsible for studying [philosophically] the foundation of moral norms or duties. These form moral systems; consequently, ethics studies the foundation of moral norms" (p. 146).

The tenor of the aforementioned Code of Parliamentary Ethics is not philosophical; rather, it is a code of a legal nature. Therefore, its drafting and implementation is a legal act, that is, a scientific act, but not a philosophical one. Unlike science, the philosophy of morality or ethics does not manage or enforce rules, neither moral nor legal, as philosophy merely reflects on rules and makes rational judgments.

It is clear that the use of ethics in the aforementioned congressional body is an act of governmental ignorance, even more so if we read the entire content of the Political Constitution of Peru. nowhere do we find the word philosophy written, and the fact that they have mistakenly taken the name of one of the philosophical disciplines is, in our opinion, an act of complete ignorance, which is an insult to the discipline practiced for thousands of years by thousands of lovers of wisdom. It is not for nothing that many notable intellectuals have described it as the ***mother of all sciences.***

CONCLUSION

There are significant differences between human acts that result in moral acts and other actions that promote moral acts, since a moral act can be performed by a person who cannot even read or write. On the other hand, a person who cannot read or write cannot engage in philosophy and, therefore, cannot be the protagonist or participant in an ethical act.

Not all human beings can be actors of ethics, but all human beings can be actors of moral action, given that the actions we perform in fulfilling our duties are called moral actions, while actions produced by the violation of the aforementioned moral norms, by the failure to fulfill one's duty, will be recognized as immoral actions.

Imperfection (and not perfection) is what makes a human being human. Therefore, attempting to eliminate negative human acts, apart from being useless, would be like attempting to denature Homo sapiens, which is also impossible, because eliminating an individual's negative acts would allow human beings to cease to be human and become a superior entity. A God, being eternal, has no origin or end, while human beings show their imperfection in their origin and finitude.

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