Is it necessary to speak of virtue again?

Será preciso de novo falar de virtude?

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Abstract: In the current debate in political philosophy, the so-called communitarian thinkers intend to offer an alternative to the dominant liberal thought. The ideal of ethical community as way of life in society in which intersubjective relationships are ruled by laws conceived as public laws, reintroduces the question of virtue in the scope of social and political life, with the requirement of an ethical style of doing politics.

Keywords: Ethical community. Moral philosophy. Political philosophy. Virtue.

Resumo: *No debate atual em filosofia política, os pensadores chamados comunitaristas pretendem oferecer uma alternativa ao pensamento liberal dominante. O ideal de comunidade ética como um modo de vida em sociedade no qual as relações subjetivas são regradas por leis concebidas como públicas, reintroduz a questão da virtude no âmbito da vida social e política, com a exigência de um estilo ético de fazer política.*

Palavras-chave: *Comunidade ética. Filosofia política. Filosofia moral. Virtude.*

1 A current debate in the field of political philosophy

The ideals of the French Revolution – liberty, equality, fraternity –, which definitively established political modernity in the West, were valued differently in the last two centuries by the dominant ideologies. However, the ideal of "fraternity" or that of "community" seems to have been the least valued of the three. After the Second World War the ideal of the community seems to have been relegated to oblivion. Within current political thought, most contemporary liberal philosophers only evoke community as derived from freedom and equality. Liberal conceptions of politics do not include any autonomous principle of community, such as the national community, language, culture, religion, history, or way of life (KYMLICKA, 2003).

However, in the last two decades of the 20th century, the notion of community seems to have been reborn in the current of political philosophy – communitarianism – which affirms the need to value community as much as freedom and equality were valued. Unlike the Marxist concern with the community, contemporary communitarianism that emerged from the writings of Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor, among others, does not talk about revolution and the

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construction of a socialist society, but considers that "the community already exists in the form of common social practices and cultural traditions and a common understanding of reality" (KYMLICKA, 2003, p. 292, my translation). It is not so much about building the community *ab ovo* as about respecting and protecting it. More than Marx, these thinkers, in their criticism of modern liberalism, approach the Hegelian critique of classical liberal theory, whose axis was in the denunciation of the formal and individualistic character of that conception, forgetting that human actions are inscribed in historical concrete practices and in particular relationships closely linked to the communities to which human beings belong, as well as to the particular social and political roles they occupy in them. For the new communitarians, political philosophy must pay greater attention to the practices and understandings shared within each society and, in view of this, it is necessary to modify the traditional liberal principles of justice and rights.

In this sense, Alasdair MacIntyre's analysis of Liberalism transformed into the moral tradition of our time is exemplary (MACINTYRE, 1988). Since a tradition of enquiry is not just a coherent movement of thought, but "a movement in the course of which those engaging in that movement become aware of it and of its direction and in self-aware fashion attempt to engage in its debates and to carry its enquires forward" (MACINTYRE, 1988, p. 326), modern Liberalism can be considered a tradition, despite having inscribed on its birth certificate the project of freeing men from the tyranny of tradition. For the understanding of Liberalism as a tradition, it is of the utmost importance to bear in mind two things: first, that the liberal project of founding a type of social order, in which individuals could emancipate themselves from the contingency and particularity of tradition, using norms genuinely universal and independent of tradition, was not only and not even primarily a project of philosophers, but of modern liberal and individualistic society. Secondly, it must be borne in mind that the history of Liberalism itself shows that its continuity is partially defined by the interminable character of the debate on those universal principles and norms, so that what for the nascent Liberalism was a mistake to be quickly remedied, "has become, in the eyes of some liberals at least, a kind of virtue" (MACINTYRE, 1988, p. 335).

According to MacIntyre it is undeniable that Liberalism has a conception of the good and of what was once called virtue. Its novelty lies in the fact that the good came to be conceived exclusively in terms of personal preferences expressed in the first person, as the formulation of reasons for acting and, therefore, as premises for practical reasoning. Now, this transformation took place due to a restructuring of thought and action, in harmony with the procedures in the public domains of the market and of the liberal individualist politics. MacIntyre, however, does not claim that procedures in the public domain were the cause and the psychology of the individual the effect. What he proposes is that one demanded the other and that, by intersecting, they defined a new social and cultural artefact, the 'individual', so that, contrary to previous traditions, "in the practical reasoning of liberal modernity it is the individual *qua* individual who reasons" (MACINTYRE, 1988, p. 339).

Linked to this conception of practical reasoning is the liberal conception of the just order, which can be formulated as follows: "the overriding good of Liberalism is no more and no less than the continued sustenance of the liberal social and political order" (MACINTYRE, 1988, p. 345). The cunning of Liberalism is that, having a theory of the human good, it can only offer decisive arguments supporting its conception of the good by resorting to premises that already presuppose this theory, so that the inconclusiveness of the debates in Liberalism, regarding the fundamental principles of liberal justice,

> reinforces the view that liberal theory is best understood, not at all as an attempt to find a rationality independent of tradition, but as itself the articulation of an historically developed and developing set of social institutions and forms of activity, that is, as the voice of a tradition. (MACINTYRE, 1988, p. 345).

Now, the problem that arises here is whether we are obliged to swallow Liberalism as the last, the highest and, according to its pretensions, the only way of conceiving the human good and, therefore, of conceiving justice and justice as well. practical rationality.

United in the critique of Liberalism, according to Will Kymlicka, three currents within communitarianism can be distinguished:

> Some communitarians think that community replaces the need for principles of justice. Others feel that justice and community are perfectly compatible but feel that to correctly appreciate the value of community, we need to change our conception of justice. The latter are divided into two groups. One holds that community should be envisaged as the source of principles of justice (that justice should be founded on shared understandings of society, not universal and ahistorical principles); the other asserts that the community should play an increasing role in the content of the principles of justice (justice should give more importance to the common good and less to individual rights). (KYMLICKA, 2003, p. 293, my translation).

Whatever the position taken by the new communitarians, in addition to the common criticism of Liberalism and its institutions, an understanding of human society as an ethical community is at the basis of all these philosophical projects. Although differently understood in the different currents of current political thought, the concept of ethical community has become central in contemporary discussion, especially when it comes to the relationship between ethics and politics. According to Marco Olivetti, the ethical community can be understood as a way of life in society in which intersubjective relationships are ruled by laws conceived as public laws (OLIVETTI, 1982). Even without exploring all the implications of this definition, it is important to keep in mind that one of the particularities of the moral law is that it can coexist with its non-observance without, however, losing its character and its prescriptive force. This understanding of the moral law leads us to a different relationship between law and existence, since the intelligible fact that is implied in the law, that is, the ethical community, appears as the very condition of possibility of non-observance of the law. This is because the ethical community constitutes the condition of possibility of the empirical fact of transgression. We have here a true foundational relationship, a real condition of possibility of the empirical-real fact of the transgressive behaviour, which, precisely, presupposes that condition at the very moment in which it transgresses (PERINE, 1994).

This understanding of the ethical community as a condition for the possibility of the moral law opens the way to overcome the private character of morality, typical of modern liberal culture, both in its empiricist and rationalist and critical aspects. In the empiricist perspective, given that the moral sense cannot be mediated, that is, it cannot be formulated as a law, it is condemned to confinement in the subject who experiences it privately. In the rationalist-critical perspective, which aims at the moral duty as formulable in a universal law, morality is also privatized, since this law is not a public law, but remains inscribed within the human subject. It is true that this law demands that humanity must be considered as an end, but it remains a private law, to be reiterated by the rational subject. The "kingdom of ends" that Kant speaks of is not the ethical community, as understood here, in which relationships are ruled by the moral law understood as public law. The kingdom of ends is the result of the observance, by each moral subject, of the moral law that constitutes him in his intimacy.

When we ask ourselves if it is possible and if we should seek a mediation between the abstract universality that postulates the principle of recognition of the other subject, even if it remains enclosed in the private, and the real intersubjective recognition, which sacrifices the person to collective subjectivity, we are not formulating a moralizing or simply rhetorical question: this question, which is a true moral question, is involved in the historical development of modern culture, since the process of differentiation that characterizes it was set in motion by the demand to arrive at that constitutive intersubjectivity of the moral sphere, and which, however, has not yet been adequately conceived (LIMA VAZ, 2000).

2   Concluding

The debate on the ethical community in the scope of political philosophy opens space for the intersection with the debate on the virtues in the scope of moral philosophy. The con concept of practice allows us to see that the task of the moral human being, that is, the task of being virtuous, is an eminently political task. A practice is, according to MacIntyre,

> any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and of human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MACINTYRE, 1985, p. 187).

Indeed, if virtue is understood as "an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods" (MACINTYRE, 1985, p. 191), then it is clear that the moral life with its ideal of virtue can only be conceived and realized in the human community understood as the ethical community, as we defined it above. Eric Weil maintains that it is not a hyperbole to say that politics, if it intends to understand itself and realize its concept, is morality in progress, and that morality is essentially political, since in this understanding of virtue and human community the bond between morality and politics is not in question. What is at issue is, as Weil says, "the question of meaning or, transposing the problem in the language of politics, the end of action, of all action, an end for politics, an end also for morality" (WEIL, 2011, p. 281, my translation). But this does not mean that the moral human being must make politics as a profession. It entails, however, as an inescapable requirement, the creation of an ethical style of doing politics, according to a happy expression by Henrique de Lima Vaz (1985).

The serious political crisis to which Brazil has been dragged in recent years would require here a vigorous resumption of the extremely urgent problem of the relationship between morality and politics. Politics and morals, if they do not refuse to meet, if they do not reduce one to individualist hedonism, the other to unscrupulous Machiavellianism, as Eric Weil says,

> they are the free search for man's freedom in view of sense, the search for a clearer conscience and a more conscious action, a more coherent conscience, and a clearer action, since coherence and conscience can never become total, since men never cease to be, at the same time and indissolubly, desire and freedom, arbitrary and in search of justice, violence, and reason. (WEIL, 1982, p. 253, my translation).

In this time of crisis, we are witnessing a dangerous imbalance between these two aspects of the ethical dimension of the human being, either with the predominance of the political over the ethical, of politics over morals, or with the attempt to moralize politics driven by the senseless desire to do justice, even if the world perishes. The awareness of the urgency of certain political tasks explains only in part the fascination that the discreet charm of politics exerts on the contemporary scene. The media exhibitionism, hypocritical opportunism, and spiteful revenge, by resisting reason, tend to forget that the most modern and most hateful forms of totalitarianism have always justified in the name of political urgency the most horrendous forms of violence that history has known. When the mismatch between moral conscience and the course of the world is very accentuated, one must fear that barbarism has already established itself within the walls of the city!

The ethical-political challenge of ensuring that justice is compatible with the ability to act clairvoyantly in politics implies the suppression of the alienations to which we are subjected, since they are what prevent the effective exercise of ethical will in the political domain. But the suppression

of alienations cannot be entrusted exclusively to politics. Politics can prepare, dispose, facilitate the transformation of the world in view of justice. It cannot make human beings righteous. In a lecture by Jacques D'Hondt entitled "Ethics in the world as it goes," we read the following:

> In a world in which intelligently premeditated intentions managed to reach their goal through action, without too serious deviations, that is, objectifying themselves without significant residues and without inopportune additions, politics as such would no longer have a place. Then the hour of the moralists would strike! May those who condemn ethics to death, at least allow it to be buried upright, to respond more quickly to the call of this resurrection. (D'HONDT, 1984, p. 34, my translation).

Personally, I have reason to believe and hope that the fruitful intersection of a renewed conception of virtue ethics with an audacious understanding of the ethical community will create the conditions for a resurrection of ethics and politics in our time and in our country. So that this faith and this hope do not fall into the void, what remains for us, as philosophers, is the exercise of understanding, and as citizens, the virtue of honesty. Indeed, as Eric Weil suggests, the possibility of non-violence within human communities depends on honesty, and the option for non-violence is what allows the philosopher to live according to the conviction that the understood reality is no longer the same as before the understanding.

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