

Can a "Generic" Subject Produce an Ethical Stance through Its Own Cognitive Operations?

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> Upshot • I agree with some of Quale's general conclusions, in particular that each individual knower is responsible for choosing among alternatives and the pragmatic consequences that are related to this choice. However, in adopting implicitly the premise according which individual human existence precedes coexistence or social existence, and in focusing on the cognitive operations of a "generic subject" (that is, a disembodied subject coming from nowhere and deprived of any historicity and sociality), Quale's argumentation becomes questionable. I illustrate this point of view by analysing his discourse concerning the role of language in the conceptualization of cognition and his attempt to ground the source of ethics in the individual construction of the world.

Language and cognition

« 1 » In reading Andreas Quale's text, one notices that the role of language, *the social tool par excellence*, in cognition and communication is not mentioned. Therefore, one wonders how and with whom an agreement can be reached about the proper rules and procedures used in reasoning (§7), and how an individual knower will cognitively operate without having developed a linguistic capacity. For instance, how can one argue from a RC perspective (§7) that it is possible to "demonstrate and communicate to you how Newton's law of gravitation operates" without mentioning that any utterance will be interpreted by potential hearers, as has been shown over and over again in the context of the research program conducted in science education on students' alternative or spontaneous conceptions. For example, the words "heat" and "cold" have a specific meaning for youngsters and they use them in a viable way to make sense of

a variety of phenomena they encounter in their everyday life. It is not until they learn to participate in the language game of school physics that they will eventually enlarge their semantic repertoire to include meanings for those same words that seem compatible with the meanings they attribute to these others called "scientists." This compatibility of meanings resulting from a succession of interactions between knowers is possible, according to Ernst von Glasersfeld, within what he calls, after Humberto Maturana, a "consensual domain":

“Once we realize that words cannot refer to things that exist independently of an experiencer but only to speakers' and hearers' representations of experiences, it becomes clear that communication is possible only within the bounds of what Maturana (1980) has called a 'consensual domain,' that is, a domain in which the communicators have adapted their conceptualization to the conceptualizations of others in interactive experiences.” (Glaserfeld 2007: 67)

« 2 » It is quite clear then that, in this excerpt, communication is conceived of as social phenomena. Certainly, every knower will construct a semantic universe of its own, but every knower will speak with the words incorporated in a specific language, which is constitutive of a culture within a society. More so, in learning a language, one also develops ways of thinking and categorizing that are characteristic of a specific worldview as a source of ethics.

The social origin of ethics

« 3 » In this commentary, I will not enter into the theoretical debates concerning the relations between language, thought and culture, in particular the discussion around the Sapir-Whorf hypotheses. I will take a shorter path to illustrate how a particular worldview embedded in a language will constrain the conceptualization of the "other" by an individual knower and, accordingly, give way to a difference in the construction of an ethical stance. As Thomas Slunecko and Sophie Hengl remind us, children are more or less constrained by adults to language in a certain matter and progressively drop animistic talk of the type "the moon follows me because it wants to illuminate my path."

“It is stunning to observe, for example, how children who just start speaking universally project souls onto everything; how they therefore employ all things, even lifeless things, as subjects of their sentences and how they only gradually can be convinced of narrowing the scope of possible subjects to what for adult speakers seems appropriate. As it often happens, cultural-historical development can here be modeled after ontogenic development; for the history of 'high culture' has to some extent witnessed the eradication of an animistic world, where a plethora of agents with souls and intentions used to flourish.” (Slunecko & Hengl 2007: 44)

« 4 » In other words, there are just a certain number of beings that can figure as others in the Western cultures or worldviews. However, such is not the case in, for instance, animistic cultures, as Philippe Descola (2005) has shown. In such cultures persons share intentionality with animals and plants while being physically different. Therefore, if the construction of the other is one of the sources of the elaboration of an ethical stance, then this construction is culturally and socially constrained through languaging.

« 5 » But as Paul Ricoeur (2000) argues, the construction of the others with whom we have interpersonal interactions is just one facet of the elaboration of an ethical stance. Indeed, in a modern society the individual knower will be confronted with another constraint related to the construction of these distant others participating in all kinds of institutions and defined by their social role (professors, lawyers, politicians, business people, etc.) that are constitutive of the political life in society. More so, since more or less violent conflicts are part and parcel of everyday life, then another level of ethics has to be taken into account. Therefore, the regulation of social life justifies the presence of a third party, a being without a body, represented by the existence of a corpus of laws and the institution of justice. This type of being, for example the supreme court in a country, has the last word in a discussion. As Luc Boltanski (2009) pointed out this is because any embodied individual can only have a viewpoint and therefore can hardly convince the others that he knows what is real or good. In this light, the construction by an individual knower

of an ethical stance is socially constrained. But this is nothing new for constructivists if we follow Jean Piaget's viewpoint about the role of worldviews in the individual cognition:

“An adult subject has already elaborated an arsenal of cognitive instruments that allows him to assimilate, and as a consequence to interpret, the data received from the objects in his environment, but also to assimilate the information transmitted by the society he belongs to. This information refers to objects and to situations already socially interpreted. After adolescence, when the fundamental logical structures that will constitute the basic instruments of his future cognitive development are developed, the subject has at his disposal, other than these instruments, a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) that conditions his ulterior assimilation of any of his future experience.” (Piaget & Garcia 1983: 280, my translation)

Ethics and politics

« 6 » One might think that such discussions are more or less some kind of academic babbling. However, epistemological and ethical questions are sometimes at the center of controversies, and the case of the exploitation of a forest in British Columbia (Canada) shows that these questions cannot be dissociated from the social and political stakes. Geographer Bruce Willems-Braun has analysed in this case the conflict between ecologists and people from the forestry industry. From his viewpoint, the mediators in the conflict focused primarily on the claims of these two groups, thus ignoring the claims of the indigenous people of the region, who were for all purposes excluded from the debate, even though that this forest legitimately belongs to their ancestral territory.

“The Nuu-chah-nulth – a confederation of First Nations that live on the West coast of Vancouver Island – were not adequately consulted, even though the land at issue lay entirely within their traditional territories and had never been ceded to colonial authorities or to the federal state.” (Willems-Braun 1997: 7)

« 7 » This marginalization of the indigenous populations can be interpreted as the consequence of the epistemological domi-

nation of Western origin (Semali & Kincheloe 1999). Indeed, even though the ecologist and the scientists working for the forestry industry disagreed about the exploitation of the forest, they shared a common and dominant way in our societies of representing the forest. It is essentially conceived of as a culturally empty space, which view justifies people from the forestry industry considering it as a source of renewable ligneous matter and ecologists seeing this exploitation as a threat to the ecological equilibrium of a pristine nature.

“Land, forests, animals, and sea are brought together into a symphony of natural harmony. This is a land that is resolutely ‘wild’ and ‘nonhumanized,’ the last stand of a pristine nature external to and threatened by the juggernaut of industrial society.” (Semali & Kincheloe 1999: 19)

« 8 » Thus, each and every one of them cannot imagine that the Nuu-chah-nulth, just like the Kasua from Papua New Guinea studied by Florence Brunois (2004), populate their cosmos and their forest with living and non-living existential beings whose action is coextensive. These people live in a “socio-nature” and they differently apprehend the forest. As a consequence, they elaborate different social practices that contribute to foster a relational equilibrium, that is, a form of generalized ecology integrating all the existential beings, in particular the spiritual ones. Therefore, we can understand why the voice of the Nuu-chah-nulth was never heard, at least at the beginning of the controversy: their forest was not only a cultural space but also a source of ethical conduct, in that, for example some trees are sacred. It was only when they could show that in their territory one could find very old “culturally modified trees” dating from before the Conquest that their viewpoint was finally and legally recognized. It is manifest in this case that the question about who can speak for “nature” constitutes a political stake.

« 9 » Finally, I do not think it is necessary to postulate, as Quale does, that ethics belongs to the realm of what he calls the non-cognitive dimension of knowledge (§7) nor that ethical stances that deal with issues of morality and, in general, with interpersonal relationship (§16) cannot be the

result of an argumentative process based on cognitive knowledge (§18). By drawing on the lessons that can be derived from a constructivist sociology of science, Gérard Fourez (1998) claims it is socially possible to conduct a rational moral debate within an ethical paradigm to answer questions such as what will be done or what do we want to do in certain circumstances.

“Just as it is possible to study the emergence of scientific paradigms (for example, in our time the paradigms governing molecular genetics or cybernetics), so it is possible to identify the emergence of ethical paradigms such as have occurred in connection with slavery or organ transplants. In the case of organ transplants, in particular, one need only compare the ‘freewheeling’ debates of the 1950s with the type of exchanges now occurring among hospital staffs. Forty years ago, it was primarily a doctor’s ‘best judgement’ which held sway, in the almost total absence of any organized, critical reflection.” (Fourez 1998: 142)

« 10 » In this line of thinking, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1991) have provided an empirically derived model illustrating how arguments are mobilized in the different spheres of life in society to justify decisions that are ethically controversial. In conclusion, I think that what we really wanted to know is how an infant that comes to the world in a preexisting society can become a full fledged citizen in the life of a society and therefore a person capable of, among other things, participating in the ethical discussions and debates that are part and parcel of everyday life.

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