

## “Best philosophical ideas improve Humanity”

### Practicing dialogue – Elizabeth Goldwyn (Phd)

This article is built on a paradox as its main and central claim is that good articles, even if they offer the best ideas, are not really enough to improve humanity. I am concerned by the fact that good ideas often don't have much impact on actual life. And still I am writing an article to make this claim.

Let's look at a very good idea:

"You shall not take vengeance or bear grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself" (Leviticus 19, 18)

This is a very simple principle known since long by many cultures.<sup>1</sup> If we all behaved accordingly, humanity would be moral and good. And yet, we most of the time do not behave according to it, even though we understand it.

One key to improve humanity relies in the quality of inter-personal interactions, as this is also a major weakness. Human beings might not be able to prevent earth quakes or hurricanes. But they can improve the way they relate to each other and reduce the suffering they cause to one another. This claim relies on the assumptions that human beings are responsible for their behavior and can choose between different modes of action. Those are basic assumptions of any ethics.

Ethics, as Emmanuel Levinas defined it is "a relationship of infinite responsibility to the other person".<sup>2</sup> Ethics in this sense is inter-personal; it deals with the way people behave with each other. It is not only about the personal search for happiness. This paper will not try to prove this approach. It is a serious philosophical question, but I am concerned here with a different problem, the problem of improving humanity. I will assume this inter-personal approach to ethics, because, as mentioned, the problem addressed here is inter-personal.

Moreover, care ethics as defined by Carol Gilligan<sup>3</sup> might be a good theoretical background to what follows. It involves both the carer and the cared. They cooperate and interact so the carer can care for the actual needs of the cared and not what he

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<sup>1</sup> Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Chinese Confucius said that too, to name a few.

<sup>2</sup> Critchley Simon and Bernasconi Robert, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1982.

might have assumed these needs are. Care ethics implies that universal principals are not enough to address actual situations. There must be direct interaction and mutual influence between the carer and the cared.

Humanity has much knowledge, ideas and understanding. And sometimes, the truth is very simple: No one would like other people to behave to them in a way that would harm them and yet, we all do it to others. The best ideas are already in the sacred books, wisdom books and oral traditions of all the cultures. Philosophers have also contributed to our understanding of ethics, but it all has only restrained influence on our attitude towards each other. Given that it is difficult to avoid doing to others things we would want them to avoid doing to us, that knowing what is good is not enough to behave accordingly, and that we deliberately do things that we know are bad and harmful to others, is there a way to reduce harmful behaviors? Is there a way to act in a more caring and loving way, and cause less harm? How can we influence our actual attitude towards each other?

These are very hard questions and answering them sincerely demands much thought and courage. The answers are as different as people are. More thinking and talking of these problems is part of the process of improving one's capacity to love one's fellow, to reduce the suffering we cause to each other and increase the support we offer to each other.

What follows is my attempt to analyze harmful behaviors and then, I describe a study process that might be efficient in facing this challenge.

It is possible to harm others when we ignore their humanity, their being our fellows. If one ignores the common grounds one has with another person by holding an ideology that classifies him/her as essentially different from the self, and therefore, not quite completely human, it is easier to hurt and avoid feeling compassion to him/her: racism, chauvinism, homophobia, nationalism etc are such ideologies. Some religious ideologies based on negating whoever does not hold the "right" believes have the same effect. Sometimes dehumanization of the other is not ideological and is even unconscious; For example, when facing a physically or mentally challenged person, it might be difficult to feel their essential humanity rather than their difference.

Seeing a person as a means to some purpose one has, might allow one to ignore his/her humanity that is beyond this purpose, such as seeing a worker only as a means for profit or a person as a mere source of one's sexual pleasure. A person is never just a means for something. He/she is infinite in their humanity. Ignoring it allows to hurt him/her.

Then there are acts done out of anger, vengeance, fear, threat, jealousy, low self-confidence etc. Seeing or feeling the other as a source of suffering might motivate one to hurt him/her. Sometimes the other person is indeed a source of suffering. Does hurting him reduce one's pain? And still, there is an urge to hurt whoever seems to hurt one. Vengeance mentioned in the verse above is indeed a very strong source of violence and other harmful behaviors. And so are other negative feelings we have to others caused by conscious and unconscious reasons.

There are also unintentional offences. Lack of sensitivity and carelessness allow them. And sometimes they are caused by mere misunderstandings.

Most harmful actions are done out of various combinations of the above and there are more reasons. Other people would add to this list. And anyway, this analysis has only restrained value as it is general and theoretical. It won't avoid anyone from doing harmful things to others because it is not formative.

I want to suggest that in order to have some real impact on one's behavior, it is necessary to engage in a **formative learning process**. This process is based on two principles: self-understanding and dialogue. Let me try to explain myself.

### **1. Self-understanding, self-awareness:**

Introspection and self understanding of one's motives can allow change in behavioral patterns. For example: if I want to use a person as a source of income or am very angry with him/her and want to hurt him/her, understanding my motivation might allow me to control myself and change my behavior. A learning process that encourages every participant to better understand ethics but also to better understand oneself and one's motivation when hurting other people might reduce the need to hurt them and might increase the capacity to see and feel their humanity. Learning texts that show people in various interactions and try to see where and how do these events relate to the student's lives is very valuable to increase their capacity for compassion and respect for the other and his/her feelings.

Learning and thinking of these issues encourages also practice of self-awareness in 'real life' events. Knowing oneself better allows one to dominate negative feeling towards others, and better control hurtful behaviors.

It is not something that can be done once and for all: it is a learning process that demands involvement, motivation, perseverance, sincerity and courage; Involvement so that what is learned is relevant to the student and felt as personal and accurate to his life and personality; Motivation, because this introspection might lead one to see oneself in one's weaknesses. It is always easier to blame others for one's shortcomings or misdeeds; Perseverance, because this learning process deals with habits and behavioral patterns; Sincerity, because this is the only way to really affect one's life; Courage to overcome the fear of change. Change is always scary.

If it is so demanding, why would one make such efforts? This is of course a very good question. Remembering that what is at stake here is an attempt to self improvement, and making the world a little bit better, might help motivating one.

## **2. Dialogue:**

Dialogue is a key for reducing the gap between knowledge and behavior. The learning suggested here should be done with a group of people, all involved in the same process. Thus, the dialogue is already a practice of listening to the other person's point of view, and talking to him is always already acknowledgment of his humanity. As Levinas wrote: "The other is maintained and confirmed ... as soon as one calls upon him, be it only to say to him that one cannot speak to him... he is "respected"."<sup>4</sup> It is more difficult to hurt someone we know and talk to, someone that looks in our eyes, then to hurt someone we consider only through a category (worker, enemy, heretic, poor, student etc).

Still, we might and we do hurt people we talk to, even close people we love, and then the dialogue is the best mediating means to understand what was done, how the other was hurt and to apologize and reduce the harm done. All this must be practiced in the study group.

Moreover, inter-personal situations are, each of them, unique in the sense that they involve two unique people (and every person is unique) in a particular situation, which always has its particular complexities. Theories can help with principles but

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<sup>4</sup> Levinas Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity*, (Translation: Alphonso Lingis), Duquesne University Press, Pennsylvania, 1969, p. 69

their precise adaptation to any given situation must take those complexities in consideration. Dialogue is the only way to do this. It is the only way to hear and try to understand the points of view of the people involved.

The learning process done in a group involves much more than acquiring new knowledge and new ideas: it is an ongoing process of self improvement and support to others in the actual attempt to improve the participants' capacity to behave according to ethic knowledge and ideas. Attention is paid to the inter-human interactions in the group as a model for other relationships and interactions outside the group.

This learning process has human interactions both as its main subject-matter and as actual practice. The texts that are being studied concern this subject from various perspectives: they might be philosophical, literary, etc and written by various authors. This way of studying also allows analyzing the gaps between ideas and behaviour, between knowledge and feelings, and might allow reducing these gaps through the learning dialogue and support that is offered by the group for such processes.

Practicing dialogue will improve the participants' capacity to see every person, also in "real life" and outside of the learning group, as a human being worth to talk to.

What is important in this idea is the **practice** of listening to others, learning together and raising consciousness to the implications of our behavior on the feelings and well being of our fellows. This isn't a therapy group but a study and practice group, formative learning. The leader or facilitator does not hold the knowledge and cannot teach it, as every person is different, every situation unique. This way of learning is real group research.

Groups like that might be formed purposely, for people who want to improve humanity and understand the need to personal practice to achieve this. It might and should eventually influence teaching methods in schools, and become a main part of any learning process. This reflective and dialogical practice should be encouraged in companies, organizations and political leading systems. It would allow changes of attitude and patterns of behavior between fellows. People should be encouraged to talk to each other: bosses to their workers, people of different nationalities, races and religions. Thinking together of the reasons for our harming each other will reduce the violence (physical, economical and other).

I have been part of such groups and facilitated a few. I have seen people who considered each other as enemies learn to know each other and talk together, trying to avoid hurting each other in spite of the differences and disagreements. People, including me, have learned to argue without hurting the other's feelings. Most of us have become more self-aware and that improved us as people in the "real world", outside of the study group.

This article doesn't answer the questions it presented at its beginning but offers a way to encourage people to answer them for themselves and **behave accordingly**, as those are not only theoretical questions. It is suggested that involvement in group study that is already practice of human relations might actually improve those relations. In short, I say that "best philosophical ideas improve humanity" only if they are carefully practiced and involve dialogue.