

# COEXISTENCES: ETHICS, SOCIETY, AND FORMS OF LIFE. GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE

PIERGIORGIO DONATELLI

*Sapienza Università di Roma*

*Dipartimento di Filosofia*

*piergio.donatelli@uniroma1.it*

The approach to ethical and political reflection from the point of view of the forms of life and of the relations human beings establish with the other living beings, with the environment, and with the various biological, social and technological processes opens up a rather peculiar and fruitful philosophical dimension. The approach of forms of life, as we might call it, falls within a wider and diversified family of conceptions grounded on the appeal to practices, relations, and reflection, which can be conceived of as alternative to approaches which hinge on the moral and political subject variously understood, as for example in the case of the classical pair of conceptions of utilitarianism and Kantian-social contract theories. A similar contrast informed a recent portion of the philosophical literature of the analytic tradition, which in the 1980s saw the contraposition between theorists and anti-theorists in ethics<sup>1</sup>. The very concept of anti-theory comprised of rather diverse conceptions including: the revival of the perspective of the virtues, which rejects the possibility to have an exhaustive list of the criteria of moral excellence in advance, calling in its place for a (perceptive, rational, and other kinds of) capacity to make distinctions, which can be accounted for only by calling in cause the very circumstances in which they find application; the idea that moral reflection does not necessarily take the very shape of a theory presenting us with a hierarchy of principles from which deriving the particular prescription to be applied to the specific case at hand; the importance of concrete communities, where moral reflection takes the shape of accepted (or

<sup>1</sup> S.G. Clarke, E. Simpson (eds.), *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1989.

contested) shared practices. Authors coming from different orientations were grouped together in this light, such as John McDowell, Annette Baier, Bernard Williams, Alasdair MacIntyre e Richard Rorty, among others. Differently from this first wave of criticism of normative ethical and political theory, which mostly interested the English speaking philosophical community and what could be still called analytic philosophy, we are now in a different phase which has treasured other (more or less kindred) philosophical experiences. It should perhaps be noticed that the anti-theory critique has been subsequently developed by moral particularism<sup>2</sup>, although particularism (especially inspired by some classical articles by McDowell from the 1970s and 80s) has been presented as part of the new course of analytic meta-ethics, which does not seem to be interested in working with a critical register capable of inviting the contribution of different philosophical lines. Other philosophical experiences are indeed more significant in this respect: in particular, feminist and women's ethics, as well as the ethics of care in its various declinations; Wittgensteinian moral philosophy as it has been developed by authors such as Cora Diamond and most importantly in the work of Stanley Cavell and in what he calls moral perfectionism. To these lines we should add the recent upswing of pragmatism and critical theory.

Now, we might ask why the easy negative labels: anti-theory in ethics, or alternative ethics. A reply can be offered by taking a look at the longer tradition of ethical and political philosophy well before the events of the twentieth century, that is back to early modernity. In particular, between the seventeenth and eighteenth century it is easy to register how the dominant line is the one of modern natural law and the social contract tradition, to which Hume and the Scottish Enlightenment represent the main, yet minor, alternative. The dominant line holds that the very task of moral and political reflection is that of elaborating theoretical devices which allow to establish the political order. Such theoretical devices appear still necessary today (e.g., the notions of contract, rights and political obligation). It is precisely this conception that will be reprised in twentieth-century normative theory. Yet this conception was abandoned by a new tradition in the nineteenth century, with Hegel representing the quintessential classical thinker who re-thought ethics, politics, and the law, carving out for them a space fashioned after the understanding of the human forms of reflective habitation in the world (as we might want to put it). We could also say, however, that Hegel lies right at the origins of a way of thinking that, together with his great critics – such as

<sup>2</sup> See for example the recent volume edited by S.G. Chappell, *Intuition, Theory, and Anti-Theory in Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

Kierkegaard and hence twentieth-century existentialism – and his internal critics or heirs, in their own way – such as Marx and twentieth-century critical theory –, represents an alternative approach to ethical and political thought; such an alternative seems to be interested in addressing different questions with a different language quite unlike the questions and language of the tradition which up until Kant, despite the great many distances, tells of a common landscape in philosophy<sup>3</sup>.

We are now in the position to try to draw some conclusions about these complex events. The big division between the line stemming from Hegel to existentialism, and to Adorno and beyond, and the line which goes from the classical thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century to Rawls and Hare, among others, somewhat loses its edge. The division is in fact smoothed because there are approaches impossible to reduce to each camp – such as the ethics springing from Wittgenstein, the ethics of virtue which goes back to Aristotle and Hume, the ethics of care, pragmatism, and some recent outcomes of critical theory – that do not need to define themselves in negative terms. Furthermore, these approaches make it possible to read from their own point of view the allegedly dominant theoretical perspective, variously characterized (by privileging the social contract, the elaboration of a normative theory, or transcendental institutional theories as Amartya Sen calls them). Two telling examples of this re-interpretative operation are Martha Nussbaum's capability approach, which witnessed many formulations, critical of the tradition of social contract but working in the wake of political liberalism and thus aiming at addressing the questions of modern social contract thinkers. The other example is Cavell's moral perfectionism, which is part of his wider conception of the philosophy of the ordinary, reprising with force the picture and conception of the social contract (Rousseau's in particular). These examples show how the approaches grounded on the appeal to practices, relations, and reflection have the independence and strength to employ and rethink other traditions within their own.

It needs to be mentioned that, together with the said great division, other big, more recent divisions crumbled as well, such as that between analytic and continental philosophy. This is not the place to even scratch the surface of this complex issue. For example, it is not at all clear what this distinction means in the first place, and what it means today might not be very useful to investigate the very origins of analytic philosophy, both with reference to the contrast

<sup>3</sup> R. Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, in Id., *Outside Ethics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005, pp. 40-66. I discuss these themes in my *Etica. I classici, le teorie e le linee evolutive*, Torino, Einaudi, 2015, in particular Ch. 12.

between those who were focused on the analysis of the proposition (Moore and Russell, say) and those who instead considered practices (the later Wittgenstein), and with reference to the contrast on the very role of science (Wittgenstein vs. Quine). My point here is however quite simple: besides the various uses of the notion of analytic philosophy, there are nowadays many important and fertile philosophical approaches taking away virtually any intellectual appeal from the operations of exclusions through which the two parties distance themselves from the styles, methods, and agendas they deem inadequate. In some cases, because of their versatile and productive character, these approaches complicate our attempts to locate them in one of the two opposing camps, while in others they show the fertility of their crossbreeding (even if there are cases in which it is indeed appropriate to indicate certain styles and questions as analytic, and yet these cases greatly differ from each other so to forbid any generalization: they in fact tell nothing about how to legislate on the way to do analytic philosophy or on how to do philosophy in general).

Approaches grounded on forms of life and coexistences come to the scene in this moment in philosophical culture. They circumscribe some of the approaches referring to practices, relations, and reflection, and do it in rather peculiar ways. They are bottom-up approaches, starting from the reflection on practices and forms of life in the wake of Aristotle, Hume, Dewey and Wittgenstein<sup>4</sup>. We can indeed individuate some characteristic features of this family of approaches. The notion of form of life recurs in them with different meanings. (1) In the first place, it indicates the relationship of interdependence making possible the preservation of individual lives. The idea of interdependence can be explored in various ways. The ethics of care makes it the very centerpiece of its approach: according to it, the support needed by people is the support of those relations in which they are involved; but the maintenance and support of the (natural, ecological, social, economical) world is the maintenance and support of a net of relations as well. This activity of maintenance and support requires specific qualities such as the attention and the capacity to seize what is not visible, what we don't want to see – qualities to be understood as themselves practices or virtues. Furthermore, forms of life feature in the Wittgensteinian line as well, as bustling knots of relations which on the one hand constitute the very background of conduct and thought, and on the other represent the relations earned personally, which call for a movement, a change, a mobilization of those aspects of the self fixated in

<sup>4</sup> For this conception, see P. Donatelli (ed.), *Forme di vita e modi di vivere / Forms of Life and Ways of Being*, "Iride", 29 (2016), n. 77, and in particular the *Premessa*, pp. 79-81.

mechanisms and automatisms. Both perspectives call in question the model of the political subject addressing her needs in order to preserving and developing herself (as it is for example with social contract theories). They in fact thematize the priority of the relations which make possible the very idea of a subject with her own needs and interests, and transform the concept of scarce resources necessary to fulfill the needs of the subject, which themselves become subjects in various relations (environments, non-human animals, and those human beings themselves who we don't see but from whom we depend in various ways).

(2) Secondly, the notion of forms of life indicates the relations of coexistence between living beings and biological and social processes. Some central lines of cultural anthropology profitably thematized the very idea of coexistence: it challenged those conceptions ruled by the notions of identity and otherness. Philippe Descola has shown for example that almost all traditional societies did not possess a system of distribution and an economy of the relations between humans and the world (plants, animals, natural environments) which make justice to the separation between human beings and the outer world<sup>5</sup>. What we have instead is a regime of coexistence of various kinds of subjects. A different way of developing the idea of coexistence has been advanced in the field of the life sciences: in this case the challenge is the separation of the biological from the cultural. In this case as well, both lines of research offer interesting lessons about how to rethink the given political scheme of the human being with her needs and requirements, which prompts the constitution of the political order understood as a particular system of interdependence between humans (as in the model of social contract), however concealing in this way a rich and variegated set of different interdependences among humans themselves understood as ecosystems and between humans and other individualities living in a relation of coexistence.

The authors of the present monographic section tackle these themes from a variety of directions. Rossella Bonito Oliva deals with the question of the world-pictures working as the background of human lives, individuating the extinguishing of this very horizon in common sense. Caterina Botti reprises the ethics of care, in which morality is seen as a relational texture of attention to others in their particularity, and rethinks bioethics accordingly. Piergiorgio Donatelli explores the notion of vulnerability and relates it to the approach of forms of life, pointing to the Wittgensteinian line as a fertile perspective to develop these concepts and their connections. Elena Gagliasso problematizes

<sup>5</sup> P. Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, transl. Janet Lloyd, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2014.

the concept of an organism's environment, reinterpreting it as a bundle of relations in which various explicative dimensions (biological, historical, and cultural) are at stake. Sandra Laugier reprises the ethics of care in order to subvert the autonomy of the subject and to defend a political conception which moves from the responsibility informing the relations of care and the responsible relations of coexistence. Stefano Petrucciani investigates the concept of alienation: in the recent discussion in critical theory, alienation indicates various ways for the individual to be disconnected from reality, overlooking however the structural dimension belonging to the classical Marxist conception. Elena Pulcini develops the theme of those emotions characteristic of the relations of care, bringing into focus the emotions involved in the care for the distant ones which is distinctive of a globalized world.