

THE MORAL DECISION. FROM *PHRONESIS* TO ETHICAL COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT.

The Aristotelian idea of φρόνησις (*phronesis*) is an invaluable resource to help amending the limits of deontological and consequentialist theories. It permits to free the moral decision from rules and *standard* principles and to give contextual motivations. The ethical competence, as a process of construction of moral judgment aimed to give reason for our choices, is a contemporary development of this intuition.

KEYWORDS

Ethics monism, phronesis, heterogeneity of morality, moral judgment, ethical competence.

1. LIMITS OF ETHICS MONISM

The two most influential theories in moral philosophy from the end of the XVIII century are the Kantianism and the utilitarianism.

They have been usually considered as rival theories, but actually they converge on some aspects and they point out common limits¹. Actually, these two methods give different answers to the attempt to developing a *standard* decision procedure to resolve moral dilemmas, since what is considered as ethically decisive in a lifespan field should enjoy the same consideration in other fields.

Finally, the kantianism and the utilitarianism share the idea that there is a unique moral principle able to orient and justify our choices. According to the

¹ See F. Manti, *Bíos e pólis. Etica, politica, responsabilità per la vita*, Genova University Press, Genova 2012, pp. 15 - 18

kantianists, the moral decision is deontological, while according to the utilitarianists it is consequentialist; according to the former all moral obligations are categorical (binding *a priori*), according to the latter they are not. Both the decision models are characterized by their ethics monism.

This led to neglect the moral judgement as the ability to correlate principles or general rules to specific contexts, and has led – for example - to consider controversial ideals of the person founded on the autonomy (Kant) or the experimentalism towards different forms of life (J. S. Mill), as the basis of the liberal neutrality², and it has elided the moral conflict as the typical dimension of the morality.

Even the contemporary reports, as the reports by Rawls and Harsanyi, are not so persuasive when trying to overcome the aforementioned limits. It is not possible here to discuss analytically the question³.

Extremely and partially summarized:

1. Rawls' contractarianism and the utilitarianism follow different decision rules, but both the *maximin* rule and the principle of the medium social utility with related axioms and social welfare, reduce ethics to a branch of the Rational Choice Theory.

2. The divergence concerns the “moral algebra” that has to be used. Harsanyi does not challenge the original position as an analytical tool to be used in order to define the justice criteria and other aspects of morality, but he opposes the Bayesian calculus (with the principle of equiprobability) to the *maximin* rule.

3. In my opinion, both the aforementioned theories are subjected to at least three criticisms able to question their own structure:

- a. Any calculus procedure of the Game Theory can take into account that morality has to manage a plurality of factors coming from specific contexts and with contextual and biographical dimensions.

- b. The requirements imposed by the rationality of the calculus make marginal the psychological and the emotional dimensions which have – on the contrary – a relevant impact on orientations and conducts.

² I do not discuss here the questions related to the relationship between ethics and politics. I only want to underline how monistic moral theories have insisted on giving an ethical justification and not only a political justification of the principle of neutrality. For an in-depth analysis, see F. Manti, La neutralità politica come principio deontologico, in *Etica & Politica/Ethics & Politics*, vol. 17, n. 3, 2015, pp. 247-261

³ For an in-depth analysis see F. Manti, *Bios e polis, op. cit.* pp.18 - 41

c. The Rational Choice Theory is based on basic conditions of internal consistency (axiom of contraction and axiom of expansion) which limit the decision to this consistency. This limit is excessive and inadequate when applied to moral and social decisions⁴.

Even the revision of the theory of justice proposed by Rawls in *Political Liberalism* arrives at a theory of decision based on the overlapping consensus that does not respond convincingly to the need to relate general principles and rules to specific contexts in order to obtain indications to face and – if possible – resolve moral dilemmas. As a matter of fact, the object of this consensus is restricted to the basic structure of a well-organized society⁵.

2. AN INTUITION OF ARISTOTLE

As defined by C. Larmore, an invaluable resource to help amending the limits of deontological and consequentialist theories, is given by the Aristotelian idea of φρόνησις (*phronesis*)⁶, which is fundamental to understand what is the moral judgement, since it permits to free the moral decision from rules and *standard* principles and to give contextual motivations.

Before defining the idea of φρόνησις, Aristotle gives a methodological indication related to the arguments concerning human behaviours and, precisely, referring to their precision. Though φρόνησις is a dianoetic virtue, they are not epistemic, since they do not affirm an incontrovertible truth, but «[...] ἐπὶ τὸ πᾶν [...]»⁷, that is «mostly». Their grade of truth is approximate

⁴ See A. Sen, *Rationality and Freedom*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, London England, pp.121 -157; F. Manti, *Scelte di mercato. Una teoria della decisione ragionevole*, in AA.VV., *Etica ed economia il binomio possibile*, Sentieri Meridiani, Foggia 2010, pp. 29 - 35. In particular, the internal consistency required by these axioms is not able to take into account real context conditions characterized by their dynamism or variations (always possible) in the information we have (see A. Sen, Internal Consistency of Choice, *Econometrica*, Vol. 61, N.3, pp. 495 - 521). Outside the assumption of situations with a high level of abstraction, as the original position, the calculus that follows the internal consistency axioms of the Rational Choice Decision shows all its limits. This is true also for a probabilistic calculus as the one of the function of the average utility (or function of social utility) since it is influenced by the attribution of values of utility to the different individual utilities. Harsanyi, though, does not have difficulties to accept the original position as a sort of heuristic assumption able to clarify several aspects of morality.

⁵See J Rawls, *Political Liberalism*. Expanded Edition, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, pp. 133 – 172. For a discussion on the consent by intersection, see F. Manti, *Bios e polis*, *op. cit.*, pp. 74 - 80

⁶ See C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, Cambridge University Press, p. xii

⁷Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 1094 b 21

also because if we start from preconditions carrying these traits, the conclusions have to be of the same type. Therefore, the precision of our expressions in this field is as high as permitted by the nature of the object.

The following example is illuminating: «παραπλήσιον γάρ φαίνεται μαθηματικοῦ τε πιθανολογοῦντος ἀποδέχεσθαι καὶ ῥητορικὸν ἀποδείξεις ἀπαιτεῖν.»⁸. That is: expecting precision from “mostly” preconditions «would be, more or less, admitting that a mathematician counts on persuasion and a rhetorician on rigorous demonstrations.».

Therefore, judgement is not elaborated thanks to general rules but taking into account the context in which we act: « [...] τὰ πρὸς τὸν καιρὸν σκοπεῖν [...] »⁹.

This also means that moral judgment does not have to deal with formal rules, but with life activities where examples, experiences, education have a fundamental role. The φρόνησις allows us to choose the best behavior in every context. Aristotle specifies how it is a customary state of mind, accompanied by reason and addressed to action, which pertains to what is good or evil for man¹⁰. The good action, therefore, is, in itself, an aim (ἔστι γὰρ αὐτὴ ἡ εὐπραξία τέλος)¹¹. It follows that, according to Aristotle, there is a connection between truth and good. In summary, φρόνησις, like all the dianoetic virtues, allows us to reason correctly and approximate the truth: the logos recognizes what is true and so desire accords to it. The ὀρθὸς λόγος (orthós lógos), that is the right reason, is therefore to deliberate what we have the most reason to do as appropriate to the context in which we are and to the promotion of good life¹².

The dissertation on φρόνησις, proposed by Aristotle in the VI Book of *Nicomachean Ethics*¹³, on a hand further specifies his vision of this virtue, on the other hand it underlines some difficulties.

⁸ Ivi, I, 1094 b 25 - 27

⁹ Ivi, II, 1104 a 9

¹⁰ J. Annas proposed to translate φρόνησις with intelligence. It concerns good life in general. See J. Annas, *The Moral of Happiness*, Oxford University Press, New York - Oxford 1993, pp. 73-74

¹¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1140 b 7

¹² See ivi, VI, 1140 to 27- 28. For a closer look at the subject, see M. Mangini, *Etica democratica. Una riflessione sui valori etici nella società liberale*, Giappichelli, Torino 2013, pp. 61 - 64 e pp. 69 - 72. For a different interpretation, from the one I propose, of the ὀρθὸς λόγος understood as reasoning capable of correctly deriving from the first and universal principles of being coherent conclusions of a logical and ontological order, see L. Clavell, La presenza di Aristotele nell'enciclica Fides et ratio, in S. L. Brock (ed), *L'attualità di Aristotele*, Armando, Roma 2000, p. 162

¹³ See ivi, VI, 1140 a 24 - 1140 b 30

By the way, I consider very interesting that – in spite of what happens with σοφία (*sophia*) – Aristotle does not give a real definition of φρόνησις but – in order to understand it – he refers to people considered as wise. Aristotle textually affirms: «Πεπὶ δὲ φρονήσεως οὕτως ἂν λάβομεν τοὺς φρονίμους»¹⁴. Wise is he who has the ability to decide what is good or is appropriate¹⁵ to him, not in a specific field, but in general, for a good life. His characteristic is the ability to decide « [...] εἴη φρόνιμος ὁ βουλευτικός »¹⁶, since he does not demonstrate. The demonstration regards what cannot be different from what actually is, while the demonstration requires to evaluate and discuss the principles that can be different from what they actually are. When we refer to our behaviours, we talk about things that « [...] ἐνδεχέται καὶ ἄλλως ἔχειν »¹⁷, can be different. Therefore, wise are people who can judge (θεωρεῖν) upon what is good for themselves and for other men.

It is evident that with this statement Aristotle wants to specify that wisdom regards the decision related to other people too, underlining – with the example referred to Pericles – the political dimension in addition to the ethical dimension¹⁸.

Once defined the conditions where the moral judgment is acquired and its function, we have to answer to the question related to the modalities through which we build it or to the way we exercise this faculty. Aristotle gives us two clues: the theory of mediety and the practical syllogism.

With regard to the further, we have to underline this passage « Ἔστιν ἄρα ἡ ἀπετὴ ἕξις προαιρετική, ἐν μεσότητι οὔσα τῇ πρὸς ἡμᾶς, ὠρισμένη λόγῳ καὶ ᾧ ἂν ὁ φρόνιμος ὀρίσειεν »¹⁹.

Without considering refined philological debates, in my opinion ὠρισμένη is referred to mediety toward ourselves and is made possible by the ὀρθὸς λόγος. In other words, virtue consists in the ability to appropriately face the requirements which emerge from a determined situation, avoiding excesses of any kind.

¹⁴ See *ivi*, VI, 1140 a 24

¹⁵ Aristotle uses the words τὰ συμφέποντα which can be also translated as what is useful, convenient, beneficial

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1140 a 26 – 27. The use of the word βουλευτικός is relevant because it indicates also the use of the ability of political decision. (See Aristotle, *Politica*, 1260 a 12)

¹⁷ *Ivi*, VI, 1140 a 35

¹⁸ See *ivi*, 1140 b 7-11

¹⁹ *Ivi*, II, 1106 b 36 – 1107 a 1-2 «Virtue, so, is a disposition that orients decision following a mediety towards ourselves, defined by reason and as defined by he who is wise»

Aristotle underlines also that it is difficult to practice ethical virtues as mediety. It is difficult to look for and find the middle path as it is difficult to find the centre of the circle: it is not for all, but only for he who has a full knowledge (εἰδότης) of the subject.

He also underlines some rules of behaviour able to define what really is the mediety towards ourselves²⁰, but, as Larmore argues: «[...]only judgement can shape their vagueness and transform them in significant provisions.»²¹.

In the III Book of *Nicomachean Ethics*, when analysing the deliberation²² (βουλή and βούλευσις)²³ and giving causes for reflection on the practical reasoning, Aristotle does not give indications on its form and if and to which extent is it oriented by considerations concerning virtue. The moral decision, as said, regards cases that “mostly” happen, whose result is uncertain, and where there is indefiniteness.

In this context of ideas, Aristotle identifies the syllogistic type of the structure of the moral decision (which we do not have to forget has a contextual character and does not concern the aims but the means which conduct to the aims). This structure is as follows:

Major premise: what is considered as what has to be done

Minor premise: means through which I do what I affirmed in the major premise (given the context)

Conclusion: the accomplished aim

It is evident that the premises imply the moral judgment and that it precedes and permits to formulate the premises from which the conclusion is inferred. In the light of these considerations, we think that Larmore is right when he affirms that the practical syllogism cannot be considered as a model able to explain how the moral judgment works²⁴.

3. THE HETEROGENEITY OF MORALITY

The modern alternatives to the Aristotelian intuition regarding the moral judgement do not seem convincing. The third formulation of the Kantian categorical imperative and the idea of a moral algebra able to calculate which

²⁰ See *ivi*, II, 1109 b 2 - 26

²¹ C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, *op. cit.*, p. 18

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 1112 a 18 – 1113 a 14

²³ The two words cannot be considered as synonyms

²⁴ See C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, *op. cit.*, p. 8

is the decision that produces more social wellness, respond to the same requirement: determining the moral obligation in the light of a unique and universally valid impartial principle as rationally justifiable, the deontological principle or the consequentialist principle of utility. The critics that Rawls moves to the utilitarianism and the critics by Harsanyi to the deontological neo-contractualism of the further underline (both and mutually) the limits of the ethical monism, whichever its declination is. I think therefore as sharable what said by Larmore:

The correct point of view, in my opinion, is that there is the deontological reasoning, the consequentialist reasoning, and both are valid ways of morally reasoning. The mistake made by both the utilitarianists and Kantianians consists in claiming that only one of these principles can be licit. And I think that it can exist more than a moral reasoning and that we have to admit the multiplicity of these ways²⁵.

The existence of a multiplicity of ways of reasoning on the right action to do in order to pursue other people's good, implies the acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of the moral as a matter of fact of our experience. Depending on the contexts, we decide and choose moral actions giving deontological or consequentialist reasons.

This experience also shows that not always the moral decision requires impartiality. There are some peculiar categories of people, groups or individuals with whom we have special relationship that can be related to ways of life like interests: toward these people we can act in a preferential way in determined circumstances and conditions, justifying these preferential actions.

Therefore, we should place side by side to the deontological and consequentialist principles the principle of partiality «[...] following which we have to respect the specific and particular relationships we have towards the others and we have to act for their good in the light of these special bonds we have with them.»²⁶.

In addition, always in the light of our moral experience, it is possible to note that, in our social relationships, we are asked to justify some decisions determined not only by considerations on principles, but also by the convergence of contextual factors (included education and tradition), intersubjective and negotiation relationships, motivations generated from our moral loyalties, our "moral feelings" and emotions.

²⁵ C. Larmore, *Dare ragioni*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino 2008, p. 34 (The text has been published only in Italian since it is the report of a lesson, authorized by the Author)

²⁶ Ivi, p. 37

Our moral experience shows that we have to face daily obligations like keeping promises, be honest, return others what we owe them, whose rules do not require in many occasions a particular processing on the moral side.

Other obligations like - for example - being benevolent, generous or fair, require a reflection on “when do we have to follow them, how can we realize them, which consequences will have our actions on the others”: in other words, they require the processing of the moral judgement. There are also circumstances where the moral judgement is solicited or induced by passions, or, as we say nowadays, by emotions. The emotional impact of situations like suffering, inequality, etc. can contribute to generate a moral reflection on how should we act to avoid them or, at least, to limit their impacts. Aristotle had foreseen a relation between good and passions to the point that he thought that sometimes they could even coincide²⁷. Friendship with ourselves is considered in itself as a mutual agreement among reason and passions²⁸. The vast majority of modern ethics has elided passions from the moral dimension. Thanks to the philosophers of the *moral sense* like Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, A. Smith, the emotional dimension of the moral has been underlined, to the point that Hume could consider passions (at that time passion meant emotion) as the ground where morality grows.

Among these philosophers, he who underlined more than others the importance of the moral judgement was A. Smith. Apart from underlining that justice rules are the only rules of morality to be precise, while the rules regarding virtues are unprecise, vague and undetermined he also underlined that virtues are connected with a general rule or with a way of acting, and, at the same time, integrated with the moral feeling proper of each of them.

This feeling is exposed to several changes depending on the contexts. A. Smith has defined sympathy as the ability of putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and to care for his/her wellbeing, that is the moral sentiment *par excellence*²⁹.

Referring explicitly to Hume and A. Smith, Hoffman has proposed an interesting theory of the relationship among empathy and moral development. His thesis is that even if the empathetic moral can explain many aspects of pro-social behaviour, a moral theory needs to be referred to some moral principles.

²⁷ See Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, VII, 12, 1245 b 1-2

²⁸ See Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, II, 11, 1211 a 33 - 37

²⁹ See A. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 11- 18,

The relationship between empathetic affections and moral principles is orthogonal³⁰.

For example, empathy implies the ability of putting yourself in someone else's shoes, so it is orthogonal with the respect of individuals' rights, though producing a deep motivation to justice. An observer can be motivated by empathy to help a person and, at the same time, feeling it as a duty because he takes care of the others.

With regard to the three fundamental principles of morality, empathy is orthogonal with the deontological principle, since we feel that helping a person in trouble is our moral duty (putting ourselves in his shoes); empathy is orthogonal with the consequentialist principle because we take the responsibility of our actions thinking about the consequences of our actions and about how we could feel in the same situation; and it is orthogonal with the partiality principle, when we take into account the particular "familiarity" and sharing we have with other people.

To sum up: if the majority of moral dilemmas raises empathy because they imply visible and invisible victims, present or future, orthogonality among empathy and moral principles allows to weaken the *biasto* which the further is subjected, to activate the moral imagination and to elaborate the judgement.

Even if the moral judgement is not completely determined by rules, it «[...] is not arbitrary. [...] We do not judge blindly, but reacting to the particular given situation, on the basis of some reasons.»³¹.

So we should pay serious attention not only to the different elements of the moral judgement, but also to the process through which we formulate it. It is also because we are aware of this process that we can give reasons to ourselves and to others for our decisions.

4. THE ETHICAL COMPETENCE

The elaboration of the moral judgement and the concrete practice of the decisional process implied by a particular judgement can be defined as ethical competence. There are many and problematic definitions of competence³². I think that the definition by Cepollaro is very interesting: according to him "competences are not things"³³. Nor they are notions or skills, even if they

³⁰ M.L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 221

³¹ C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, op. cit., p. 22

³² See P.G. Bresciani, *Capire la competenza*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2012

³³ G. Cepollaro, *Le competenze non sono cose*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2008

imply both of them. To understand their nature, it is possible to define them as emergent properties relational, connected to uses and contexts. This means that these competences emerge from real intersubjective practises³⁴.

Being related to fluxes of communication, competences are dynamic and cannot be reduced to the conditions of their emergence. This implicates their retroactivity with regard to the initial conditions and the transformation of these conditions.

Therefore, competences are not “things” or “sets” that can be learnt and applied to a system, since their fundamental characteristic is that they are related to a context, locals, situated, evolving in the contexts where they emerge. They contribute to the evolution of the contexts by generating new ones. So interpreted, competences can be seen as a *bricolage* of knowledge and ability to act in determined contexts, where they represent knowledge in action and the ability to use given resources.

With regard to the ethical competence, this is a basic competence, since it is transverse and influential on more specific competences. Since the moral dilemmas regard intersubjective relationships in determined contexts, the ethical competence emerges as an answer - as taking the responsibility of these dilemmas.

More in details, it consists in the definition of which ethics fundamental principles have to be endorsed in a specific context, taking also into account the orthogonality with the emotions and, first of all, with empathy.

In addition, acting in a way ethically driven, when there are dilemmas or moral conflicts, can contribute to determine a moral co-evolution of the interested subjects or, at least, if there is not a possible solution, to formulate and/or recognize rules and ways of conflict management and cohabitation.

The ethical competence is, therefore, an expression of the dynamic-cultural and operative balance people can find among themselves and the context and it is done by subjects who can diagnose the environment where they operate and produce complex performances, actions, relations adequate to the context itself on the basis of the decisions they have to justify.

Inside complex organizations, the ethical competence requires to take into account *stakeholders'* needs, to choose, after reflecting, priorities, having in mind a generative vision of ethics that should be implemented and supported by all, but especially, by he who has directive functions and responsibilities.

A deep moral sense endorses the development of clear and positive relationships among all the *stakeholders*. As said by Damon, morality is not a constraining power that forces people to be honest and to avoid problems, but,

³⁴See *ivi*, p. 30

on the contrary, it realizes a fecund source of motivation, inspiration and innovation³⁵. Therefore, choices and behaviours founded on moral decisions strengthen negotiation and cooperation and generate influential relationships able to determine the well-being for all *stakeholders* in a structured system.

5. MORAL DECISION AND LIMITS OF ETHICAL COMPETENCE

Since now I have underlined the different “elements” of the moral judgment, the complexity of the process of its construction that results in the ethical competence. I was not able to propose a definition. Due to the fact that it does not imply the mere compliance to rules, a *standard* definition looks like impossible. As said, the moral judgement is not arbitrary, since we answer to emergences in particular situations on the basis of some reasons. The moral decision implicates a judgement that merges rationality requests with moral sentiments, the biographical dimension and the experiences of each of us, and the context where it has to be made. This means that, when formulating the moral judgement, it is not requested a theoretical rationality nor a generic reference to empathy (or to other moral sentiments), but a practical sensibleness able to merge rationality and empathy. In addition, it is also thanks to the awareness of the process through which we elaborate a moral judgement that we give reasons, to ourselves and to others, of the decisions we make.

The deontological, consequentialist and partiality principles can be identified as the fundamental principles of the moral. Above them, we have to face other moral principles like the principle of promptness, beneficiality, justice, responsibility, respect for autonomy etc. Let me define the first principles, which are fundamental, as first order principles, while the others can be grouped in a second order.

In fact, we use the latter on the basis of deontological, consequentialist or partiality considerations.

Our moral experience is complex since, in the light of the heterogeneity of the moral, it merges a plurality of factors. The judgment is expressed on the basis of the definition of a hierarchy among the fundamental principles of the moral (deontological, consequentialist, partiality), which is elaborated, from time to time, taking into account the context where we have to act. This choice guides the use of some principles which I define as second order principles (freedom, beneficiality, justice, etc.) and it contributes to give reasons for our

³⁵ See, W. Damon, The Moral Advantage, in *Optimize* 2002, <http://www.optimize.com/issue/003/ethics.htm>.

actions. For example, I can believe to act for the right because I am pursuing an obligation or because I am evaluating the consequences of what I am going to do.

The reference to this or that principle, pertaining to the first order or to the second order, can be guided by factors like empathy, biographic experiences, cultural tradition, negotiating needs, relational needs or even by a mix of these factors. Since – as I tried until now to demonstrate – we do not decide on ethically relevant issues following formal criteria of internal consistency following our preferences, but we decide to take into account a plurality of factors like information and evaluations related to the context where we have to decide, when we have to give reasons for our actions (to ourselves and to others) we need to refer to a contextual principle of justification that could be formulated as follows:

We are requested to give reasons for decisions, choices and actions in the light of the ways through which we arrive to recognize the priority to one of the principles of the first order and we connect them to the principles of the second order, taking into account the specific context where we are situated when deciding.

The moral judgment, in itself, is not able to overcome the moral conflict nor it is always expressible. It has to face the rational conflict that can be considered as the effect of the limits of our reason. Even if we try hard to give reasons, a profound moral dilemma can be irresolvable and so it represents a conflict. For example, the urgency reasons that can be invoked to sustain priority in the consequentialist principle could not necessarily be of the same intensity for everybody.

Larmore affirms that when consequentialist reasons are in conflict with deontological reasons of the strictest type, we should suspend the judgment on which of the two principles represents an obligation for us (but we have to decide which of the two principles we want to follow)³⁶. So he proposes a sort of *epochè* (suspension of judgement) when we think that we could have more information that could modify our view of the situation. The problem is that we cannot always have access to more information related to a conflict. Sometimes we have to admit that there are some irresolvable conflicts. This can happen in the relationship with others, but even with the relationship with ourselves. This is the case when we feel obliged to act in the light both of the deontological principle and of the consequentialist principle, since both of them require actions we think as acceptable, but indeed mandatory. In these

³⁶ C. Larmore, *op. cit.*, p. 149

cases – as said by Larmore – we do not have a deficit in our knowledge, but, on the contrary, we know too much, that is, we know that we are obliged to do the action that we consider the best one from both the deontological and the consequentialist points of view³⁷.

Are we facing a defeat? Does admitting the heterogeneity of the moral implicate the impossibility to decide? Should we come back to foundationalist morals? Let us start with this last question.

Firstly, I would say that rationally recognizing that we do not infer the fundamental principles of the moral but actually we find them, and that these represent the undeniable connections enabling us to look at ourselves as moral agents – whichever our vision of good life is – does not implicate any metaphysic of the moral subject, nor the need to look for foundations outside the moral itself.

In this regard, the principle of contextual justification recalls the fact that whichever the justification we give to our actions is, it has to be referred to a specific context. This means that, even if the moral principles justify actions, they do not have justifications since they represent assumptions of our rationality. I agree on Larmore's idea following which the fundamental principles, having the aforementioned characteristics, establish the limits of the moral intelligibility³⁸.

In this regard, I think that we have to add another reflection: when facing an irresolvable moral conflict and the necessity to decide, we have to acknowledge that there are some obligations we cannot respect, so that moral decisions where fundamental principles are in conflict are always difficult. Among the contexts as they are and as they ought to be, there is our ability to do things, but we have to be aware that «Our possibilities in the world are then too narrow for what we know we ought to do»³⁹.

I do not think this represents a defeat: on the contrary this represents the realistic acknowledgement of our limits, of the necessity to know them and to face them constantly.

This is the conclusion of the journey that has taken us from φρόνησις to ethical competence, thanks to which we have seen how is it possible to build the moral judgement and which are its limits.

Aristotle had a great intuition when putting the judgment at the core of the moral reflection and even if he has nothing to say to us with regard to the heterogeneity of the moral, and even if the φρόνιμος does not correspond to he

³⁷ Ivi, p. 150

³⁸ Ibidem

³⁹ Ibidem

who is ethically competent⁴⁰, it contributes, still today, to remind us that this centrality does not involve the eclipse of the role of the reason. The idea of practical reasonableness, that is involved in the practise of the ethical competence, is connected with Aristotle's intuition and represents an alternative to the ethical monism and to the Rational Choice Theory in a social and relational ethics perspective.

⁴⁰ Φρόνιμος is he who can decide on the good life in general, while the ethics competence is situated, contextual and does not imply nor a vision of the good life in itself, nor a perfectionistic idea of human nature. As J. Annas points out, « [...] Plato and Aristotle, insist that working for a living was incompatible with developing the virtues; Thus virtue and skill, would not naturally be considered as forming aspects of the same life.». (J. Annas, op.cit., P.72). Ethical competence, on the contrary, allows to deal with moral dilemmas emerging from professional practices