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## *CONFERENCES & NOTES*

# A Brief Introduction to Polo's Ethics

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The content of *Ethics: A Modern Version of its Classics Themes*<sup>1</sup> comes from an undergraduate course taught by Leonardo Polo at *Panamerican University* (Mexico City) in 1993. As many of his printed thought, it emerged first from his lectures, recorded by students who attended his classes, then transcribed and edited the tapes with Polo's corrections and finally published the finished product. This is one of the first English translations of his prolific work, which was all written in Spanish (see <http://www.leonardopolo.institute.org/works.html>).

Professor Polo offers an unusual treatment of ethics by considering it as a guide not only to human action but also to all branches of knowledge. In his words, the "guiding principles of behavior are shared by all humanity and are formulated in any society, although, as a branch of philosophy, ethics is really an invention of the Greeks... and Aristotle is the first systematizer of ethics."

For Polo, Aristotle's systematization is a recent exercise in the history of man, but ethics really emerges with *Homo Sapiens* about 170,000 years ago. Polo intends to examine ethics *in status nascente*, making use of what the theory of evolution and paleontological research can contribute. Furthermore, he supplies very incisive observations about facts that said theory cannot explain.

These guiding principles have existed ever since *hominization* took a turn toward *humanization*—a concept that, for Polo, signifies the explanation of the series of characters that are also obvious in modern man but are not corporeal only as *hominization* recounts. In other words, understanding ethics requires knowing when the actions of individuals of the genus *Homo* became "human."

The genus *Homo* does not display the standard process of speciation (unlike other forms of life, which are determined by their environment); rather, *Homo Erectus*, *Habilis*, and *Sapiens* transform their environment in order to survive. The use of fire, clothing, and creating artifacts signals the species that survived beyond others due to these traits. But *Homo Sapiens* distinguishes itself from other hominids by a very special correlation between brain and hand that

1 Leonardo Polo, "Ethics: A Modern Version of its Classics Themes," Translated by Paul A. Dumol. Manila, Philippines: Sinag-Tala Publishers 2008. (Original title: *Ética: hacia una versión moderna de los temas clásicos*. 2da edición; Madrid: Alianza Editorial AED OS, 1997).

transforms its environment in unexpected ways — dwellings, cultivation, eradicating other species, and today, endangering its own habitat.

The most elaborate artifact is language, and with it, governing: governing oneself and governing others. Man has to labor in order to survive; he cannot do so singlehandedly, but he needs to cooperate with others. Two basic predicaments give rise to ethics: Do I toil to survive (hunting, fishing, cultivating)? Do I do so cooperatively? All persons except dependents must answer these questions; this has been true since humanization began and continues to be a requirement today.

This is just one of the very unusual ideas that Polo offers in his first chapter: “Openness in the Human Being”. Here, he deals with why ethics cannot underwrite traditional disciplines like economics, psychology, sociology, and biology when they embrace a reductionist view of human action. They assume that man is not free and, therefore, not just constrained by nature and the worlds he creates but totally determined by them.

Following his radically new way of interpreting human action and ethics from their onset, in his second chapter, “Intelligence and Human Behavior,” Polo tries to make the best out of evolution theory’s explanatory powers. Nevertheless, the process of speciation by adaptation and radiation does not apply to *Australopithecus*, the first biped that developed instruments and demonstrated a capacity to produce. Furthermore, *Homo Erectus* and *Homo Habilis* exhibit the use of instruments to create instruments (e.g., flint-making). *Neanderthals* and *Cro-Magnons* even had a cranial capacity superior to *Homo Sapiens*; nevertheless, those species did not survive.

Based on up-to-date paleontological findings, the aforementioned species that indicate hominization alternatives possessed a certain cognitive power — a form of imagination or conditional reasoning: if A, then B. But this is neither to abstract nor to universalize, which is the primordial manifestation of intelligence. And so with intelligence humanization begins.

We must add the concept of freedom to the appearance of intelligence in humanization. In other words, there are regularities, norms, or laws that, in contrast to deterministic laws that physical and biological realities follow without fail, need not be followed. These



“moral laws” are laws followed by free beings in order to be free. Polo observes that by complying or not complying with said norms, man is subject to various interior states: “virtues and vices that follow upon practical action, not as results nor due to external consequences, but as intrinsic modifications of the capacity to realize actions”. Such norms and states contribute to the corporeal and intellectual survival of persons and groups in time. Ethics is then neither something added nor fortuitous, but it is innate to intelligence, freedom, and the need to decide about alternatives: to labor or not, to cooperate or not, to love or not, and where and when to do all of the aforementioned.

Intelligence resides within each individual —it is not a property of the species, since an individual does not derive his purpose from his species; therefore, each individual is superior to his species. Evolution can explain how different living species appear, but not how intelligence appears, since it is not genetically determined within a species. No animal goes against its own species; however, man does so by waging war against other men —a negative example of not deriving his purpose from his species.

Chapter three elaborates on human society and ethics. For Polo, the fact that intelligence cannot be explained by evolution requires creation. Hominization is the process of preparation for God to endow man with intelligence: man’s spiritual dimension. In every human being we can distinguish what is biological, typical, essential and personal. What is biological manifests itself typified and refers to “what is natural” in each one of us (character and attitudes): psychosomatic differences that distinguish each one of us but that considered together constitutes the “human species”. If for Plato philosophers, military, farmers, artesans and merchants described types present in Greek society, ours are constituted by many more “roles”: our present way to refer to types.

What is essential in human beings is dynamic and not finalized as is the case of all animals. Essence is a given end to “what is natural”: in the case of man, it is not given but needs to be developed. In other words, “man’s essence is not a datum, but his freedom’s commitment (that lasts all his life) to the increasing conquest of his being human with respect to his personal being... where the traits of his type are structured, arranged, organized. This involves making the most of such traits, perfecting them. Such improvement is due to virtues and so is ethical. Virtues understood as those actions that

result in the growth of the principals of said action. A growth that allow for higher intellectual and moral operations freely acted.

It is here that it becomes man's mission to perfect himself via virtues. Not doing so results in man's decadence. "The seriousness of ethics lies in the fact that a man can make himself good or bad. Therefore, what improves a man is ethical; what worsens him is unethical." Man's actions are such that he is their first beneficiary or first victim.

The theory of types allows Polo an unprecedented approach to society and culture. If each individual is superior to his species, but does not exhaust his species, then the species is distributed among human beings, each superior to another in something. This demands respect and honor of the other, which is a profoundly ethical relation. This recognition is "based on types, since each human being is an irreducible type; he has something in common with others and something diverse. The coordination of types grows with social life and human community: it is what we call culture." We are still far from accomplishing the ideal form of this coordination.

Chapter four characterizes the fact that man is a person. In this chapter, Polo explores the radical primordially of the person. The human being is forthcoming, gives of himself, contributes, communicates, and is effusive. In other words, the person "manifests" himself.

In contradistinction to certain Eastern philosophies that downgrade "having" in relation to "being," Polo categorizes three levels of possessing: corporeal, intellectual, and habitual. With relation to what is possessed, the first refers mainly to material objects (i.e., all material goods), the second refers to knowledge via possessing ideas, and the third to spiritual goods such as virtues. The intimacy of this possession increases with each level. Complementary to this is man's capacity to give—intelligence, freedom, having, giving, and manifesting are key features of a person. They are characteristics of *Homo Sapiens* that hominization cannot explain but that humanization attempts to explain.

Employing contemporary concepts, Polo refers to the person as a *free system*. Closed systems have only one state of equilibrium, whereas open systems have several states that can be improved by learning—this is the case with animals. However, human beings can learn both positively and negatively. Virtues increase a person's ca-

capacity to improve, whereas vices deteriorate man's capacity to be a better human being. Furthermore, this metaphor allows for a contemporary understanding of happiness as the preferred state of equilibrium of a free system, that is, "a psychological situation that corresponds with the desired good." Being free, then, allows the system to prefer erroneous states of equilibrium, such as when unjust means are employed to acquire money, prestige, or power. True happiness, on the contrary, is related to higher goods that are not easily lost, such as love for others and love for God.

A scientific treatment of ethics demands that three dimensions of ethics be considered: *goods*, *norms* and *virtues*. "The virtues strengthen the capacity of the human being to possess the good and in this sense also form part of the good: they are good". Further, "the fulfillment of the moral laws will not make one happy now, because they are only means to obtain the good". While "Moral virtues strengthen man's will—they are perfective habits of the will and being, so strengthening the capacity of adherence of the will, that is, the capacity to love . . . while vices impoverish the will, they ruin it . . . and diminish the capacity to love". The virtuous person fulfills moral norms with ease because in truth, said norms exist for freedom.

Polo's innovative consideration of the systems approach concerns not only proposing the human being as a *free system*, but regarding ethics as the systemic interplay of three dimensions: goods, norms and virtues. With respect to the former, no previous system's thinker had thought of considering freedom a defining attribute of a system, and furthermore the system's capacity to learn positively — contributing to its growth and flourishing— but negatively too — diminishing all its qualities—. This allows for a better understanding of the role of virtues. On the one hand, they are qualities of the free system that the person is, on the other hand they play a fundamental role in understanding the systemic character of ethics. It is by associating different ethical perspectives to an exacerbated dimension that the need for a systemic portrait of ethics is proven.

Different ethical perspectives have not always cared for the three dimensions. A case in point is *Stoic* ethics, which prioritize virtues. For Stoics, all is corporeal, reason included. Good for them is not pleasure, as it is for the Epicureans, but whatever preserves or increases rationality. Happiness is only attained through virtue, which should derive from impassibility. "It is an ethics that attempts to neu-

tralize human suffering, an ethics of self-mastery that hopes to make man capable of resisting the influences that affect him from the outside. Stoic virtue is not oriented to the exercise of ulterior acts, but rather to constructing an interior refuge”.

Another ethical perspective Polo discusses is that of ethical *Normativism* or ethical Rationalism. “According to this stance, one must fulfill the law because one ought to live in accordance with reason; the contrary is to be irrational”. From here, stem *Consequentialist* ethics (human actions are neither good nor evil by virtue of an *a priori* ethical rationality but by an *a posteriori*, that is, because of what follows from them). This ethics is contrasted with *Autonomous* ethics or ethics of *Convictions* (“I act as I ought, though the world perish”). These perspectives reduce ethical action to compliance with norms, and in so doing, consider only those goods that can be obtained in life so long as one complies with the norms, here, mainly material goods. Once obtained, there is no room left for growth in other dimensions.

When a rationalist ethics gives way to an ethics of goods, specially material goods, as has been the case of a work ethic of austerity, that derived in accumulation of wealth giving rise to capitalism, usually norms and said habits are relaxed. To the point of making of material goods the sole purpose of action. “Who seeks only pleasure is not happy, nor enjoys life, since pleasure is his sole business; he needs to take pleasure seriously, since its loss leaves him in anguish.”

Such reductionist perspectives call for an ethics that is complete. One that takes into consideration the systemic interplay of virtues, norms and goods. To speak of virtues without norms derives in a dispassionate estoicism. Only material goods are desired without virtues. Norms separated from goods become uncaring. Ethics is then the reciprocation of its three dimensions, otherwise we are faced with partial, reduced and unstable ethical perspectives.

In his fifth chapter, “Will and Freedom,” Polo unravels the assumptions of modern ethical thought starting with Kant and cites its flaws as having ignored the two other dimensions of ethics: goods and virtues. In a similar fashion to how in Stoic ethics, exacerbating virtue over norms and goods offers a lessened view of human action, so does ethical thought, which assumes the will’s actions to be spontaneous and disconnected from the intellect, such division cannot explain freedom.

Polo brings classical notions to the fore. Natural will: an opening up inherent to our spiritual nature is a potency that requires being connected with the intellect, becoming rational will. It is practical reason that attains that what is presented to the will in each and every case causes it to act, including presenting something that can bring happiness or a concept of good. This acting of the will has an effect on the will itself and disposes it to new acts. This disposition is usually called a virtue or vice; it is in this moment that freedom occurs.

Other topics Polo deals with allude to how a person discovers moral norms and how these norms take place, what is conscience, what are the principles of moral action, and how these two are related.

These very controversial standpoints are presented in such a way that the last chapter is self-contained: "The Dimensions of Human Action". What characterizes the actions of a branch of hominids for them to have become "human"? This is the question that Polo addresses in his final chapter.

Considering action allows Polo to combine ethics' three dimensions: virtues proceed *from* action, people attain goods *with* action, and moral norms unfold *on account* of action. Polo considers two types of human action: the first is the conscious and free intervention in physical processes whereby a series of events are transformed and modified. Human beings then create their own world by transforming nature, modifying events, and creating new possibilities. Since such an intervention is the fruit of a decision, human responsibility is undeniable. Ethics then encourages man to act: virtue strengthens the will and so facilitates and increases action. For Polo, not to intervene is a sin of omission. He refers to this type of action as *production*. An analytical description, albeit incomplete, refers to ends, motivation, knowledge, and doing as components of human action. Polo attempts to bring these factors together by considering that "it is not enough to want something to be able to do it, just as it is not enough to have an idea to make something with it, but rather the mediation of action is required. Wanting is not the same as doing".

Another type of action is that of *government*: human beings govern themselves, and moreover, government is a social activity without which there is no society. This differs from production in that it does not transform passive material, but it forms active agents. The connection between motives and ends is *language*, which is the type of

doing most directly linked with thinking. By examining both types of action, Polo ties together his six lessons with clear examples of the role played by the classical virtues in order to conclude that “in short, ethics is knowledge of human action that cannot be substituted by others. The true science of action is ethics. In another sense, ethics is not a science, but something more: a form of wisdom.”

No doubt, this is a very ingenious consideration of ethics that requires attentive reading on the part of the average reader but offers profound insights for expert researchers on ethics exploring the weak assumptions that underpin modern ethical thought.

The English translation is a fortunate endeavor in the face of Professor Polo’s fluid but overwhelming thought in Spanish.