

## EDITORIAL

The theme of this issue of the Journal is ethics. If ethics, in general, is presented as a solution to problems, we would like to point out here its problematic nature.

Ethics has become a recurring theme among us, as citizens, as professionals, and as individuals. Above all, we perceive ourselves within a world in which one feels and one denounces a “lack of ethics”. In this sense, one says as well that “there aren’t values anymore”, or that the important thing is to “bring back values...”. On the other hand, we feel somewhat lost, insecure, and perplexed as to what is ethically correct behavior, concerning what may be a moral value. This deals with about two different questions that must not be confused.

The first perception, a “lack of ethics”, in general supposes that we know what is “ethics”, as if everyone who complained of said lack were referring to the same moral code. We are here before a rather strong perception, and at the same time, uncensored, that there is something universally valid for all of us in the field of correct human behavior. The second perception is more complex, and introduces us to an environment of greater reflection: knowing that historically, ethics can change and have changed, knowing that the crisis of which we speak is also equal to an ethical crisis, or rather, a questioning of the validity of the current ethical code; we worry about knowing if and in what sense the same moral criteria are still valid for discerning if anyone behaves ethically well or badly. Another more difficult question is to ask ourselves if we still can aspire to a universally valid criterion for all human beings without distinction, or is we must admit that it is possible to have culturally different moral criteria. Especially among specialists, there is the debate to whether it is possible, as has been done even in occidental society, to rationally found some moral value, making it and judging it valid for all human beings based upon the fact that its foundation is rational and because all human beings are rational. One can also observe that there are diverse plans to facing what we denominate “the ethical problem”, demanding clear and attentive analysis.

If we currently insist upon declaring that the solution to such problems is found in the field of ethics, and no longer in the field of politics, or economics, this signals, before anything else, recognition of the difficulty in safeguarding the ethical dimension of human life. It would seem that from all sides one perceives there to be a tendency to live as if “good” and “evil” no longer existed, and what we counted upon were merely “it worked” or “I won”, independently of the price that such a result inflicts upon others. This may remind us immediately that ethics only exist as long as they relate to recognition of a commitment that we have with our fellow human beings, be they close or not, and that ethics relates to the existence of a human plurality. There would not be ethics if there were only one individual. More recently, we include these “others” of each human individual to be animals or nature in a general sense.

Possibly the dramatization of the modern ethical problem reveals itself more intensely when we repeat the following question: why is there ethics, after all? Why is there this mysterious presence within us that becomes something we call the “moral law”? Why do we worry about doing “good” with others in mind, and not only ourselves?

When we talk of a modern crisis, we easily may remember the Zarathustra of Nietzsche, who, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, descends from the mountain and announces solemnly, “God is dead”; that this news will cause a revolution in human beings. If God does not exist, and if we must be ourselves the gods, the self-creators, God will no longer be the source to determine

moral law, neither will God nor His pretentious representatives say what is “doing good”, and we mustn’t keep score to God before or after death. The being who must establish moral law, renouncing an absolute being, is each human being him/herself. This task is the mark of modern times: the human being must be autonomous, free, carrying with himself all the responsibility for that which happens to him. It is up to the human being to define the norms from which he will “do good” and avoid “evil”. It is also not accepted, as was the case with the Greek Classics, that there is a universal “human nature”, equal in all human beings no matter the time nor place. Thus, it being up to humans, what will we do? What will we accomplish? All of us? In distinct classes? In distinct peoples and cultures? Can we establish something as a value from the consensus among human beings? If it were such, how in the name of consensus have we been led to tragedies and holocaust?

To these and other interrogations, the responses are varied, but always marked by the imperative of human autonomy: some times emphasizing individualist solutions, others, collectivist. More recently these responses, above all the collectivist, have been questioned: the political crisis and the human mistrust of our own ability to achieve a universal and single truth have contributed as well to question the existence and the possibility of defining a universal ethics, beyond strengthening here and there a return to the religious solution (“a return to the sacred”). What does “doing good” mean today? And if “doing good” can be different for different humans, why still is there something called a “moral duty”?

Before so many questions and solutions, the debate intensifies with its dialogue more and more among specialists of different areas (one only needs to recall bio-ethics). Rarely can one say that there is agreement among those who study ethics. Some retake classical traditional philosophies; others proclaim the need for new concepts. Some accent more individualized solutions, concerned with the lack of autonomy in modern society, other emphasize more communal solutions; some continue considering ethics an exclusive field for human behavior or relationships, others include animal relationships and biological nature in general. It is worth remembering the insistence of some authors (Foucault, Derrida, Agamben...) to suggest an “ethics of friendship”, which signals a microphysical task, a “caring for one’s self”, for it would not be about fulfilling a norm, but protecting the very existence of a human subjectivity, freeing us from such a sizeable normalization, or rather about saving the fact of one’s own existence as a possibility, and not as something predetermined as a previously established essence. For this reason, one defines ethics as a “reflexive practice of freedom” (Foucault), and not as the fulfillment of a determined law.

Beyond recommending the authors of the following texts to you readers, we wish with these brief observations to call your attention to a plurality and complexity of problems, that cannot be forgotten before the volume of easy prescriptions, so many times moralist, which circulate in so many books, in so many discussions, and in the different areas of knowledge, including in Nursing.

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