

The Non-object-like Actuality of a Moral Challenge [1999]

A Summary, ad Jeruzalém: Moral Philosophy as an Educational Tool, international conference

One of the most inconvenient complications of moral education is the uncertainty of the so called „ontological status“ of moral principles or norms. Since several last centuries, in Europe (as well as in countries influenced by the European cultural development), the main stress had been put on things, in Latin „res“. (This trend has its roots in old Greek philosophers, of course.) Moral norms could not be proved as „given things“, similar to „natural things“, and so they were interpreted as subjective (and therefore relative) aims, only. Old metaphysical conception of moral commands as „supernatural things“ could not be held any more, but moral subjectivism or relativism could not replace the authority of real things which can be proved. The basic problem is not rooted in any impersonal historical change, but in the lack of an adequate, reasonable concept, so important especially in education, and being able to stop our schizoid thinking on ways which are not only different, but actually incompatible and so bearing a mighty trend to reductionism with.

We possibly cannot start using a different word for „reality“, even if it is so nearly connected with „res“, i. e. things. But we certainly must profoundly reinterpret the conceptual content of this term. (In German, e. g. , the word „Wirklichkeit“, originally a translation of the Latin „actualitas“, is commonly used instead of or besides the originally Latin word „realitas“.). In any case, however, the problem is not a terminological, but a philosophical, i. e. a conceptual one. The Greek conceptuality is mainly characterized by forming conceptual models of „things“ which may be called (after Brentano and especially after Husserl's „Logische Untersuchungen“) „intentional objects“. Husserl's platonism made him possible to remain within the realm of metaphysical thinking, even if he introduced his well known method of phenomenological reduction. His conception of „intentional objects“ reflected the old (originally Greek) tradition of „geometrical thinking“ of triangles etc. : they were unchangeable, because timeless. One of the most important philosophical tasks of our times is to establish a new way of conceptual thinking, using models which would not be reduced to such unchanging images, but which could represent „real“ changes we encounter in our everyday experiences. We can provisionally use a negative term for such an art of models (constructs) of thinking, namely „non-objects“. Conceptual thinking using such non-objects could be called non-objectifying thinking. Which is such a thinking consisting in?

Every conceptual structure of our thinking has to count with (at least) two different types of intentions, namely with conscious acts intending to intentional objects and those intending to „real“ objects. But if we want to think over „real things“ which are no „res“, no „things“, we have to use a „new“ (but really perhaps a very old) intentional orientation not to „objects“, but to „non-objects“, i. e. for our times models so constructed to be able to be models of events, not of timeless „images“. Such a new form of thinking is inevitable especially when we are to interpret ethical principles or, better, moral challenges (or commands.) On the other side, moral education is a perfect domain where such a new way of thinking could be demonstrated and perhaps even prepared to be applied to other realms of problems.