

Relativism and Absolutism. A Crisis of Moral Values?

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“1) Should we speak of a crisis and relativism of values or a crisis and relativism of the consciousness of values?

2) Should we speak of a crisis of values or a crisis of a certain type of value?

3) Are crises of values (and relativism) brewing in the consciousness of an ordinary person immersed in ordinary life situations more dangerous than crises (and relativism) arising in theories, in the conceptions of which they are proposed?

A crisis of values or a crisis of the consciousness of values? You can speak of a crisis of values in manifold perspectives. The first of them, still very broad, is the formal perspective. By accepting it, we do not ask what specific values are in crisis, but only whether the values themselves are in crisis. To answer this question in the affirmative, certain conditions must be met. These are, however, antinomic conditions, i.e. such that although they are mutually contradictory, they are all required to be met if we are to speak of a crisis of values. 1) Values must be understood as time objects, i.e. existing in time and subject to its influence. 2) Values must be understood as extratemporal objects; although they somehow realize themselves in time, they also exist beyond these realizations. The first condition must be met if we are to recognize that so fundamental a change has taken place in values that we must call it a crisis. If values were immutable, they could not "degenerate" into crises. The second condition must be met if we are to recognize that the change is a variant of a crisis. In other words, there must be a norm or a standard, a deviation from which constitutes a crisis.

Can you think of a consistent combination of both conditions? Not in the strict sense. However, you can make some modification that will make this combination possible. This modification may consist in the fact that instead of speaking of a crisis of values alone, we will speak of a crisis (in relativism) in our perception, not of a crisis of values alone, but of a crisis of the consciousness of values. Hence, values themselves are not subject to change nor a crisis change. That which is subject to change is only our knowledge about values, our attitudes built on them, our choices based on them.

The approach presented above may be supported by views which, in this respect, were formulated in the history of ethics. Nicolai Hartmann's axiology is particularly illustrative here. Arguing against the relativistic interpretation of values, Hartmann discriminated between value and its validity and, as a result, drew the conclusion that the relativism of values does not actually relate to values themselves, but only to their validity in culture and ethos. A similar type of antirealist reasoning is popular among other philosophers. For example, Polish theoretician Kazimierz Twardowski argued that since there are manifold views on good in different epochs or cultures, we cannot conclude about the relativity of good itself. Such a diversity may have a source in immaturity or misidentification of values. A similar reasoning is also presented in the ethical and axiological considerations of Władysław Tatarkiewicz. He wrote that the alleged relativity of good is sometimes confused with its unavailability for some people; sometimes a limited human mind cannot comprehend too many goods at the same time.

A crisis of value in general or a crisis of a particular type of value? We have just spoken of values in a very general way without exploring their diversity. And yet in the diversity of our life situations, values appear as different or diverse according to their types and within their own realms. Consequently, we can speak of moral, religious, social, intellectual, vital, hedonic values, etc. Just like within the realm of moral values, we can speak of such values as honesty, trustworthiness, truthfulness, faithfulness etc., and within hedonic values such values as pleasure, satisfaction, enjoyment, delight, physical pleasure, mental pleasure etc.

Such a diversity should be properly understood. The heterogeneity of values does not mean that they are of equal rank. On the contrary, there can be superior or inferior values, such as are more or less valuable, more or less worthy of choice and realization. Such diverse values acquire meaning and relevance under specific cultural conditions. Even Aristotle emphasized in his meticulous ethics of moderation that bravery is recognized as a virtue in the face of danger. If it is so that different cultural factors entail concentration on a particular type of value - according to the regularities discussed in the *Ethics* by N. Hartmann - it may mean that the so-called value crises are *de facto* crises of certain types of values.

This material perspective therefore argues that values are specific, concrete cultural senses. A crisis of values (and their relativity) is then a loss of meaning these particular types of values in culture possess. Consequently, one can speak of a crisis which, in the contemporary mass culture, a value of productive life experiences while it is being superseded by a value of consumer life. By the same token, one can speak of a crisis of a value of personhood (subjectivity) in totalitarian societies, or of a crisis of values of solidarity in societies based on economic competition.

Is relativity of values brewing in the consciousness of an ordinary person immersed in ordinary life situations more dangerous than relativism arising in theories, and in the conceptions of which they are proposed? If a relativism of values is interpreted as a process that takes place in the consciousness of values, then it seems here that it would more aptly be adopted for conceptions developed in axiology or ethics. A crisis of value can also manifest itself in the ways in which their status, hierarchy or any other relations between them are presented in theories. They may be variously exemplified. Relativism is one of them, another is hedonism, and still another is a position - shall I say - of naturalized "axiology" formulated by John Leslie Mackie who concludes that values do not exist, and what does are social needs that are called values as a shorthand expression. Psychologism may be seen as a similar example of a crisis of this type.

Is any of these crises more dangerous than others? It is impossible to answer this question in a clear and definitive way. In order to prove that the crisis reflected in theories is more dangerous arguments are advanced in theories that create a semblance of validity. These or at least equally strong arguments are not identified in the popular consciousness. Moreover, often, as closely related to practice, it will be based on assumptions contrary to opinions that are directly, often only declaratively voiced. The crisis of the axiological consciousness of an ordinary man is also particularly dangerous because this consciousness is the starting point of theoretical consciousness which may as a consequence easily "inherit" the former's errors.

Relativism prevents any conclusive assessment of conflict situations. It is also in discord with the intuition of common elementary values such as are intuited e.g. in the face of natural disasters. The solidarity with the victims does not then have merely a relativist meaning, but presupposes the existence of universally and intersubjectively acceptable values. What is extremely important, relativism exposes man and his life full of dilemmas and emotional conflicts to "metaphysical randomness". How often we are caught in an ethical dilemma and doubt! And yet if relativism were right, such dilemmas would be somehow frivolous, because they would only be a consequence of our being born in our place and time. As José Ortega y Gasset wrote, among other circumstances "the drama of our life would be different."

Relativism, however, is not a sign of crisis for all values. Undoubtedly, it is so in relation to the majority of moral values. But is it so to all of them? Supererogative values, although their realization arouses great respect, admiration and approval, does not have to be realized by everyone as they are by definition supererogative. Much room for relativistically discerned values is provided by "ornamental" values, such as, for example, the value of our hobby objects or preferable colours or flavours.

This fact means that even if we cannot justifiably and optimistically confirm that there is no crisis and relativity of values, but there is only a crisis of the consciousness of values, then we must now say that this crisis is by no means less dangerous. The consciousness of values is the only area where values are given to us at all."

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