

## Ethical Notions and Relativism (German Material Ethics of Values)

A variability of culture and its material components is a general and well-known phenomenon; moral ideas and ethical convictions change during history. Their clear expression are concrete moral theories and codices that always contain some concrete ethical notions and terms. These transformations are usually treated as a basic argument that proves that ethical and moral relativism is right. The aim of this paper is not to demonstrate a whole problem of relativism in ethics and its notions; it aims rather at analyzing an understanding of cultural relativism in context of three central ethical notions (value, validity, ought) formulated in main ideas of German material value-ethics, and particularly in theories formulated by Max Scheler (1874–1928), Nicolai Hartmann (1882–1950) and Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889–1977). In particular, there are three questions which are basic in this context:

- 1) what is moral value, moral validity and moral ought
- 2) how to understand the phenomenon of cultural variability within moral ethos
- 3) why and how should we construct some criticism of ethical relativism – especially in the context of distinctions and notions used in value-ethics.

I refer to the ideas of German value-ethics in order to examine whether it is possible to explain moral changes and plurality in culture without moral relativism.

By saying “moral relativism in culture” I mean the conception that states that:  
value does not exist independently of human valuing  
that this valuing depends on human’s decisions, will or feeling.

What is “relativistic” value? According to relativists, it is a product of human acts (will, decision, feeling, action, individual and social needs, social opinions and conventions). There are always people who create an axiological site of the real world. Without human conscience and activity the real world loses its ethical and axiological attributes.

That question requires, firstly, to be undertaken in the context of material value-ethics because this “school” offers a solution which seems to connect A certain form of “relativism” with moral absolutism. Secondly, it is a perspective which allows to avoid many absurdities and antinomies appearing in the post-modernist, subjectivistic and emotivistic theories, however, at the same time, it does not lose the phenomenon of historical variability of values and human valuations. And thirdly it is the standpoint which offers the largest and most precise understanding of values in the 20-th century.

The first and main argument, that the German material ethics of values gave against ethical relativism is, in my opinion, an idea of the emotional feeling of values (*Wertfühlen, Wertgefühl*). This value-feeling demonstrates values in a primary and indirect way. Nobody can create it arbitrarily or eliminate it directly.

That is why it is possible to interpret value-feeling as a first and basic phenomenological argument against relativism. It demonstrates, because it is a “passive” human experience, that value-being and value-hierarchy are objective and independent of human value-consciousness, will, action or attitudes. There are rather value-feeling and value-preferring, as Scheler notes, which constitute a basis for every purpose and will: “Nothing can become a purpose that was not first a goal!”. Hartmann formulates in his *Ethics* the same opinion: human will is grounded in a value-consciousness.

A value-feeling, however, has an emotional nature which causes, naturally, many critiques and reproaches.

Furthermore, there are different forms of value-feeling in history and different cultures or civilisations. Can we, then, really base our axiological knowledge on value-emotions? Can we really find some emotions which are of universal and intersubjective character? And can we really consider a cognitive role of emotions in general?

There is a basic distinction between value itself (*Wert*) and its validity (*Geltung*).

A distinction between value itself and its validity was clearly formulated by Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann.

Validity (*Geltung*) is not an element of value itself. It is only a moment of the real world, i.e. validity appears in the real human axiological consciousness (*Wertbewußtsein*). This way it is possible to think that value itself, even if it loses its importance and validity, does not lose its ideal valuable nature. Value itself takes its actuality in some particular, concrete real situations only.

E.g. value of freedom takes its current importance during war; value of measure takes its importance only in situation of wastefulness. Value, and more exactly its content (material), is always related to some concrete real situation. This is why value takes its validity only when there is a proper type of situation. A variability of situations causes a variability of validity.

Thus, historical relativism of value is only relativism of validity, not of values itself. Hartmann believes that value takes its importance only in some kinds of situations and in other their types it lose it.

Therefore, ethical axiological relativism seems only to be some theoretical misinterpretation and its source is that we do not have a clear distinction between value itself and its validity. This way, we have the first insight into relation between ethical notions and relativism.

But, relativism does not accept that distinction, because he simply identifies value with its validity

Value-feeling is of passive nature, and it means that value-feeling is independent of human will and its intentional wishes. In this primary and receptive value-feeling a value is ever “self-given”. The subject has here only a receptive character and his primary knowledge about value appears in a receptive act. That is why a main relativistic argument (that notes that subject “creates” values)

is wrong. There are no people who create the values. There are rather values which create people as spiritual persons.

Besides, we may also have a wrong value-consciousness, we can feel axiological illusions. Hartmann states clearly that axiological illusion proves implicitly that value itself has an ideal and objective existence. Paradoxically, an illusion proves that there exists its object, value itself.

A similar idea was formulated by von Hildebrand. In his *Ethics*, by analyzing a position represented by "French sociological school", he demonstrates some error that appears when one identifies value and social axiological "conventions". **"Moral value" means only some expression of social convictions.** As Anatol France says, an act is bad because it is socially negated, and not inversely: if an action or attitude are socially approved, they have a positive moral value; and if they are socially criticized, they have a negative value. In such a conception value is, indeed, independent of the opinion of individual person but it is always dependent on the opinions of the society.

There are two possible interpretations of this situation which are rejected by von Hildebrand: (1) moral values do not exist at all and they are only some "illusions"; (2) moral values are only some "conventions".

But if we interpret values as "illusions", von Hildebrand notes, we have to negate the position and nature of value-feeling. And if we interpret values as a kind of "conventions", one cannot understand, at all, how can we criticize those moral "conventions" which are accepted by other communities. Such a criticism (e.g. criticism of Nazism) implicates impliedly the existence of objective values (or at least independent of social opinion) which create a possibility of this criticism. And finally, von Hildebrand states: the theory that says that value is a product of social conventions does not need to negate the objective status of values because this theory, precisely, says only what is considered as values in the concrete community.

Returning to the general distinction between value and its validity, it is necessary to explain what are the reasons that cause that validity of values is various and changing. There are two main explanations here:

(1) there are objective reasons: objective historical changes of social and political situations which open or close an actuality and validity of values;

(2) there are subjective reasons: limitations, errors and illusions appearing in human value-feeling and value-cognition, e.g. resentment (Scheler, Hartmann, von Hildebrand), valuation delusions (Scheler, Hartmann, von Hildebrand), valuation blindness (Scheler, Hartmann, von Hildebrand), moving (wandering) of value-attention (Hartmann), blindness of subsumption (von Hildebrand).

As one can see, terminological distinctions (value and its validity, matter and axiological form of value) permit to accept and explain a variability of historical moral ethos and do not accept its relativistic interpretation.

What is ethos? Ethos is a set of real human opinions about moral and other values, moral and other norms, moral and other obligations and duties.

The next question is: what is a structure of moral ought and what is a relation between ought and changing situations? Can we distinguish many kinds of ought? Or there is only one type of ought? It seems that plurality and historical change of moral ought prove that moral relativism is right. This is the question which must be explained now.

According to Scheler, there are two kinds of ought: ideal ought, normative ought. Ideal ought is "unreal". It is connected with a value itself and founded on it. Its character is independent on the real situation and its concrete matter. Unlike ideal ought, normative ought assumes a "bad" human nature. It assumes that people are not inclined to act in consistence with "proper" values. So it has a repressive character and, what is most important, it is related to the concrete real situation.

In Hartmann an oughtness in general divides into three kinds: an ideal ought-to-Be (*ideales Seinsollen*), an actual ought-to-Be (*aktualles Seinsollen*) and a real ought- to-Do (*reales Tunsollen*).

What is a sense of the distinctions proposed by Hartmann?

- 1) Hartmann, like Scheler, speaks about ideal ought-to-Be. But it is now the moment of the value itself: "There is something absurd in the thought that a value is a thing that ought to be only in so far as its matter is unreal. That a man ought to be honest, straightforward, trust worthy, is something which does not cease to be because somebody actually is so. The man ought to be even as he then is".
- 2) Hartmann describes an actual ought-to-Be. It appears only when a real situation does not realize a material of the value. There are two main conditions of this form of ought: (1) the value is not realized; (2) there is a real situation to which this value is related. This ideal ought-to-Be is most independent of the real world and its variability. But ideal value as an ideal being refers always relationally to reality because its matter is an ideal model for the real situation.
- 3) Clearly, the dependence on the reality grows at an actual ought-to-Be. It presupposes that reality does not realize these values which should be realized. There are three conditions of this ought: (1) a value is not realized; (2) there is a concrete real situation to which refers this value; (3) there are some people who are able to realise these values;

What is a relation between ought and relativism. Is it really truth that historical variability of ethos proves that relativism is correct? Hartmann demonstrates that three kinds of ought depend, in a different way, on the reality, but they do not prove the relativism. Better and more expression for this dependence is RELATIONISM and not "relativism". There is only ethos, evaluation, actual and real ought, which change in different circumstances.

Therefore, both Scheler and Hartmann and von Hildebrand propose such terminological distinctions in ethics, which implicate that ethical relativism is theoretical error. It seems to be founded in an incorrect theory and description of value and evaluation because what culture and its historical variability prove is the change of valuation only.

So the next general argument against relativism, especially formulated by Hartmann, is the idea that relativism is not identical with relationism: relational references between values and the real world are not of relativistic nature. There are relations which have an absolute character. There are three kinds of this *relational* reference between values and the real world.

- 1) A material of value is related to the real situation.
- 2) Values are always related to a person as a subject and object of morality.
- 3) A moral value is always something "good" for person. It is necessary to distinguish between moral values and a value of goodness which always appears with moral values but cannot be reduced to them. There are two different values which have to be separated: a moral value itself and a secondary, only co-occurring value of goodness.

Friendship has its moral value but it is also an important goodness for person who is its object. How can we justify this distinction?

A moral value (its existence and its level in the hierarchy) is independent of a value of goodness. However, also this value of goodness is related to a person in relational way only, not in a relativistic meaning. No one, Hartmann states, can arbitrary decide what is good for him. An umbrella is such a goodness when it rains and a warm shoes when it is cold. In this context it is also necessary to remind a distinction formulated by D. von Hildebrand. He distinguishes three kinds of motivating objects: (1) subjective satisfying objects; (2) objective goodness for person; (3) values themselves.

A cultural variability and diversity, that underlined in the contemporary theories of civilisation (e.g. by A. Toynbee, F. Koneczny or, contemporarily, by S. Huntington), proves, indeed, that an axiological universum has a plural and complex character, but it does not prove any ethical relativism. A change of situations generates a change in human value-consciousness and its spectrum only.

Kazimierz Twardowski (1866-1938):  
On the So-Called Relative Truths (1900)

3 most important arguments against relativism in ethics.

1. A moral statement (and all statements in general) are composed of meaning and external expression:
2. In different times the similar expression may be connected with different meanings. In order to justify relativism it would be necessary to demonstrate that the meaning is still the same and what has changed is really its ethical interpretation.
3. Relativism can be criticised based on evolutionism: different ethical opinions can be treated as different levels or periods (lower or higher) in a moral development.

Richard Mervyn Hare (1919-2002):

“Secondly, universality must not be confused with generality. The principle involved in an ‘ought’-statement may be a highly specific, complex and detailed one, perhaps too complex for formulation in words. It does not have to be very general and simple. Complaints against universalizability, that it makes us the slaves of very simple general rules, therefore miss their target. To use an example which gave trouble to Kant: my moral principles do not have to be as general as ‘Never tell lies’; they can be more specific, like ‘Never tell lies except when it is necessary in order to save an innocent life, and except when .... and except when ...’ In a morally developed person the exceptions may get too complex to be formulated in words. But see below for the value, in our human situation, of general (i.e. not too specific) principles.” (Hare, Universal prescriptivism).

Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1886-1980):

1. Moral values are absolute; only moral norms or prescriptions are changing and relative but they are still based on non-relative values.

A general argument against relativism:

1. Every statement is relative.
2. Ethical statements are relative.
3. A statement that says that ethical statements are relative is also relative.
4. I do not have to accept relativism.

5. Ethical relativism is a form of naturalistic fallacy.

**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.