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PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES ON APPLIED ETHICS FROM THE ECUADORIAN EXPERIENCE: A CONVERSATION WITH DARWIN BELLINI REYES SOLÍS

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Abstract: Darwin Bellini Reyes Solís is currently a professor at the Universidad Politécnica Salesiana del Ecuador. The conversation explores the question if the Applied Ethics could be used in understanding and coping with the urgent problems of present-day society.

Keywords: Ecuador Philosophy, Applied Ethics, Universal Principles, Practical Philosophy, Everyday Life Conflicts, Indigenous People, D.B. Reyes Solís.

Profile

Darwin Bellini Reyes Solís is an Ecuadorian philosopher born in the city of Ambato, Tungurahua. He completed his Bachelor's degree in Philosophy at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador. He earned his Master's and Doctorate in Philosophy from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Colombia. He is currently a professor at the Universidad Politécnica Salesiana del Ecuador and also serves on the Ethics Committee of that institution. He has led several philosophical projects, both outside and within the institution where he works. His most notable works include: *"Filosofía Hoy. Un abordaje interdisciplinario de lo humano"* («The Philosophy Today. An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Human Condition»), a book in which he participated as the main Coordinator and author of the article *"Hacia un cambio cultural de la comprensión biológica de las emociones"* («Towards a cultural shift in the biological understanding of emotions»). Currently, he is a member of the Research Group on Philosophies of Language and Science (FLC) at the same university.

Outside the academic sphere, D.B. Reyes Solís has been part of indigenous movements in Ecuador, which has allowed him to have direct contact with the conflicts these communities face. For years, he has provided assistance to these movements, earning him recognition in the struggle for the rights of indigenous peoples. Furthermore, based on these experiences, he has recognized the need to *take* philosophy out of academia, seeking to move from theory to practice. With this vision, in 2018, together with other Ecuadorian philosophers, he founded the Amawtay Philosophical Center. This Philosophical Center aims to move away from the encrypted and confusing language typical of academia so that the rest of the people can have access to the tools that philosophy offers. Consequently, the members of this group have trained as philosophical consultants. Darwin Reyes has been one of the pioneers in Ecuador in what is known as *Philosophical Consultation*.

1. Tell us about yourself. How did you come to study ethics? Why did this become important to you?

My name is Darwin Reyes and I am a professor at the Universidad Politécnica Salesiana in Quito, Ecuador. All my training has been in philosophy: Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate. I have always been focused on the field of philosophy. I have not been interested in any other profession, even though in countries like Ecuador it is often more convenient to study other careers. I came to Ethics out of the need to respond to the social processes that countries like those in Latin America are going through.

I come from a rural background, which is why I had contact with the indigenous world from childhood. This contact led me to consider ethics for addressing more concrete problems. Along with this, I also came to ethics out of a need to respond to contemporary conflicts, such as geopolitics and economics. My personal experience has also led me to ethics: issues posed by children, students, etc. Universalist ethics is not useful for the everyday problems that both they and I faced.

2. What do you understand by the applied ethics?

I consider it to be a way of conceiving ethics. In a way, it has always been there. Applied ethics is the ethics that addresses concrete problems, which can even be controversial: as poverty, genetic manipulation, and things like that.

This discipline seems to have been strengthened by specific issues: the technological and the ecological. I believe these two axes are what have given applied ethics renewed momentum.

3. What influence did the applied ethics have on you?

It has allowed me to have a better approach and work with people, as it has helped me understand ethical-moral conflicts. It helps one manage daily conflicts in social relationships more adequately. It also leads to better decisions

in political and community actions. Because, on the contrary, with theoretical ethics there is a universal principle, but in the indigenous context, of poverty, violence, and social struggles, those universal principles are not useful. Moreover, the ethical universalism causes even more conflicts. Applied ethics for me would be putting ethics into action. Universalism is a problem of language, even of the brain. One must work in the act.

Let's take as an example the last indigenous uprising in Imbabura. How do they discuss to make decisions? If you impose a rule on them, for example "No to violence," they have no possibility of defending themselves. But if we look at the concrete problems: protesting, escaping poverty, fighting against a government that denies them access to education and health, etc., then ethics makes sense when it works on what is happening in the immediate experience. One must see ethics in actions, not in abstract and universal constructions.

4. How does the applied ethics differ from the theoretical ethics?

I have encountered this discussion when teaching Kant to my students. For me, Kant is a theory, not a practical ethics, because of how he handles the ethical concept and how he establishes a foundational principle. Theoretical ethics seeks axiomatic principles that can be defined as normative for any situation, or at least for most situations. This is definitely a deductive process. And this seems to me a fatal error, not only with ethics, but with everything human. That's why I oppose this type of philosophical conceptions.

5. Can you name some authors who present applied ethics as a separate discipline or area?

There is a very strong debate on this. You will not find philosophers who agree with this question and its possible answers. But I believe Socrates was already a practical philosopher and so were the Cynics. They had a very practical ethics. They dared to resolve conflict in the moment.

6. How would you describe the established tradition of the applied ethics?

Europe has been the one that has discussed these matters the most, not us. The Middle Ages strongly proposed the idea of a normative ethics, because as “there is a God” who is an absolute, and God is the “good,” then goodness is also an absolute for them. This type of experience absolutizes ethical norms: one must be good because God is good. Later, in Modernity, ethics tries to be turned into a kind of rational science. These issues seek an absolute ethics for humanity; that is the problem of theoretical ethics. Practice focuses on contexts, on what is given, and that’s why it varies.

For example, in political conflict or in the identity struggles of indigenous peoples here in Ecuador. It is not possible to impose a universal norm on an individual person in the differentiated contexts. It is not the same, for example, a black person from the outskirts involved with gangs in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, and a Norwegian with free education and cultural support. Neither is better or worse than the other, but their contexts make a big difference in what can be considered *good*. So the tradition of applied ethics, at least in this part of the world, is not very solid yet, due to the contexts we experience.

7. What schools of applied ethics could you mention?

Bioethics, for example, is a form of ethics applied to life. I consider that the strongest example we have of an applied ethics in philosophy. I would also refer to environmental ethics.

8. Is there any distinction between applied ethics and practical philosophy?

I believe not, they correspond to each other, they are on the same line. What applied philosophies seek is to have a philosophical field where one can work directly with people or communities. That is their quest: to be able to materialize a philosophical process. And for that, we generally use applied ethics. Because it is not possible to use a conceptual ethics to work directly with people or communities. That’s why I believe they are related; they work together.

9. What is applied ethics “applied” to?

I believe it applies to conflict in action. For example, in Ecuador, with the issue of abortion: you could have an absolute norm that says “life must be defended,” which is the norm used by the right-wing here in Latin America to prevent the legalization of abortion. But when you work with extreme peripheral populations, pregnancy is not a life-giving act, it is an act of aggression, an act of violence. When you see those peripheral extremes, the concept doesn’t work for you, the axiom doesn’t work for you. Because they are very different cases. The social structures here annihilate the lives of those pregnant women. If they are truly in defense of life, they should not prohibit the decriminalization of abortion. That is our conflict.

So, it can be applied to any specific conflict. In reality, you can take any bioethical conflict: cloning and poverty, for example. But in our case, you can go to the outskirts and ask yourself why poverty exists. There is no normative act, because a normative act would be to say “these people don’t work.” But those people are often the ones who work the hardest, even more than those who have money, and they will never be able to escape poverty due to social structures. So applied ethics allows you to see fundamental issues in action to better understand certain social processes.

10. How does applied ethics help in decision-making in real-life situations?

Applied ethics allows you to contextualize. I’ll give you another example. A 12-year-old boy from Santa Marta — that is from an impoverished sector in Ecuador, dominated by gangs and mafias, where the police do not enter, the state does not enter, no authority enters that sector. This boy, in his context — being violent towards people who are also violent towards him — what would a universal ethics say here? That being violent is wrong? In this case, this boy has to learn to fight, to be violent, because he has no other possibility. His context teaches him to defend himself violently because he hasn’t had a structure that regulates that problem. They could even kill him, and in a way, in his context, that is everyday life.

Someone might say “those are not everyday acts,” but they don’t take into account that for many populations they are. There are interviews with child hitmen in Guatemala, Mexico, Ecuador, etc. They are 14 to 16 years old, and when asked if they think killing is wrong, they say “Yes. But I know I’m going to die in 2 or 3 years. They will kill me, but I’ll have a good time in the meantime. This is how I earn my living. If I weren’t a hitman, I wouldn’t have any money, and I would die anyway.” In those contexts, morality for judging actions becomes conflicted. And there, applied ethics has value.

11. How does applied ethics function in political and social issues?

That’s why I place conflict as the fundamental axis of ethics. Because when there is no conflict, there is no need for it. Conflict is generally not only personal; it is structural. That’s why I like to relate ethics to geopolitics. For example, when transnational corporations come and set up mining operations in the jungle, where indigenous peoples live, they generate a conflict that the inhabitants of that area did not have before. These relationships are not about “good,” but about economics, political interests, transnational interests, etc. Applied ethics helps you see the structure of those problems to understand the central conflict.

12. Please provide an example of a moral dilemma that could be studied in the field of applied ethics.

The most developed field there is bioethics. There are specific examples there. Here in Ecuador, the issue of euthanasia is generating a strong debate. As you know, more than a year ago, the constitutional court authorized a person to receive assistance for a controlled death. This sparked many conflicts and debates here about whether it is lawful or not. On the other hand, the Church, which has a lot of power in Ecuador, says it is not lawful because there is a “supreme norm”: the defense of life. Here there are two forms of ethics: the absolute — the church’s — and the applied — the contextual. The church, as it says, defends life until the last moment. They want to apply it to every case. So, if a woman has terminal bone cancer, and the pain is unbearable, the church would force her to endure that pain because “life must be defended.”

On the other hand, an applied ethics, which goes to specific cases, like the example of this woman, allows her to die with dignity and find relief from that unbearable pain she suffered.

13. Is there a strategy to anticipate conflicts?

This question is very complex, but I believe there is. But pay attention to what I say: I only believe, I am not sure. But I am convinced, and I am going to use as a utopia the fact that it is possible to prevent conflict. I will use another examples. First, the personal fact. That is, if we had some structures of care — responsible parents, affectively competent, with healthy bonds, who have taken care of themselves, — we would have people with the better psychic structures to face life. That is a form of prevention. But if we continue to have what we have had until now — abandoning parents, alcoholics, without affection, mothers without the possibility of having an internal process to take care of themselves, — conflict cannot be avoided. That society will have young people who kill each other, who commit suicide at an early age, with great imbalances. In the end, all this is inherited. Conflicts can be prevented, but humans also have that *negative* aspect that makes it impossible to sustain this in the long run. For example, in the economy: indigenous peoples don't matter, profits matter. In those cases, you already have to contextualize ethics. This is a *utopos*: a non-place to direct action, a horizon to go towards. In hermeneutics, they call it *horizons of understanding*.