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SOCIAL STANCES, EMOTIONS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FEAR¹

abstract

The paper presents five main social stances: to refuse, to suffer, to accept, to assent and to make something one's own. They depend on kinds of relationship between an interior attitude and an exterior manifestation. The second main contribution of the paper consists in a discussion of fear and its relationships to social stances. Studying emotions helps to stress the similarities and the differences between social stances and emotions and among social stances (see e.g. rebellion and refusal). The final part of the paper tests the conclusions of the previous part by discussing Eichmann's Nazism as presented by Hannah Arendt. The paper gives an example of how ethics can be enlightened by the tools of social philosophy.

keywords

social stances, acceptance, fear, anger, Eichmann

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- 1. Introduction** Classic moral philosophy has developed over the centuries some important and sophisticated theories to justify moral judgment, such as deontic ethics, virtue ethics, or utilitarianism. Twentieth Century ethical reflection has gone a step further, proposing a new approach: ethics can be better grounded in the light of the foundations of politics, through a discussion of the conditions of justice and social agreement. This is one specific original contribution by John Rawls, the libertarians and the communitarians. I hope that a further step, what we may call the Twenty-first Century turn, will take into account new elements offered by social philosophy. Moral philosophy, I will try to show, can better grasp its own specificity and limits by understanding that moral and social deontic norms are often interdependent and interconnected, sometimes even in conflict.
- In what follows, I will present a phenomenology of social stances and I will discuss the main ways in which they relate to emotions. I will then dedicate to fear a good part of the theoretical discussion. The attempt is to show that ethics and the moral judgment can be enlightened by the tools of social philosophy.
- The decision to give fear so much attention depends on the fact that it is an important emotion, for its power to give strongly compelling reasons for action. Its sometimes bold, sometimes subtle presence is very important not only for the societies evidently built on fear, but also for those just apparently free from it. It happens in fact that what it is feared does not concern just life and physical safety. The last paragraph will be a case study to test the general discussion given in the first part of the paper.
- 2. Social stances** An essential discussion of social stances can be developed by answering two main questions: “What are they?” and “Are they reducible to an exterior manifestation?” (see also Terravecchia 2015). Answering these questions is propaedeutic to a discussion of the relation between social stances and emotions.
- A social stance is a disposition of the social agent which inclines the agent to respond in a certain way to social realities, such as requests, offers, proposals, threats, emerging social bonds. It is important to notice that the inclination here is not just a preference among alternatives, it has rather a normative dimension. Because of this, one can act in contrast to

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her stance, but in that case she has to explain her good reasons for doing that or, if need be, she has to apologise.

The social stance is a kind of “yes”, or “no”, or a neutral attitude, which can determine the agent’s decisions, acts and further stances. For example, the treaty offered by an enemy can be accepted, or refuted. It can even be suffered if there are not acceptable alternatives. One can give her assent to the treaty, thinking that it is the best thing to do. Eventually, the agent can decide to be not just the addressee of the offer, but also to be proactive, playing a fully active role. After the decision about the social stance to be taken, everything changes. Social obligations rise for the social agent and she has to deal with them, at least until she changes the stance taken or until something else, which is essential in the situation, changes. A phenomenology of social stances shows that they are at least five: to refuse (or rebel against), to suffer (or to be subject to), to accept, to assent and to make something one’s own.

Each social stance is the result of a relationship between an interior attitude and an exterior manifestation. There are three possible values for each of them: negative (to say “no”), neutral (not to say “no”, which is not yet saying “yes”) and positive (to say “yes”). Let us examine now each of the social stances in the light of these three values. To refuse implies a negative value from the side of the interior attitude and a negative value on the side of the exterior manifestation: the social agent does not want what is offered, proposed, etc. and she manifests it. To suffer has a negative interior attitude, but it has a positive exterior manifestation too. Here the social agent makes the best of a bad situation: though she does not like it, she grins and bears it. To accept, on the other hand, has a neutral interior attitude and a positive exterior manifestation. This is the case when the agent wants to see what happens, not having reasons to say no. The fourth case, to assent, has a positive interior attitude as well as a positive exterior manifestation. This is maybe the simplest case and is famously exemplified by the “*fiat mihi secundum Verbum tuum*” (“be it done unto me according to Thy word”, Luke 1:38). Finally, the case of making something one’s own does not differ in degree from the assent. It rather differs as to the distance of the agent to what has been the term of the decided stance: all the previously discussed cases entail a certain distance which is not the case here. The initiative of the other is, in the present case, fully shared in a proactive way.

Social stances are dispositions. They last in time and, as said, they are the reasons for decisions and actions, and eventually to take other social stances. Laura, for example, being a friend of Kate, could have to decide whether or not to help her friend to pass an exam. Such a decision will give the background reasons to do actions such as to go to Kate’s home, to study with her, to bring her a few helpful books. The disposition is a source of normativity and so social stances rule the action: as friend, Laura is obliged to assist Kate. Of course, she could decide to decline the task, but then she should show her friend that she has more urgent things to do and it would be appropriate to apologize for not helping. Explanation and apologies reveal that there are norms obliging *pro tanto*. One could point out that friendship is a social bond, not a social stance, but every social bond implies social stances and in fact, for example, one can accept or refuse a friendship or she can accept or refute her family bonds. In any case, one must take a stance: not taking any is impossible, because this would still be a case of suffering or accepting. Social normativity comes from instituted social reality or (*vel*) emerging social entities but all of them are not effective, unless they are at least suffered.

Emotions are dispositions too (this remains true, even if moods are more stable as dispositions, see Deonna, Teroni 2012: 4), but social stances as such are not emotions. The ways in which social stances are related to emotions is at least threefold. Social stances (1) can be contingently connected to emotions, (2) they can be typically accompanied by emotions and they can be (3) causally related to emotion. An example of a contingent connection is seen

3. Social stances and emotions: the threefold relationship

in the case of a girl who has received a coloured and funny love declaration, emphatically performed by a clown on the street. The situation explains why she is amused, an emotion which of course is not dependent on her smiling refusal. Indeed, refusing someone's love declaration, as such, is not connected with amusement. However, the same girl would typically feel joy, probably mixed with embarrassment, if the clown were her boyfriend crazily though seriously asking for her hand. In this case, her assent would be typically accompanied by joy. Other examples of typical though not necessary connections between social stances and emotions are indignation, associated with refusal when what is refused has to do with important disvalues, and anger, associated with rebellion. Here the emotions help to shed light on the differences between rebellion and refusal. Such differences are not evident from a strictly cognitive perspective, both being a "saying no". On the other side, apathy is typically connected with acceptance. Finally, to exemplify the third case, emotions are the reasons for assuming social stances: one can give her assent to join a political party because she likes its leader, or a girl can give her assent to marry the clown, because she loves him. It is clear that the causal relation is not excluding freedom, it rather shows the reasons for its exercise.

4. Fear and social stances

Fear plays a central role in the history of political philosophy. Thomas Hobbes, as known, in his *Leviathan* (1651) indeed considers fear as the root of political life: it is fear that pushes people to accept the social contract (see ch. 17 and ch. 20 where he distinguishes between the reciprocal fear and the fear of the Sovereign). It is disputable and indeed it is widely discussed in political philosophy whether Hobbes is right on this within the political theory (see e.g. Blits 1989, Debrix 2009, Ginzburg 2008, Goodin, Jackson 2007). In social philosophy however, or at least in the phenomenology of social stances, the role of fear is clear. Fear can be a reason for the first two social stances (to refuse and to suffer). About the third stance, acceptance, fear should be at least accompanied by other positive reasons or emotions to reach a balanced, neutral, interior disposition. Finally, fear cannot be presented as a positive motivating reason in the last two social stances, to assent and to make something one's own. It may seem that someone could make her own something because of fear, but if fear is the reason of her stance, then she is just acting *as if* she were making it her own (having the possibility, it may be interesting here to discuss the special case concerning self deception). These two last stances require a positive interior attitude and this excludes fear as a direct reason. All this also shows that the social stances on which proactive behaviour and social communities are largely grounded do not have fear as direct reason. Therefore, fear is not sufficient to give an account of the social reality, as shown by a phenomenology of social stances.

The relationship between social stances and fear is threefold: fear can typically accompany one social stance as we will see; it is causally related to another social stance and, finally, it is contingently connected with a third one. As for the first case, to suffer is typically connected with fear, though of course not exclusively. From ancient times to Twentieth Century totalitarianisms fear has been an *instrumentum regni*. In ancient societies, assent was considered unnecessary and refusal was made impossible, or at least very dangerous, acceptance was difficult to be gained by the power, so to suffer was the typical option for the people. Rebellion was terribly punished with a twofold result to destroy the stronger opponents and to give an example: entire cities robbed and razed, people enslaved after many atrocities or brutally killed. All this was meant to create the background common knowledge that to refuse the requests of the power is extremely dangerous. It is now easier to understand Machiavelli's reasonable advice to the prince (*The Prince*, 1532): "it is much safer to be feared than loved" (ch. 17). Interestingly enough, Machiavelli's further advice is to avoid that fear becomes hatred. We can understand why: hatred is strong enough to motivate a rebellion, as fast as it is doable. Hatred, indeed, gives very strong reasons to revolt notwithstanding fear.

After many attempts, blood spread and tears, the human kind has found, through institutions (Montesquieu's doctrine of separation of powers is a classical example), forms of collective life not ruled by fear for life and for essential values (the so called human rights).

Fear can be causally related to refusal: one can refuse the request to take a flight, because she has an irrational fear of flying, even if she knows that an airplane is the safest means of transportation. Let us also consider a man who refuses a puppy as gift because he fears dogs: as a child he was badly bitten. From a rational point of view, he can explain his fear, but still the reason for his refusal is an instinctive emotion that sounds odd, watching the cute puppy. Yet, fear still motivates quite reasonably the stance of not having anything to do with dogs. Here the emotion becomes the reason for action. Political history gives many examples of causal relation of fear with social stances. French revolution history maybe presents the most famous example: The Great Fear (17 July - 3 August 1789), a popular revolt in the countryside.

There are still two important topics to be discussed about fear within the field of social philosophy: its contents and its relevance in action. As to contents, it is necessary to distinguish at least between four main general contents: the fear for life and for one's own physical safety; the fear for one's honour; the fear for the agent's properties, and finally, the fear for the safety of other people, especially of those with whom the social agent is bound. Of course, the first content of fear is at least *prima facie* much more compelling than the others, but one should not underestimate these, especially the second and the fourth. Social life could be so much negatively conditioned by the loss of honour that it may well happen that the agent, after loosing it, finds no reason to live so that the final result of the first two cases is the same. About the fear for those with whom the social agent is bound, it can be an even stronger reason for acting than fear for one's own safety: the agent who may accept the sacrifice, may not be ready to sacrifice her loved ones.

Even in societies that would be free from physical violence, the fear system would not be necessarily absent. There are forms of pressure that have to do with threatening the honour. These forms of violence can be hard to be detected, since they tend to be subtle, working on the background, from the "not said". Nonetheless, they are effective and they can deeply influence, and eventually manipulate, people.

A discussion of the contents of fear helps to understand how much it is relevant and from this the levels of responsibility of the social agent. Understanding the connection between fear and actions is essential to morally evaluate such actions, because the presence of fear may help to scale down the responsibility of the agent. This is true for a single act, as well as for social dispositions. For example, a man obliged to do something bad by a gunman threatening his life is judged with indulgence by the law and from a moral point of view. Here the emotion plays an important role, showing the relevance of the interior attitude in taking a stance. Moreover, the presence of the emotion of fear, if detected, helps to understand the origin of the action for its deep compelling roots and the limits of the free act.

It is useful to test a new conceptualisation, to show if and how far it explains the phenomena, i.e. if it helps to better understand the facts and the values involved in real life situations. For this reason, I will now discuss an exemplar case to see if the theory works and if it is useful for a better understanding of the social reality. I take as an example the notorious case of Adolf Eichmann, as presented by Hannah Arendt in her famous *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt 1963). For the purpose of the present discussion, it is enough to test if the proposed theoretical framework works well for Arendt's Eichmann, so to say.

Nazism gave the German people positive reasons to be embraced, such as its fight against unemployment and against hyperinflation, its defence of national values, the perspective of a

5. Fear: its contents and its relevance in action

6. Testing the theory

glorious future for the country. It provided also negative reasons, e.g. the fear of communism or the idea that “without us disorder and chaos will reign”. Considering the hard times for Germany in the Thirties, from an internal and an international point of view, and considering the weakness of its institutions, the positive reasons could have been easily turned into negative. In this case they would sound as the fear of unemployment, the fear of being a humiliated country that has lost its values. All this gave many Germans the reasons to suffer the Nazis presence or to accept their methods. Others were ready to refuse Nazism, but not having the power to change the situation by fighting as individuals, they had to suffer the events. The fear for one’s safety and sometimes for one’s life prevented almost any resistance and led the vast majority of Germans to suffer or to accept Nazism.

In this historical context, Eichmann decided to join the S.S. accepting a proposal. Here it is Arendt’s page about the episode: “Kalterbrunner had said to him: Why not join the S.S.? And he had replied, Why not? That was how it had happened, and that was about all there was to it” (Arendt 1963: 31). Eichmann initially did not give his assent to Nazism, as Arendt well explains: “He had no time and less desire to be properly informed, he did not even know the Party program, he never read *Mein Kampf*” (*ibidem*). His frustrating life of a mediocre man of the lower middle class, a condition without prospects, pushed him to say a kind of “let us see what happens”. If this is his starting point, after a while the propaganda, his sincere admiration for Hitler and his desire to pursue a career, led him to give his full assent to Nazism and to follow orders scrupulously. Here one can see how the party worked, forging his interior disposition: “He was perfectly sure that he was not what he called an *innerer Schweinehund*, a dirty bastard in the depths of his heart; and as for his conscience, he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to do – to ship millions of men, women, and children to their death with great zeal and the most meticulous care” (Arendt 1963: 23).

He was not acting because of hate against Jewish. He somehow considered himself as an idealist. Here is the explanation given in the book:

“An «idealist» was a man who lived for his idea – hence he could not be a businessman – and who was prepared to sacrifice for his idea everything and, especially, everybody. When he said in the police examination that he would have sent his own father to his death if that had been required, he did not mean merely to stress the extent to which he was under orders, and ready to obey them; he also meant to show what an “idealist” he had always been” (Arendt 1963: 40). Hate would have explained a stance of refusal of the Jewish people. Eichmann in many occasions and with many examples tried to show that this was not his position up to the point that when he was told about the Final Solution, these were his feelings: “I now lost everything, all joy in my work, all initiative, all interest; I was, so to speak, blown out” (Arendt 1963: 29).

Here we see a case in which emotions accompany but not determine the social stance. We also see a conflict of the social norm (obey orders) with the moral one (do not harm the innocent) and we know how he solved the dilemma tragically.

Eichmann’s position, during the process, would have been better if he had demonstrated that he was under the influence of fear for his life, or for the life of his family, when complying with Nazi’s orders. Arendt, for example, writes about Himmler’s “justified physical fear of Hitler”. His fear, however, did not prevent Himmler to stop the Final Solution. He hoped in this way to get a merciful treatment after the War. Eichmann could have simply followed Himmler and the “moderate wing” of the S.S., but he preferred to be faithful to the *Führer*, challenging Himmler’s orders. After all, neither his free joining the S.S., nor his doing his job “with great zeal” had anything to do with fear. For these reasons we can say that he did not suffer, nor he merely accepted Nazism. He gave his full assent to it and this was considered unforgivable by the jury. The absence of fear, where expected as a discharge, is an aggravating factor.

The first part of the paper presents the five social stances: to refuse (or to rebel against), to suffer (or to be subject to), to accept, to assent and to make something one's own. They are a result of a relationship between an interior attitude and an exterior manifestation in a way that characterizes each of the stances. The social stances are not emotions and the first main contribution of the paper was to discuss the threefold relationship between social stances and emotion: contingently connected, typically connected and, finally, causally related. The second main contribution was given through a discussion of fear, by showing its relationships to social stances. Fear was discussed taking into account its four main general contents (the agent's life and physical safety, the agent's properties, the honour, and finally the safety of others, especially the loved ones) and its relevance in action.

Among the secondary and still relevant results of the paper, it was possible to notice that discussing emotions helped to stress some aspects otherwise not evident from the mere discussion of the social stances: rebellion and refusal, have in common their being a "saying no", but they differ because rebellion, but not refusal, is typically, though not necessarily, connected to anger. It was also important to stress a common feature of social stances and emotions: they all are dispositions.

Through its specific contributions the paper tries to give a wider contribution by showing that ethics and the moral judgment can be enlightened by the tools of social philosophy. In fact, a case such as Eichmann's trial was discussed in depth in the last part of the paper. Social philosophy reveals a normativity which interacts and sometimes enters in conflict with the normativity of ethics. In this case we have the social-moral dilemmas such as: "Am I obliged to obey the orders, or must I follow the ethical rule not to harm the innocent?". Emotions add a further level of complexity to this field: their compelling power may interfere with the two normative domains adding some more issues. What they do, or miss to do, is relevant to judge the action.

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7. Conclusions