

FOR A NEW PLACE: CONDITIONS AND MAN'S MORAL IMAGE

Flávia Martins Guimarães Fung

Prefeitura Municipal de Campinas / Universidade São Francisco / Faculdades Pitagoras /
Universidade de São Paulo

Abstract: The study of Victor Hugo's work, *Les Misérables*, in his film version, focusing on the theme ethics, development and human moral conduct, having as theoretical basis the thoughts of Aristotle, Durkheim, Freud, Adler, Piaget, La Taille and, particularly, Kohlberg's theory on Moral Development, by which develops the analysis of moral profile represented by the main characters of the dilemma. Associating the social conduct of the stigmas and integrations between the so-called social trash and righteous.

Keywords: moral development, ethics, justice.

Introduction

Right or wrong is one of the issues that continually guides the moral look of a man about himself and his peers. The answer or judgment, however, although apparently universal, is permeated with drawbacks. At the time of decision for action, each person evaluates what it looks better driven by emotions and reasons built in social experiences and the marks that this story leaves.

Is it possible to set the right or wrong of one's action? Is it possible to define universally what is fair?

The dialogue on what's fair appears in every field of the constituted knowledge of man's formation: by the faith that is presented to be professed; by the existing legal rules defined by the State of their mother country; by family and parenting group norms; by the knowledge of science presenting the truths to be considered to act with yourself, with the other and the environment.

If every human group has a story and each person gives it a particular significance, how do we form a collective morality? May it be relative? When?

Faced with the challenge of the analysis and the educational use of Victor Hugo's work, *Les Misérables*, in his film version, it is brought in this article theoretical foundation on ethics and

morality, aiming to help the search for answers to these and other points of reflection that may arise.

This work, despite having a French historical scenario of the beginning of the nineteenth century, brings up nowadays conflicts that affect human coexistence and interaction, social judgement on what is fair or unfair, what is marginal or socially accepted, the individual or collective shame that the national and international scene of imbalance and moral transition of this century evokes.

Ethics, Moral and the Moral being

The word “ethics” comes from the Greek term “ethike philosophy” used to indicate “moral philosophy” or “way of being”. In the transition of power from Greek to Roman, culturally appears the term “moral”, translation of “ethos” for the Latin “mos” or “mores”. The two terms are used routinely to indicate the character and way of being of someone or some community. Vasquez (1984) points out that the behavior and customs are not born with men, but forms to be acquired and habits conquered by social coexistence.

Aristotle introduces the concept of "fair environment" defending the importance of balance and logic to form a moral society and an ethical man. However, what distinguishes these two terms, according to this philosopher? In Nicomano's work Ethics, the wise man presents ethics as the search for the good of oneself and the moral as conduct built in and for society, important for the constitution of the political being.

In the same work, Aristotle claims that happiness is the highest asset and that friendship and justice are the main virtues to reach it. It notes that it reflects on the political citizen, so friendship is the art of getting along in society, and justice the act of observing the law or the conventional standards set by the polis (general Justice). I would just like to mention that, apparently, among psychologists the flagship of morality is also justice. Piaget also considers it as the most rational of all.

Man to be considered virtuous, decent citizen, needs to be in line with the moral precepts and normative rules of the society he belongs to, only then he will be a righteous citizen and, consequently, happy.

It is important to start this article with a synthesis of the Aristotelian idea, for this thinker norths all studies of morals and ethics in Western society, despite looking exclusively for collective being.

From the philosophical basis, arise other moral concepts. Some with affective base (Durkheim, Freud) and others with rational dimension (Piaget, Kohlberg).

Durkheim, sociologist, shows the moral related to the feeling of the sacred, to the collective strength. He argues that fear and the desire to be recognized as a good man are motivators of human morality. Thus, the collective principles are feared and desired. Freud focus on the psychological being, the conflict lived between his personal desire and moral duty. To be accepted, one needs to lose freedom and become civilized, so man has an uncertain moral future. Both consider the man as a heteronomous being, dependent on the moral standard of the group to be moral.

Piaget was concerned with the epistemological being. He argues that man is a being that develops his potential through interaction. He builds himself morally through the heteronomy and can achieve autonomy, moral domain or self-regulation.

Heteronomous morality is linked to moral realism and the restrictions imposed by adults with unilateral aspect of the relationship that is defined by the respect for authority. The autonomy translates into the need for mutual respect, cooperation and screening of reason. For Piaget, morality or the capacity to decide and choose what is right or wrong evolves in stages.

The author presents the typologies of justice according to moral evolution. Her studies restate Aristotelian characterizations and are categorized as immanent, retributive and distributive.

In the film, we see the use of the retributive justice that generates a break with the social group and the punishment for an offense committed. There are two cases observed: the punishment of Valjean for food theft and the prostitute for generating disorder in the street. In both cases, the punishment was unproportional. For Valjean, the severity of the punishment was far above the committed act. In the case of the prostitute, the offense was not even her fault – she would have been harassed by youth from society – and penalized because of the immoral aspect of her work in society. Society never judges itself, assessing the inhumane conditions to which these individuals were released.

Piaget's studies were limited to the observation of children, up to the age he considered them autonomous, stage of acquiring abstract logical thinking. He advocated the idea that every man, except for negative intervention of the social environment, could become morally autonomous. His research based studies of the levels of moral development by Kohlberg and moral virtues for La Taille, both contributing to the expansion of knowledge on the issues. Kohlberg focuses on the pursuit of the process of the construction of the autonomy and studies groups beyond infancy, presenting six moral stages that can be achieved by humans.

At the conclusion of his study, he discovers that the majority of the population reaches at most the fourth or the fifth moral level.

As a research method, Kohlberg used the presenting of moral dilemmas to the group of people of his interest, asking them to submit solutions explaining their proposal, categorizing decisions and arguments presented earlier.

Kohlberg's moral levels and the characters' dilemma

From here, this article proposes to identify and understand the moral levels of development presented by the characters involved in the dilemma created by Victor Hugo. Put together, we will make reflections on the relativism or not of ethics and moral. Let us look at the dilemmas present in the work *Les Misérables*.

The main moral dilemma of the work takes place around two characters of humble origin and little education that, in difficult situations of hunger and social helplessness, decide to act immorally, breaking the socially established standards of conduct. Before the law and most men, they are treated as "social garbage", condemned for their mistakes. However, during the plot a web of new opportunities for the "immoral ones" is created from the forgiveness and generosity.

Jean Valjean is the protagonist of the work and his dilemma can be read in the following transcript:

Jean Valjean, of a humble peasant origin, orphaned without a father or mother since his childhood, was collected by an older sister, married with seven children. When she became a widow, he became the family breadwinner, and so consumed his youth in rude and poorly paid jobs (...). In a particularly harsh winter, she lost her job, and hunger knocked at the door of the miserable family. In desperation, he resorted to crime: broke the window of a bakery for stealing a loaf of bread. (...) Taken to court for the crime of theft and burglary, he was sentenced to five years in the galleys. (...) Even in his ignorance, he was aware that the punishment had been imposed was too hard for the nature of his fault and that the bread he had stolen to stave off the hunger of an entire family could not justify the long years in prison to which he had been convicted (Victor Hugo).

This plot shows as the character initiator of the forgiveness web a bishop, who hosts Jean Valjean when he is released to probation after 19 years in prison. Wasn't the condemnation only five years? This fact makes it possible to observe the contempt with which a man convicted of theft was put through and imagine the look on himself and the human being he became. The bishop is facing a bitter and hurt being who amazes he housed. Unfortunately, the moral "blindness" makes Jean act erratically again. In the middle of the night, he steals the silver cutlery and attacks the bishop. Jean is arrested by the police with all

objects and taken to the bishop, who claims to have given him the silver and also asks for what reason he forgot the candlesticks, which should be worth at least two thousand francs.

The Bishop's generosity, revealed by offering Jean resources needed to start a new life, and the forgiveness granted by that religious authority renewed his hopes and was the strength to start a new life.

We have the bishop as an example of post-conventional maturity, level III, whose moral value of actions are not in accordance with the rules and social and moral standards in force; It is connected to the universal ethical principles such as the right to life, liberty and justice. There is a relativist look at the social contracts, whose purpose is to ensure that these ethical foundations are preserved. If it does not, the laws should be changed and even disobeyed.

Jean Valjean at this stage of history, a person experienced only in the pre-conventional level of moral, living or circumventing the rules that existed only on his outside; who had accepted the punishment as confirmation of their error, even considering it too severe, is replaced by the chance to leave the hedonistic stage and develop morally.

A person at the stage of relativistic instrumental hedonism has the manipulative and instrumental moral guidance, used to serve his own needs and interests in a world where there are other people with their interests, where the socio-moral perspectives are coordinated and prioritized from the individual point of view.

The protagonist can renew his way, makes use of a new identity and re-creates his own life. As Mr. Madeleine, became a successful entrepreneur and becomes mayor of the community he adopted as his own. However, does not reach the peace although being a good and righteous man. In addition, due to an act of bravery, he is identified by Javert, his tormentor in prison, current head of the local police, as the fugitive who never submitted to probation.

At this time of the plot, both reveal conventional level of morality, for they seek to live according to the established rules, what is socially accepted and shared by the majority, respecting the established order. Therefore, there is a tendency to act in order to be well regarded in the eyes of others, to merit esteem, respect and consideration.

The level is the same, but the stages are different. Jean is in stage three, which behaves in the search for social approval, wanting to be a good boy. He wants to meet the expectations of others, caring for others and acts by the idea "do unto others as you would have them do unto you"

Javert is in stage four, is oriented to the law, order and social progress. Defines and justifies his actions by duty to maintain the functioning of the institutions as a whole, self-

respect or conscience understood as fulfillment of obligations set for himself or consideration of the consequences of the acts. He conducts himself as an impartial, institutional and legal observer. On behalf of the law calls for investigation of Mr. Madeleine, he investigates the past of the mayor and classifies him as a wanted criminal. Valjean has to take the decision to surrender and save a homeless man accused in his place and assume the fugitive status, or keep his unblemished new identity to keep up the good steward of many. He decided to save the beggar.

Jean lived in his dilemma two moral precepts: one seemed to defend the collective good, looking at himself as the one who does not indulging, would continue to help many to have a better life and the city to progress at the expense of the risk of a single life. He would act this way by the criterion of utility as in Stage 5, which focus on guidance for the democratic social contract, for the law relativism based on the calculation of the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

The other reflection showed him his selfishness to keep the lie leaving an innocent suffer. This continued change of reflection symbolizes the affirmation of Kolberg that people stroll by different moral stages, depending on the circumstances.

Valjean surrenders acting by universal principles of conscience, acting by rationality, universality of values, the most mature moral stage. The truth and the other's right to be defended by it, prevails, even with personal or collective losses. It was not the other that showed him who he was, but he secretly knew himself. The original work, it is described one of his dialogues with his own conscience that condemns him when thinks not to reveal the truth.

However, he had a promise to keep and this was the reason to flee again, doing some good for someone else, Fantine.

Fantine is a poor girl who becomes pregnant unmarried and has to leave her daughter under the care of a family and leave in search of work to support it. She goes to the city where Jean Valjean was mayor, and working in his industry ends up being fired, the result of moral prejudice as the organizer of the group discovers her moral "slide". She becomes a prostitute and suffers various abuses. In a street fight caused by society's boys, she is arrested unfairly as a troublemaker. Learning about it, Jean follows in her defense. He tries to replace losses suffered by the dismissal welcoming her, treating her illness and, after her death, adopting her daughter Cosette.

However, what moral condition has Fantine? In many situations, she asks for forgiveness for their fate before the social prejudices and consequences suffered by the

established rules. She thinks they are fair just because authorities imposed them. Morally, she is a small child, in the first stage of development. Her perception of herself will improve only over the pious look of Jean, but not enough to overcome the first level of maturity, Stage 2. She is just like Jean in the beginning of the plot.

The look of the other is presented in several parts of the work as a fundamental element of the representation of oneself to each person. We represent to ourselves, until the autonomous maturity, what the other reveals about ourselves. This fact allows thinking about the theories of representation of oneself.

Man is born undifferentiated from the world and people, only capable to realize its self, as a unit by the interaction. The split between "self" and "other" and start of the construction of the value of oneself from mirroring the look that notice it. Generally, it occurs from two years on. This metaphorized look of seeing oneself in the mirror and find one's image is linked for life and moral formation (or choices in moral dilemmas) when considering the judgment that other people can do about the decisions taken and the social value that acts and its consequences have.

Adler presents as the great human conflict the fight against one's perception of being less than moral perspective of society. He leads his reflection by the study of the complex of inferiority and superiority:

Long ago I insist on the fact that being a man is to feel inferior.
The fundamental law of life is to overcome the difficulties.
The human soul is not defined by the verb "to be", but by the verb become. (Adler, 1930/1933 cited La Taille, 2002, p. 62).

The characters Jean Valjean and Fantine represent very well the ongoing struggle to overcome the challenges to become someone better and the possible failures. How would Adler think about these characters?

War, capital punishment, racial hatred, as well as neurosis, suicide, crime, alcoholism etc., arise from a lack of social sense and should be understood as inferiority complexes, as negative attempts to solve a situation in an unacceptable and untimely way". (Adler, 1991 cited La Taille, 2002, p. 64).

It provokes a critical review on the limits of this analysis that shows the disregard of the social system and its moral failings. Is there a uniformity of opportunities for the right action, or society itself is organized according to the principles of cooperation, dialogue, building of a better society for all that characterizes the social sense?

Social standards and unequal conditions are external factors to the personal desire. The distance between what I am and what I want to be, the “becoming” suggested by Adler as a sense-making or social consciousness, can be prevented by society itself. A society that does not restore their perception of the people, represented by Javert chasing Jean, or the organizer of industry groups, who fired Fantine, does not allow the change of values that people can do themselves. Another situation is the social inequality that generates different moral dilemmas, but does not consider them in its principles and standards, as it is explicit in the text of Victor Hugo.

La Taille (2002), citing Piaget, debates the concept that even for adults, in the process of autonomy, despise the judgments of others is very difficult because we have the emotional need for approval, and give up this is not uncommon. Therefore, the moral conduct is continuously associated with the social representation of itself.

Final considerations

The work is to reflect on the continuing moral formation of a person during his pilgrimage. It serves as an example to Kohlberg’s assumption that we are people in constantly moral evolution and we are able to, after reaching a higher stage, to retake old patterns of previous stages.

Debate on the relativism of moral before dilemmas involving human survival needs, the judgment of what is good, good to how many... Dilemmas about the persecution of the past as the shadow of an evolving being, but cannot extricate themselves from guilt or social charges which is stuck in the minds or social judgment.

Mobilizes to think about the power of forgiveness or assistance from the other for the change of each person, and shows the different reactions of people on opportunities to change moral standards that life presents.

The work allows a trip on the human moral development and the perception of ourselves in this regard, while watching the movie we sympathize, agree or disagree with the actions of the characters.

Each character serves as a resource to trigger dialogue concerning human dilemmas, and help identifying the level of latent moral evolution in social actors who write the history of real life. The literary work of Victor Hugo, expressed in prose or dramatized, is timeless and transcends any cultural frontier, serving as a forming resource in ethics education and understanding of human moral development. The ongoing conflict between what is necessary,

what is right and what is good; the choices for ourselves and for the collective is the human saga, how we identify moral maturity and immaturity of the people.

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