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Recursion In Moral Mode
Who Can Cast The First Stone On Social Networks?

"Maybe you meant recursiveness"

"Everything is recursive." That answer closed the dialogue box on the screen and perpetuated an inescapable loop: any valuation you make will also be applicable to your own valuation and critique. The final point seems to me both frustrating and instructive; my female colleague G had underlined that my critique of prejudice in a journalistic piece was also moralizing: saying that something is bad is bad, and along that line of thinking, any argument becomes simplified until it is nullified in the web of the social media.

The notion of recursiveness (or recursion) comes from the world of computer science, and its definition seems to allude to programming processes and their shortcuts for the uninitiated. According to the common explanation, to understand the meaning of the term, you could evoke the meaning of words like "self-referentiality," autopoiesis," or "fractality." Something is recursive if it can be explained using its own definition; if it can be reproduced and maintain itself based on a cycle of programming; if it induces and copies from a same database, although on a different scale.

The notion of recursiveness refers to repetitive cycles based on the same logic; cycles that, through processes of induction, consecutively activate and order data and actions. If by this time you're feeling confused about the technical meaning of the term "recursiveness," let me offer you another definition from Google. In a simple search for the word "recursiveness," you might find the answer, "Did you mean: recursiveness?" Humor is part of teaching the design of what are called ordination algorithms, whose simplifying logic starts from processes of basic induction. A large collection of memes exists that very creatively insists on underlining the closed nature of the formula: recursiveness is defined by itself.

Although alien to the field of computer science, colleague G's response also has a tragic dose of sarcasm that may shed light on the apparent perpetuation of the conflict on the social media: while some intellectual voices consider it a given that we live in a polarized environment, others maintain that we have entered into a period of Puritanism. While some academics maintain that the Internet is a territory of discord, others emphasize the impossibility of dialogue in the digital framework.

In that complexity, "everything is recursive." Peeping out of G's sentence is perhaps that slight —or great—

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> Why does everything seem recursive in the digital maze? Why do those certainties create so much bother in academia? If everything is recursive or relative, what is the meaning of dialogue in this, our present?

irritation generated in our academies by the racket of the social media. In a world where everyone talks, nobody listens; in a world where everyone shouts, nobody hears; in a world where every single person is right, they are all at the same time wrong. The absolutes in question are in consonance with the closed, binary nature of technological recursiveness. The prosthesis from which we look at the world is of a binary origin, and in that destination, our look upon the world would seem to suffer from bichromy.

"Relativism." Another word that carries with it an accusation and accompanies G's initial concern and that might help us to avoid a lament: "Everything is relative, nothing is absolute." I remember particularly a high school philosophy class in which in one instant we visualized how the whole argument fell apart: If everything is relative, saying so is also relative. What is the place of sophists today? Can recursiveness be considered a form of sophism?

Let us rethink the sophist Protagoras (481-411 BC) and his affirmation that the world is made to the measure of he who contemplates it, and he who contemplates it in turn invents it. We are the measure both of what we believe to be true and of what we believe untrue; of what we believe exists and what we imagine is non-existent. Is our vision of the world self-referential? Are we the measure of all things? What is our idea of truth, of objectivity? Does calling an argument sophistry legitimize defending scientific truths to the death? Why does it bother us in academia that everyone can all be right on social networks?

The Reversal Game

Journalist x is right when he denounces ignorance and negligent behavior by society with regard to the pandemic. I'm right in underlining his mistake when he generalizes and stigmatizes those who don't look at the problem as he does, or those who "don't believe" —as he does— in scientific or institutional recommendations. My colleague G is right when she says that what I say can be reiterated in the reverse, that what I say contains a moral tautology, which I am condemning to a loop. So, are all the arguments correct? End of story? Dialogue over? From this point of view, recursiveness would seem to be the final argument. "The catastrophe of truth!" Do you like the title? Would you read that? Or would you prefer, "The Eclipse of Reason"? Or, I know: "The Era of Relativism!" I'm afraid to tell you that the proposition would not be alarmist, but a mere publishing marketing strategy. Actually, I find in the word "recursiveness" the possibility of unapologetically renewing our discussions about Truth, both in the socio-digital sphere and in the heart of our disciplines.

That is my hypothesis: according to the playful reversal principle, not only is the eclipse of Reason as a metanarrative made evident —as defined by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979)—, but something else also raises its head: a radical questioning of the authorities of knowledge, including our own. I think that in what we call polarization dwells a rebellion of autonomy for knowledge. If the institutions of knowledge are truly in crisis, it is not because technological loudspeakers have democratized —or relativized— truth, but rather because it is difficult for us to accept that Doubt as a principle of knowledge is not reserved exclusive to science.

The problem of our time is not recursiveness in and of itself or relativism, but the moralizing posture that we adopt when faced with it in the social sciences and the humanities. In the classroom, we are spurred by doubt, questioning; in the classroom, knowledge is always questionable. If academic knowledge advances it is because the Socratic method survives in the spirit of our universities. In this sense, the efforts against the supposed ambient relativism show us a glimpse of a selfish antagonism: How can you doubt me if I'm a scientist? How can you be convinced you're right if you aren't backed up by a degree?

Morals Are Always Recursive

My neighbor E doubts everything, and he is not a scientist. He'd like to have been, but he didn't go to the university. On the social networks, everything is distrust and bravado. They're full of "buts" and disqualifications. They're

always right, above all when the person on the other side of the screen shows his/her credentials, when he/she is trying to teach a moral lesson. For E, being right has always been a struggle, and more so now that he spends a great deal of his free time debating online about a wide variety of topics that come across his screen. How similar are G and myself to E? What degree of morality and closed-mindedness exists in our positions?

From the moral angle, it would seem that on the social media, we're all —men and women— summary objects and all —men and women— subject to accusation. The moral repetition on the social networks is as infinite as it is deafening. Every comment we publish activates, literally speaking, an invariable pattern of valuation (like-dislike, joy-anger, agreement-disagreement), but that is not due merely to the *sacred social media*; typical of our moral framework is dynamism, accommodation, recursion: to each human action corresponds a moral reaction, with or without technology.

In creation myths or cosmogonies, human life is created after destruction. In Christian Genesis, the transgression against heavenly mandate begins and closes the creation cycle, over and over again, whether because of sin, lies, hatred, violence, selfishness, or rancor. Divine justice (punishment) is the mark of the mythical rebeginning; this means that these kinds of narratives include a reiteration: the world is perpetually in a process of collapsing and being reborn.

To paraphrase Paul Ricoeur in *Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology* (1986), the gods tend to remake the world because once they create human beings, they invariably spawn moral dilemmas. According to this logic, we can say that morality is not only the central problem in creation myths, but it is also one of our problems in our technological uncertainty. The moral dilemma is always current. The world is a complex, dynamic construction of meaning, based on the cyclical reiteration of its moral principles. Every time human action—or a comment on social media— exists, a fissure opens up at our feet that threatens to widen. In that sense, morality is not synonymous with established values and customs in a specific society. Neither is it a matter of truths, but rather a perpetual adjustment, a negotiation of conflicts, an infinite reiteration subject to the circumstances of time and space. It is also not a space for opposing absolutes (fair/unfair; good/bad; truth/lie).

Therefore, despite the opposing opinions of some colleagues, whether men or women, to talk about a return to morality today does not mean that there is a resurgence of the values and customs of the past or a rise of conservatism against the kingdom of immorality. What we call "a return to morality" is nothing more than the social, day-to-day readjustment of the principles I mentioned above. The scandal lies in the fact that this becomes more and more visible and more interfered with. To paraphrase Gianni Vattimo in *Transparent Society* (1989), communications technologies make society more transparent. Technology, specifically digital technology, is what gives us this spectacular effect of moral dynamics. Today we are not only witness to an endless variety of human actions and forms of behavior, but also of human thoughts and fantasies that we assess from their performative angle, from the standpoint of their character as action.

In the confrontations on social media, what is at stake is the credibility of everyone, men and women, the nonsensical, the collapse of Truth (with a capital "T"). It is the alternation between heroism and monstrosity, between angel and beast, between wisdom and ignorance. This is where the fight between the morality of he/she who teaches lessons and the immorality of those who situate themselves, ironically, beyond good or evil, to teach lessons, as Nietzsche would say, materializes —or rather, digitalizes.[1] It is a classical problem of meaning that makes us return eternally to the moral question of the extrapolated absolutes: good and evil.

And it is worth saying: it can help us understand, using other words, what recursiveness is, the starting point of this article, or, rather, why everything seems recursive in the digital maze, why everything can be relative, why those certainties create so much bother in academia. If everything is recursive or relative, what is the meaning of dialogue in this, our present? What is the meaning of my debates, and my efforts (and those of G and of E) to make the world see that it is wrong, that its logic is flawed, contradictory, or just nonsense? What is the role we have as academics in a world already so full of truths? **VM**

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Notes

1 The author is referring to Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). [Editor's Note.]