1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between moral decision making of the human subject and the ontological model that one applies to (or rather, imposes on) reality. We wish to critically observe which objects we consider as bearers of moral value and how we verify their capacity to be such bearers. Before going to ontological consequences, we must first clarify the relation between ontology and ethics in the context of its application in the area of technologies. Ethics offers several approaches to understanding good and its interpretation. Due to different ways of understanding good, various ethics offer differing explanations of why humans do good and why they avoid evil. Our choices differ in spite of the fact that their common denominator is a pursuit of good. This is true, above all, in applied ethics. Human life as a value stands in the center of our efforts. This value, however, expresses itself differently in medical professions, in nursing, police, or in a school setting. The commonly used differentiation between general and applied ethics is fully valid here: general ethics talks about good in the sense of an autonomous object and applied ethics refers to it in terms of concrete ways of searching the good on various levels of human practice. The task of general ethics is to find a legitimizing framework in which we may justify and explain what is good and evil. In applied ethics, then, we apply this legitimizing framework into practice and determine which concrete actions are good and which are not.

Nevertheless, we are confronted with the following question: Are we able to find a common consensus in general ethics, that is, a consensus acceptable by all as an ideal of good, which we could then apply in practice? This is the desire, the wish that originated in the Enlightenment, which sought to replace the legally constitutive, universally valid and accepted role of God with the new authority of reason. Indeed, “the underlying characteristic of Enlightenment is an uncritical faith in the objectivity of human reason – in the capacity of reason (a metaphysical, transpersonal category) to explain the world and to teach the human race how to live in it” [2, p. 197]. This new authority was to have the same attributes as God. Reason, thus, was supposed to postulate universally valid rules that would be respected by all. Along
with Palitefka we may ask whether our contemporary Western civilization, driven by such ambitions, has any future at all [3, p. 33].

2. The question of Relativity and Plurality

The vision of modernity, originating from the Enlightenment, was a unity. This concept arises out of a conviction that there is but one universally valid truth that people across cultures and religions are able to understand and accept. For the enlightened reason, only that which can be proven, verified and ultimately proven as useful for man can be accepted as truth. This usefulness, however, ended up being reduced to an economic dimension. To prove the existence of good within the legitimizing processes of the Enlightenment was impossible. On the other hand, to measure usefulness through gain was and has remained possible, as we can witness in our everyday experience.

From its very conception, modernity has been confronted by plurality. It was held unacceptable for there to exist a different opinion which would vary from the commonly accepted one and yet be true. One common truth and one common good was the ideal of the age. The fulfillment of the ideal of truth in modernity, however, came into conflict with the freedom of the human. Freedom spawns a plurality of stances, attitudes and opinions, thereby calling into question the supposed unity of truth. This approach, in addition, often produces despair for which science has been unable to provide a solution, as Pavlíková points out [4, p. 193]. A number of authors concur that reason produced by the Enlightenment had become the cause of the biggest catastrophes of the past century. People murdered other people in the name of reason. Freedom rendered people unable to understand and accept. For the enlightened reason, only that which can be proven, verified and ultimately proven as useful for man can be accepted as truth. This usefulness, however, ended up being reduced to an economic dimension. To prove the existence of good within the legitimizing processes of the Enlightenment was impossible. On the other hand, to measure usefulness through gain was and has remained possible, as we can witness in our everyday experience.

Against the background of this historic experience, we are confronted today with an opposite extreme, the view that everything is permissible and justifiable. This phenomenon is generally linked with postmodernity. Postmodernity, on the other hand, shifts the whole reality to the pole of transcendence. Reason is not able to understand, it is not able to know and do good, hence it loses all its competences and authority. Both solutions are radical and neither of them is practically viable. The functioning of the first scenario, i.e. when reason transcends all of reality, is highly problematic because in order for us to be able to determine who is responsible of any given action and to whom one is responsible, we may perceive this responsibility from two perspectives. The first one revolves around one’s responsibility to someone, i.e. an authority which sets the norms. The second perspective focuses on the object of responsibility, that is, who or what are we responsible for. To be accountable to someone means to accept his (her) authority as a norm-giver and to respect his model of differentiation between good and evil. In the case of religious ethics, God is this norm-giver, guaranteeing by his transcendence the correct differentiation between good and evil. However, as we pointed out before, reason, too, strives to transcend reality and offer definite solutions to the question of what is good and what is evil. A peculiar dialectic relationship of reason to itself emerges here. Reason is the norm-giver, while simultaneously being the one who subordinates itself to the norm. Transcendence thus overlaps with immanence.

3. Between Reason and Irrationality

The rise and fall of reason from the time of the Enlightenment to the present has been accompanied by attempts at a correction and a new definition of the significance and the role of reason. Especially in the 19th century, several philosophical schools emerge which try to reduce the significance of rationality at the expense of “irrationally” defined principles of being. Voluntarism or the philosophy of values might be mentioned as good examples. Volition dominates the former one, while a discerning feeling rules the latter one. Both stand in a radical opposition to rational principles of formal logic and the economics that is often associated with it. That, which brings profit, is logically good and that, which brings loss, is evil. Helping one’s neighbor, taking care
This is precisely what has become a source of problems for the modern thinking and the application of reason as a tool of knowledge that transcends over the reality and which decides its fate. If humans, on account of their being smarter (i.e., more reasonable), claim transcendence over nature and other living things, then this notion of transcendence will lead them to an ecological crisis that we witness today. If one, in the name of any truth, claims transcendence over other people, then resulting from such notion of transcendence are human catastrophes, world wars, conflicts, refuges etc. There is an absence, in both cases, of responsibility, not only on the individual level but also on the social level, as Jurová argues in her recent study [9, p. 71].

What Kierkegaard indicated already in the 19th century, came to the forefront of philosophical and ethical discourses of the 20th century. Their solutions usually revolved around trying to redefine the ‘subject – object’ relationship, as well as around a new understanding of what we consider to be reality [10].

4. The new ontology of ‘Deep Ecology’

In addition to the failures of the supposed ‘naked rationality’ of modernity, we have presented a summary of an astute criticism from the side of postmodernity, pointing out that reason did not manage to prevent catastrophes from happening. Instead, reason posited itself into the position of a ruler over life and what it means to be human. Not only reality but also human dignity became immanent. It became an object of interpretations from the position of rationality.

This is where a key question arises, the question of relationship between subject and object. To what extent may we leave an open space for interpretation and can be interpreted and defined by reason? Applied ethics in relation to new technologies is always confronted with the question: on what basis can we determine the limits of reason? On one hand, we have given up on the ability of reason to create a meaning of being; on the other hand, thanks to new technologies, we have reached deep inside some of the most mysterious realms of human life. Crucial in this context seems to be the question: ‘who is the bearer of moral value?’. Is it the human being? If so, then we need to ask, who is a human being, when does one’s life begin and when could it be said that one’s life has ended? Can we, at least in a certain sense, speak of animals as bearers of moral value? Better yet, do the machines and the products of our intelligence and wisdom belong to the sphere of moral value bearers? Answers to these questions are closely linked to our particular ontological perspective.

We wish to present the holistic concept propounded by A. Naess. In his concept, Naess places the ontological dimension of the bearer of moral value on all living things, with which we co-create together a living organism and in which all of us share a mutual responsibility for the state of the living environment and the planet. Also resulting from this organic reality, is our...
responsibility to take care of our environment. Due to our abilities and possibilities, we find ourselves in a position where we must not do otherwise but to assume this responsibility. Jurová, in this connection, points out the model of the so-called tolerant society, where subjectivity is transferred from the individual to a society that is open to dialogue and that is able, in this dialogical environment, to search for solutions to its problems [11, p. 144]. Such tolerance, however, is yet again based on rationality.

A new movement of the so-called ‘deep ecology’ develops within the environmental ethics in connection with Naess’ emphases, perceiving humans as integral part of nature (and vice versa). From the viewpoint of ontology, such approach is in contrast to the modern ‘subject-object’ dichotomy. Such relation between subject and object constitutes an imbalance in nature because the object becomes a mere ‘object of scrutiny’, subject to manipulation. The subject, on the other hand, rules and decides about the value attributed to the given object, as well as how the object would be utilized in the system. The ‘deep ecology’ approach responds to the ensuing abuses that are engendered by this system. In addition, our current ecological situation is a stark reminder of the inadequacy of the old, dichotomist thinking. Instead of its nurturing function, our living environment confronts us with acute threats. According to deep ecology, nature has its own intrinsic value, which cannot be derived from its usefulness to humans. The critique of anthropocentrism from the side of postmodernity is in line with the critique propounded by deep ecology. The artificial dualisms between subject and object, culture and nature, reason and non-consciousness (etc.) has proved itself to be untenable. The rational, self-aware subject loses its ability to transcend reality. Deep ecology, contrary to that, draws the isolated subject into a holistic being. The process of returning the human individual as a subject into the complexity of being happens by means of forsaking the rationalistic, dictatorial positions, assuming instead irrational positions, in the context of which, due to empathy, we are finally able to identify with nature and the planet (perceived as a holistic being) as its integral part.

We see a similar line of argument in Antošová who comes up with its ability to transcend reality. Deep ecology, contrary to that, draws the isolated subject into a holistic being. The process of returning the human individual as a subject into the complexity of being happens by means of forsaking the rationalistic, dictatorial positions, assuming instead irrational positions, in the context of which, due to empathy, we are finally able to identify with nature and the planet (perceived as a holistic being) as its integral part.

We see a similar line of argument in Antošová who comes up with the notion of a ‘transcendent concept of love’ [12, p. 137]. Human being is not the measure of all things, quite on the contrary, the value of humans is measured by their presence in all things.

From the perspective of the interpretation of being, the human is unique only in the sense that one is able to become aware of one’s moral responsibility for the whole. This realization, however, is not strictly rational; it is not a realization in terms of a rational calculation that if we continue to devastate nature, destroyed environment will become a threat to our own existence. This awareness is rather our empathizing with nature, while realizing our own partaking in a complex organism, in being itself, in Naess’ sense.

In practical life, this kind of thinking has inspired countless activities of nature protection, though its application in the ethics of research remains complicated due to the ontological consequences that we pointed out before.

5. The Metaphysics of Networks

Latour, similar to Naess, strives to include a wider array of being in his concept of reality (besides the self-aware human being). In his concept of post-structuralist motivated theory of network agents, however, Latour surpasses the boundaries of biosphere. We may accept, along with Gogora, the term *oligoptikon*, which relatively accurately captures this shift [13, p. 489]. Latour searches for a solution that remained hidden from the modernity or, we should better say, he is trying to bring modernity to its real goal for, according to Latour, we have never been modern. However, he rejects being identified as a postmodern thinker, suggesting instead the term ‘amodernity’, which better encapsulates his ontological stance. Latour carefully examines the methodology and art in which modern science develops, arguing that scientist actually do not describe reality but rather construct a cosmological model the task of which is to verify all further evidence and claims. This, obviously, leads to separating human society from nature. Science goes even as far as to decide about truth and untruth in the process of knowing nature, as Latour’s example pertaining to vacuum clearly shows.

Latour thus defines a new starting point that accepts two kinds of transcendence. The first one is the transcendence of nature and the second one is the transcendence of society. Contrary to previous claims, we encounter new types of transcendence here. The dualism of two transcendences, however, will incessantly engender a conflict and tension. Hence we will actually never move beyond the limits of modernity the paradigm of which we wished to forsake. Latour strives to remove the contradiction and conflict by means of a combination of both types of transcendence, using the process of redefining and re-purifying the so-called ‘quasi-objects’. The purification of quasi-objects is a method that will enable us to comprehend the fact that just as society produces culture and objects, so also nature limits society and its possibilities of existence. It is not possible to find a univocal, conclusive answer to the question: ‘what is on the side of the object and what is on the side of the subject?’. Therefore, he talks about ‘quasi-objects’ that are in a certain sense objects, while in another sense also subjects [14].

This ontological shift ultimately means that if we want to understand the moral dimension of our actions and the corresponding moral applications in science, we must neither assess them from an extreme, one-sided position of the creators of technologies, nor from the opposite extreme position of those who are threatened by these technologies. In this case, the ontological shift means that we must accept not only all living things but also all technical objects that we have created into the complexity of our responsibility. After all, we are already
beginning to encounter the question of intelligent machines that are relatively autonomous in making choices, which raises the question of assuming responsibility for their decision making.

6. Conclusion

Our striving to solve the questions that originated as a result of technological advancement but also due to the intentional application of a dominant position of the Enlightenment’s reason requires a change in our ontological interpretation of reality. The bipolarity of the world that has been an integral part of the foundations of our civilizational paradigm separates reality into subjects and objects, true and untrue, real and non-real. We have shown that our ontological position (view) should move to the middle, which ultimately means that we should forsake the superior position of the knowing subject and leave some space for doubt, including the possibility that we might actually be wrong. As Valco and Valcova point out, “The neglect of the subject and his inner world results in ambitious projects of human ideologies at the expense of the individual. The proud pursuit of objectivity without a recognition of human limitations, and the dimension of subjectivity in the process, has proved to be a dead end that emits the stench of manipulation, loss of human dignity, and finally nihilism” [15, p. 26]. We should rather embrace that the human does not intrinsically surpass reality through one’s individuality or subjectivity, but is rather a member of an ontologically higher whole, i.e. the society or biosphere. Hence, an adequate point of departure (for Latour as well as for Naess) appears to be the forsaking of egoism that was originally constituted by the Enlightenment’s subject. Although the shift from the position of ‘I’ to the position of ‘we’ is, in Latour, determined by his sociological approach, it brings similar results to those stemming from Naess’ concept.

At the same time, we need to be aware of the danger that Kierkegaard warns about. Both, the holistic as well as the structuralist approaches significantly complicate one’s personal relationship with God or, more generally, to transcendence, which is the basis for the individual’ authentic experience of one’s existence. In both cases, existence is either evaluated based on its participation in society, as defined by its position in the structure of the given society, or it is interpreted as a partial member of an organism, as an organ that functions in the context of biosphere as a whole. In both cases, thus, the situation amounts to a rejection of the ancient and Christian traditions which understood the human as a rational living entity whose essence was constituted by the unity of its body and soul. Human rationality meant, among other things, that humans were able to distinguish between good and evil and to make choices for the benefit of the good.

In the Enlightenment, however, rationality assumed a new dimension (to the detriment of the social and living environments). After its historic failure in the wars and concentration camps of the 20th century, the only viable solution seemed to be to give up on the subject (as an individual) and to transfer the agency of the bearer of moral value onto the society, onto a collective consciousness, or a structure of objects and events that constitute moral meaning and value. After all, as Valco, Kralik and Barrett argue in their recent study, morality and values are an integral part of human society – they are “socially embodied, not individually based” [16, p. 104]. It remains to be seen, however, whether the set of possible solutions might also include a return to the original ideal of a virtuous, rational living being, with the conviction that “central to living a happy life is being a good, moral person” [17, p. 98]. This return would, in any case, require a personal, inner conversion, instead of legalism. It would require an intentional, personal stance, perhaps even the inner disposition of a hero, not the cowardly transfer of responsibility onto the society or our life circumstances. This question concerns science and the implementation of ethics in science. As long as a scientist functions only by the rules, often even violating them, this is a legalistic approach which indicates that the scientist is not that rational living being who distinguishes between good and evil. He is rather a scholar of the Enlightenment type, aspiring at all costs to increase the limits of knowledge and to penetrate deeper into the essence of things, cells, objects with the desire to rule over them (i.e., use them to one’s own benefit). Nevertheless, the principle stays valid: he who wishes to govern others, must first manage to rule (control) himself. A good initial step might be, if general and applied ethics were not perceived as a useless waste of academic credits in educating future scientists but rather as a legitimate part of the development of personality of the future scientist. This might set us on the path of searching “for elements that might be utilized in building up a synthetic philosophical outlook on the reality of this world - an outlook that would not only map this reality but would also designate in it the necessary reference points adequate for human conduct and interaction” [18, p. 209].

References


