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# ETHICS AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN THE COMMUNICATION SOCIETY

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(Received 19 August 2012, revised 11 October 2012)

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## **Abstract**

The paper explores a theoretical scenario designed to describe the ideal social community based on ethics and communication, in search for a perspective of an axiological hierarchy, which will characterize the society of tomorrow, based on an analysis of the relationship between Ethics and organizational culture.

*Keywords:* ethics, axiological hierarchy, knowledge, organizational culture

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## **1. Moral acting in a world of communication**

Problems relating to *the nature of communication* in relation to *the self-consciousness*, be it practical consciousness – *moral sense* or the theoretical moral consciousness, as a basis for the expression of the moral consciousness in determining the social action - *the ethics*, are significantly linked to the approaches of the Frankfurt school and, in particular, to the name of Jurgen Habermas, after he published his well-known work 'The theory of the communication action' [1] whose ideas are developed further in the 'Moral consciousness and communication action' [2].

What is important in the context of this analysis is the distinction which Habermas makes in respect of the three cognitive interests common to the human beings: *the technical interest* in the knowledge and control of nature; *the interest as a possibility to understand each other* in order to be able to operate in common; finally, *the interest to understand ourselves*, eliminating the possible distortions, inherent in the process of our reporting to the world (which establishes the critical science).

These interests also guide in a different manner the human actions, the philosopher from Frankfurt distinguishing three types of activities:

- *the instrumental activity*, aiming at obtaining success in non-social situations, headed by rules of a technical nature and in which the economic efficiency and the profit (the money) validate the success;

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- *the strategic activity* that seeks the success in social actions, whose degree of efficiency is measured by the influence exerted on social partners (the expression of success being the power);
- *the communication activity* which, opening the universe of the inter-comprehension, does not pursue the success and neither to influence the others but to build a world of ‘together’ on the basis of ‘an agreement that provides the foundation of the consensual coordination of the action plans pursued individually’.

We made this brief reference to the critical theory on society developed by Habermas to highlight how surprisingly exactly is overlapped (over the philosopher’s conclusions) the analysis of the ‘waves of change in humanity’s civilization’, performed by the authors of the work *The Fourth Wave*, Herman Bryant Maynard, Jr and Susan E. Mehrtens [3], prominent persons with deep experience in the entrepreneurial *social practice* and in the work of communication.

## 2. A framework of changes

By adopting and extending the concept of ‘wave of change’ proposed by Alvin Toffler in *The Third Wave* [4] and developed in *Wealth in movement* [5], the two authors quoted characterize thus the revolutionary moments of the humanity growth:

*The first wave of change* is represented by the agricultural revolution. It’s all over in essence and as such, we are not interested in it here.

*The second wave* – ‘We are separated and we must be competing’ - coincides with the industrialization, with the concern of humankind to achieve efficiency and profit. Yet it continues to spread covering the greatest part of the planet. It is dominated by industrial activities and technical interests. Whereas, for most of the countries it is a process more or less complete, belonging to a great extent to the past, it will not be the subject of our analysis.

*The third wave* – ‘We are connected and we must collaborate’ - builds up force in the modern society, identifying itself with a new type of social organization, ‘based on knowledge’.

The interest in the development of opportunities for us to join one another in common social activities direct us towards strategic actions whose purpose is power (the information represents the ascendancy in knowledge and knowledge is power).

Finally, *The fourth wave* – ‘We are one and we choose to create together’ - opens the sacred space of communication, when the “responsibility for the whole will become the focal point of our society” [3, p. 17]. The social practice such theorized involves an ethics of tolerance and of the free communication. In Habermas’ terms, the representation of such a world may also be called ‘ideal community of communication’.

The path of the philosopher's critical thinking intersects thus profitably with the theoretical pragmatic procedure based on management experience, with a view to proposing a scenario of a future world, a future in which the action communication represents the consensual coordination of the action plans of the parties - what is claimed individually, in an *inter-comprehensive process*.

The Third and The Fourth Wave are interesting in terms of the thematic proposed for debate, ethics and communication, whereas in the following lines we will straighten our attention to significant modifications, with deep ethical consequences, which the waves of changes determine.

The knowledge-based society, as a product of the third wave, introduces revolutionary transformations not only as regards the human action, but also as regards the human consciousness.

The society itself has suffered in the last half century a truly revolutionary change consisting of the transition from an industrial type economy *dominated by the manual labour* to an economy based on knowledge or on the intellectual work. Alvin Toffler places the beginning of this revolution in the time horizon of the sixth decade of the last century, 1956 being the man in which, for the first time, the "white collars" and the workers of the services have exceeded in number, in the United States, the "blue collars", i.e. the industrial workers [5, p. 14].

In equal measure, the economic organization which due its wealth to traditional technological processes must make room to what is still called nowadays – after 50 years - the "new economy", that helps promote a new system of wealth based on knowledge, which "has accelerated dramatically the development of systems theory, of information sciences, of computer programming and of the training in the field of management of programming ..." - all of these have pumped a new knowledge which is important for creating the wealth" [5, p. 15].

It is the world of the inter-comprehension and of the communication in which the ethics is adapted as a basis of social action. But there is also a world whose scenario is still waiting for its author.

### **3. Toward a social community based on ethics and communication**

A few philosophical considerations for a theoretical scenario designed to describe the ideal social community based on ethics and communication are required.

1. The man can not existentially achieve his personality outside of the conditions of Dasein. The existence does not achieve by itself its personality, it needs an alterity. In this way, *the communication* acquires a major importance since through the other, the man comes to achieve a classification for himself. The existential communication is *the promotion* (Hervortreiben) *of the self through the other*. It is Karl Jaspers' argumentation in its first major work, *Philosophy*, 1932 [6].

2. It appears that, in the holy space of communication, the other is even more important than our own person. Such an understanding generates an ethics based on a new moral principle: the principle of the preferred alterity (or of ‘the privilege of the Other in relation to Self’). This theoretical movement is a “road leading from existence to existing and from the existing to the other next to us” [7].
3. Elements of this conception which revolutionize the ethics in the communication society can be summarized as follows: taking responsibility for one’s own destiny belongs to the Ontology; taking responsibility for the other’s destiny belongs to the Ethics, to do this however, the Ethics must plunge in the depths of the inter-subjective relationship; thus is carried out the inter-comprehensive process, a clear result of the complexity of communication; the relationship between *one* and *another* is revealed in transcendence as a report of ‘one - for – the other’; thus, the communication activity “defines in a new way the *ethic subject*”, which is no longer the one, neither the other, but the “*between-us*” [8].
4. Inscribed in the tradition of the American pragmatism, L. Kohlberg uses the ethics developed by John Rawls (Theory of Justice) in the Kantian spirit and in the spirit of the natural right, on the nature of moral judgment and of moral consciousness, and in its asserting on stages. Kohlberg devises the transition from one stage to another of the assertion of the moral consciousness as a *process of learning of the individual acting within the daily communication practice*. The analysis of the philosophical foundations which supports his theory is the subject of a significant part of Habermas’ work *Moral consciousness and communicative action in the discourse ethics* which he proposes us, in so far as it sends to a theory of the communicative action, giving “credible prospects for a vertical reconstruction of the levels of development of moral judgment” [2, p. 115].

#### 4. The ethical culture

The ethical culture, at the level of individual, and, mostly, at the level of the organization, becomes decisive for supporting a community attitude responsible for challenges of the knowledge-based society.

The pride of the knowledge-based organizations to consider that the free, creator spirit can push the allowed boundaries of knowledge no matter how much, makes that the research laboratories of these organizations to focus to find solutions to the questions that should not be asked: with respect to human cloning; to genetic manipulations; to the artificial development of human intelligence; to the extension by medical assistance of human life up to the limit of immortality, to the development of artificial intelligence up to the point in which it can take over physically and intellectually human tasks, etc.

Social and political dangers that may result from such an orientation of the knowledge-based organizations are unpredictable. Therefore, an evaluation of their activity in moral terms is more necessary than ever.

In the field of 'applied' ethics is recognized the idea that, in the business world - via the political environment - come the most serious threats to the present, but, mostly, for the future of humanity. If companies do not assume responsibilities, considerably increased, in the process of transit towards a knowledge-based organization, which amplifies the risks the humanity, globally, must cope with, then even the humanity's future in the long term can be compromised.

A morally responsible attitude of the companies towards the community is, that which businessmen are not always aware of, in the interest of their own business development. "What the leaders in business, civil and political environments haven't understood well is very simple: an advanced economy needs an advanced society, because each economy is the product of a society in which it is embedded and on whose institutions it depends." [2, p. 34]

If the essential social institutions are the 'misaligned' in relation to economic progress, they brake the development of organizations towards a more advanced system, based on knowledge.

The economic race is never a lonely travel, unfolded in an ideal space; it may be rather liken with the distance covered by a swimmer who isn't indifferent as regards the position of other swimmers with whom he is in competition, but neither as regards the 'environment' in which he swims (excited or turbid or, on the contrary, quiet and stimulating).

The ethical culture is of such a nature as to require that climate of correctness, that encourages a competition where conflicts should be resolved amicably, and divergent interests should be harmonized, by the acceptance of the entitlement of all to a 'reasonable gain', may it be seen as profit, either as a source of progress and well-being for the community. The processes of restructuring and redesign of companies, as a result of the 'new economy' (knowledge-based) determine the abandoning of traditional practices of management: many decisions shall be taken from hierarchical levels increasingly lowered and not only at the peak level. For this reason, the members of the company should be familiar with the essential values and aims of the organization as well as the ethical behaviour which it proposes. "Understanding the moral criteria of conduct in business is particularly important, as the new organizational structures give rise to new complications (related to the circulation of information and information management within the framework of the different work teams and the entire organization), for which there is no traditional precedent." [9]

In this way, a solid knowledge of the ethical culture of the organization becomes the necessary precondition for the success of employees' action, of the *total quality management* type. And in this way, whereas the ethical behaviour of the organization can no longer be reported to a reduced number of people that make up the *top management*, but it represents 'a practice of all' of those involved in the business, there is certainty that the principles and fundamental values of ethics in business will not only be recognized or promoted declaratively, but they will be also performed in practice. It is what, in the long

term, ensures the business success and the recognition of the prestige of an environment, traditionally considered as free of respectability and honorability.

This repositioning of the role of the economy demonstrates that today, although the social transformations bear ‘the mask of technology’ because of its spectacularity, they are much more profound, consisting of a complete replacement of the civilization in which the component parts appear in a “process of feed-back with the economy, and not as subordinate elements of the latter”[9, p. 354].

This is producing profound effects in the curricula and the practices used in the third education as well [10].

It is the situation that the contemporary business environment must also accept in order to harmonize the organizational culture with the revolutionary changes that we live being aware of the fact that it is not the economy - as such – neither the profit, but rather *the ethics with its centralizing values within the new axiological hierarchy, that will define the society of tomorrow*, towards which all of us - individuals, organizations, governments, businesses - we have already started this infinite travel.

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