

Business Ethics
Prof. L. Bibard
Sessions 3 reminder

On Humanism

Despite all his representatives were not atheists (far from this), the European humanism can to a certain extent be grasped as a *revolution against “God” and “nature”* at once. “God” and “nature” are in the “Renaissance” period, two fundamental references which help “God” to be duly represented by an all-powerful church. As their very name suggests, “Humanists” want something new, they want “humanity” to be given her place *here and now* on the earth. They want that “humans” do not suffer any more from “nature” nor from “God”. The first one being “created” by the Second, and Him being represented by the Church for a blessed – or not – future after death (for a somewhat detailed presentation of the European context at Machiavelli and Descartes epoch, see the appendix end of the reminder).

The fundamental “humanist” decision is understandable as a decision to “master” and “possess” “nature” as Descartes puts it. In other words, “nature” may be put under *human control*, for the sake of humanity as such. From now on, human *will* will be the end of every “progress” step (cf session 2, on Kant *categorical imperative*). The fundamental assumption that “control” of (human and non human) nature is at once possible and “good” for humanity, represents one of the main grounds of our global world.

In such a context, the “globalization” dynamic, which started as the *spreading worldwide of a “control” culture*, can now be understood as a *tension* between “western” civilization or “attitude” (understood as the admission of the assumption that a potentially total “control” of “nature” - instead of God’s one - is *simultaneously* good and possible), and all other civilizations or “non control attitude”.

On this point of view, *despite some crucial differences* (cf the team presentation), Machiavelli and Descartes may both be considered as atheists who want progress, and democracy (or at least, political stability and not civil wars (Machiavelli); cf the importance of Descartes statements on “communication” and *collective* building of knowledge). Descartes and Machiavelli intentions can be compared the following way, based on the studied quotations

<i>Machiavelli</i>	<i>Descartes</i>
<p>Ch. XV Against ancient “dreams” – claiming for “realism”- things as they “are” vs. as they “should be”.</p> <p>The most important attack is against Plato and Platonism – cf Thomas More <i>Utopia</i>.</p> <p>Ch. XVIII “Hands” or “manipulation” against “eyes” or “theory” – e.g. practice and experiment against theory and “contemplation” (cf Aristotle on happiness in <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>).</p> <p>Ch. XXV “Beating” and “coercing” “fortune” is like “mastering” and “possessing” human life dynamics.</p>	<p>Descartes wants as well a <i>practical</i> philosophy which is supposed to be much more lucid and useful than the “ancient” one.</p> <p>The new Cartesian sciences are compared to “craftsmen” skills – e.g. action, manipulation, nature transformation by humans – cf the meaning of “theory”, <i>theorein</i>, “seeing” – and the meaning of the greek word “<i>eidos</i>” – the “look” of something.</p> <p><i>Medicine</i> will be the most important science, because it makes room for a real “control” on nature – such a control being represented by human control over the human body thus over human births as well.</p>

What is at stake for us here and now ?

- 1) The assumption of “control” of “nature” has at once been *imposed worldwide* through colonization, and *deeply desired* due to its anthropological meaning : if we are “political animals” as Aristotle put it (*Politics*, 1253a2), We know very well from our limbic brain very ancient emotions such as hunter ones and prey ones – we know very well what is a predator and what is being a prey. Hence, could we determine how to “control” our environment, we would feel secure and happy.
- 2) There is a radical *convergence* between our desire to control (e.g. master and possess) nature, and our most archaic emotions – a convergence between our dreams for “pure” and “perfect” rationality and our most “animal” reality (cf coming discussions session 4).
- 3) Due to our humanist inheritance, our current “global” world is on one hand supposedly under humans control thanks to sciences and technologies; on the other hand, we learn more and more that this is *not* the case – the various disasters we have been confronting for many years now (the “natural” ones, the financial ones, etc), show that humans actually do *not* control “nature” as such – be it the “organizational”, the “political” or the “natural” “nature”.
- 4) Also due to our humanist inheritance, people more and more require each other to behave “perfectly” : assuming everybody should and could have situations under control, makes people not accept that anybody *fails*; when people *do not comply* with their obligations, duties, skills, etc, they are supposed not only to be wrong, but *guilty*. Fights, conflicts, accusations will be crucial characteristics of a context where people assume that people should have a systematic control over their environment, and over what they do, over their behavior.
- 5) The above implies that people demand about “ethical” behavior increased dramatically during the last centuries, and particularly during the XXth one. This is illustrated by the supposedly “final” revolutions, any political side, the Nazi one or the Communist one. A significant and particularly important reaction against revolutions, was the French writer Albert Camus one. Camus observed that revolutions sooner or later would provoke States terrorism (in French “terrorisme d’Etat”). He is very close on this perspective to the Greeks notion of moderation : as an example, Plato, in his *Republic*, describes what a “perfect” political regime would consist of, but, *in the very same text* (end of ch. Or “book” IX), he makes clear that people *should never try* to make such a “perfect” regime real. Otherwise, they would provoke the worse tyrannies.
- 6) Humans need to regain confidence in each other. In this context, the main moral “values” to re-learn nowadays are like *modesty, moderation, patience*, etc.

Some managerial consequences

Preliminary remark :

After the class, one of you asked me about the relations between “control” and “perfection”. The two notions are related on the basis of the following observations :

The economic sciences assume that economic agents are endowed with a “pure” and “perfect” rationality. The notion of “pure and perfect rationality” (PPR) consists in assuming that the economic agents :

- a) spontaneously know everything about any choice to make (they are “omniscient”),
- b) are rational (which means that when knowing all the related information to a choice to make, they will clearly identify the best potential choice until the worse ones),
- c) systematically maximize their profit making the best possible choice – they are omnipotent.

Historically speaking, the notions of “omnipotence” and “omniscience”, which are respectively coeval to the notions of *control* (e.g; being as “possessor and master” of nature) and *transparency*, are *theological* notions. They are God characteristics. And God is the only being in being “perfect”. Omnipotence and omniscience are two significantly important aspects of perfection. The difficulty is that these characteristics are, in the context of the classic economic theories, supposed to be the economic agents ones. This will be one of the aspects of our discussions session 4 : the notion of “bounded” rationality is radically contrary to the one of “pure and perfect” rationality.

1) In organizations, the main danger is to make unconsciously the assumption that people have situations under control.

The problem does not consist in assuming that control is possible to a certain extent – it consists in assuming that *everything* is and may be under control. This is a very frequent source of delusions and errors – cf session 4 on “bounded” rationalities as well as the future case studies (Bhopal, Tenerife, Challenger).

In organizations, identifying when and to what extent control is real – and when it is *not* may reveal crucial.

Making the assumption of control makes people blind towards newness as such – cf sessions 4 and sq. on a short term and long term tension in organizations.

2) People need to re-learn the *relations* between spontaneous “normative” approach to ethics (things as they *should* be), with reality (things as they *are* – cf the etymology of “ethics”).

3) Envisaging the *future* on a theoretical basis makes sense only when made *at present* on the basis of real practices (due to *past* experience).

4) *Ethics and decision making* can never be separated from each other : taking into account *time* structured dynamics about ethics orients reflection towards examining decision-making processes.

5) When making a decision, taken for granted “routines” must be known by actors, for them *not* to “repeat” unconsciously mechanical dynamics and operations without being aware of their possible relevance and irrelevance.

Appendix : on Machiavelli and Descartes, “Humanist” cultural context

Two civilizations endorse respectively the “nature” and “God” representations in Western civilization : the Greek and the Jewish. “Athens” and “Jerusalem” are the two determinant cities of western culture, representing respectively polytheist and monotheist civilization.

“Nature” and “God” may respectively be understood the following way :

If “nature” is considered as an *autonomous* reference for a correct understanding of our world, this means that there *exists something which is prior to anything else*, and therefore that there is not a “God” Who creates “nature” or creatures. This would mean that “nature” is at least to a certain extent *independent* from “God” – thus *as strong as Him* (cf Plato’s *Timaeus*). Maybe this is the reason why in “Pagan” civilizations, you can find *various* “gods” – there is not any god definitely superior to all other gods nor to nature. The exact contrary occurs in Judaism and other monotheisms : “God” is supposed to be *absolutely superior* to any kind of “natural” being – the notion of “nature” makes no sense as such. There is nothing like a “nature” which would represent an independent origin of our world nor of the “universe”.

Western civilization is at first made of this tension between monotheism and polytheism. At first, Jewish people and Pagan ones only opposed each other, based on the fight of Jewish people against polytheism, in order to assert “God”’s existence and absolute strength (see *Dt*, 5, 6-22).

But a Jewish man appeared, who pretended to be God *son*. It is worth paying attention to this very “natural” statement : there is nothing more “natural” – e.g. “normal” – than the statement that somebody is the “son” of his “father”. Anyway, the problem is here that this “son” pretends that His Father is “God” Himself. Which would mean that “God” accepted sooner or later to “recognize” “nature” as such – then at once, (*Pagan*) “nature” as a source of humans death as well as birth. This is exactly what Jesus claimed. Being the son of God meant being *born*, living, and sooner or later dying – e.g. suffering the ultimate “natural” law – death. Wouldn’t Jesus-Christ been *resuscitated*, He would not have shown His *infinite superiority* to “nature”. His infinite strength is supremely illustrated, by His resurrection. Resurrection means that, contrary to Jewish people, Christian people recognize the pagan “nature” (e.g. death) *by infinitely exceeding it*. Exceeding nature this way means creating a supernatural world. This is typically the world of “miracles”¹.

The so-called “humanists” wanted exactly the same, but on a *non religious basis*. They ground their philosophical creed on Christian resurrection theology in order to surpass nature thanks to their new way of knowing and changing it. The symbol and reality of their power will thus be their *science* and later on related *technologies*.

A crucial aspect of the control over nature and any illustration of uncertainty is presented by Machiavelli as humans having control over “fortune”. See the discussion we had on the meaning of symbolic analogy between women and “fortune”.

¹ The notion of « miracle » presupposes the existence of a domain where certain things are impossible, due to « natural » laws. A “miracle” precisely consists in the recognition of “laws”, and *on this very basis*, in succeeding in *exceeding* the law.