

“I WOULD CONSIDER MYSELF TO BE A NATURALIST”

An interview with ERNST TUGENDHAT

by Darlei Dall’Agnol e Alessandro Pinzani

Ernst Tugendhat is one of the most important living German philosophers. He was born in Brno (former Czechoslovakia, nowadays Czech Republic) in 1930 to a Jewish family. In 1938 the Tugendhats had to leave the country because of the threat represented by Nazi Germany. They emigrated first to Switzerland, then to Caracas, Venezuela. After classical studies at Stanford University (California), Ernst Tugendhat moved to Germany in order to study philosophy in Freiburg and Münster (among others with Heidegger). He became an assistant professor in Tübingen (where he made his Habilitation) before getting a professorship in Heidelberg. He worked at the *Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung der Lebensbedingungen der wissenschaftlich-technischen Welt* (which at that time was co-directed by Jürgen Habermas), spend some years in Chile and was a professor at the Freie Universität Berlin till his retirement. He was and still is visiting professor in universities in Europe as well as in North and South America. Among his many books: *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die sprachanalytische Philosophie*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1976; *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1979; *Probleme der Ethik*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984; *Vorlesungen über Ethik*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1993, and *Egozentrität und Mystik. Eine anthropologische Studie*, München: Beck, 2003.

ethic@: Could you please tell us why you chose to study philosophy?

Tugendhat: For no special reason. I had a friend at school in Venezuela, also a German emigrant, who started to get interested in philosophy and – as it often happens – I started to get interested in the same thing. But then something strange occurred: I found this book, *Being and Time* by Heidegger, and as soon as I had read this book – and I read it immediately twice, when I was fifteen – there was no question anymore about what I was going to do in my life. At that time, a few months after reading this book, I went to Stanford for my undergraduate studies, but while leaving Venezuela I told to myself: as soon as it will be possible – it was 1945 – I’ll go to Germany to study this kind of philosophy. It was only much later that I then took distance bit by bit from Heidegger. I am considering the possibility of giving again a course on Heidegger in order to see what really in my own opinion has still value in this book and what not. If you ask me now, I wouldn’t be able to give an answer.

ethic@: What impressed you so much at that time in Heidegger?

Tugendhat: I had the impression that somehow he was drawing up a completely new picture of what human existence is like, and that fascinated me.

ethic@: In recent years you showed a stronger interest for Anthropology, yet not for Cultural Anthropology. Could you please tell us why you think that Anthropology could represent a sort of *philosophia prima*? Does it still make sense to speak of a *philosophia prima* nowadays? And why should this role be played by Anthropology and not by Philosophy of Language, instead?

Tugendhat: To begin with your last question, I consider philosophical anthropology and philosophy of language to be closely tied up to each other, and I believe that it would be dogmatic to claim that all human understanding could be reduced to *linguistic* understanding. Beside, I believe that we are interested in clearing up some essential features of human existence and I’m not so sure that this could be done simply through analysis of language.

As for your first question: perhaps we could speak, instead of Anthropology, of human understanding.

Furthermore, I feel quite sure that the way in which we understand ourselves, the others and the world in which we live, is the basis of all our philosophical questions. When I first developed this thesis, which I presented in an article in Spanish contained in my book *Problemas* [Barcelona: Gedisa, 2002], it was somehow an attempt to say that we, as philosophers, have to do with fundamental questions and it is not very sensible to compartmentalize what we do in philosophy into different subject matters. Such a case of philosophical compartmentalization can be seen (very clearly, in my view) in what they call “Philosophy of Action”. I think Philosophy of Action should be closely tied to the way persons feel about themselves and the connection seems to be obviously an anthropological connection.

ethic@: Which is the relationship between ethics and Anthropology as you define it?

Tugendhat: Well, I claimed that there is such a relationship in my lectures on analytical philosophy [*Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die sprachanalytische Philosophie*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1976], more precisely in the seventh lecture, and it did not quite work out. But it certainly seems rather plausible that it cannot be something which is just in the air. Rather, it has to do with how we relate ourselves to each other. If ethics has a purely anthropological foundation, this has to do with the fact that in it we ask what is necessary for people in order to be able to coexist with each other – and this would be an anthropological question. I mean: in all these cases – be it aesthetics, be it ethics – I always tend to ask what relation these interests have to my fundamental interests, and when I say “my” I mean: “as a human being”.

ethic@: Which is your current position with regard to justification in ethics? In some recent works you mention “symmetrical contractualism”: could you explain this approach?

Tugendhat: I must confess that I will probably not be able to explain it well. To begin with the

term “contractualism”, I think that the basis of morality must be in some sense contractarian, and this simply means that in order to convince another person that he should consider himself a member of a social community, you have to show him that this is in his own interest. Since this is something that you can show to everyone else, this results in a contractarian position. But this is not the whole question, in my opinion.

We could make reciprocal contracts in which one person would be less considered than another person. I believe that this leads to the question: where does justice arise and where does equality arise? My present position on this matter is the following: When people do something together, we have to deal with something which we don’t find in other species, namely the fact that each person has a will. The will has something to do with what a person considers to be good for her. And then there are, I think, two polar possibilities (I say “polar possibilities” because there can be inter-between possibilities). The first one is that one of the people making the contract – be it two or more persons – or a group among them will decide how the cooperation has to take place. The other possibility is that everybody decides and that means that there is a symmetric relationship in commanding and obeying. Let’s consider the example of a couple, of two people: what does it mean that they live symmetrically? It means that neither one subordinates the other, nor the other subordinates him- or herself, and so they are symmetrical as far as demanding and obeying are concerned.

I think this happens whatever we do together. Let’s consider a group of friends which is doing an excursion. Well, it seems obvious to me that either we have a structure of power in which one person says what it has to be done, or it is considered natural that everybody contributes equally in the decision making. It would be strange to say that some of them just do not contribute, unless there are some special reasons (like if they are ill or something similar) for the fact that they do not contribute or contribute less. But I believe that there are fundamentally two possibilities for common human action or enterprise: it is either power or what I called the symmetric element. That leads to

equality and then, of course, problems of justice arise, because as soon as it doesn't work smoothly, or when the people assume that nobody has the absolute power of deciding, they will start to complain and to ask: "why not me?" or "why me?". This is true only on the premise that everybody contribute in the same way, and so I wouldn't say simply that everybody *has* to contribute in the same way, that there *has* to be equality (it is always better not to use categorical imperatives of the sort: something *has* to be in a certain way), but there are surely two possibilities. The first one: if one believes that he is able to acquire absolute power, then let him go ahead and let the others be slaves. But there is another possibility, which is not just contractarian. If we have a normal contract, like in the easiest case of two people, for each people the question is: it is better for me to enter the contract or not? Their only question is: What is better for me? But in the symmetrical relationship the question is not only: Do I gain by entering in this contract? The alternative is not between: "What is going to be my condition if I enter the contract?" versus "I don't enter the contract", but there is a sort of interpersonal comparison of the kind: "If he gets more than I do, I'm going to be unsatisfied, I'm going to call it unjust, I'll enter the contract but with the conscience that it is an unjust contract", and there enters this aspect called symmetry, which has to be added to the idea of simple contractarianism.

ethic@: In your symmetrical contractarianism, is there a concept of the good, and if yes, which one?

Tugendhat: Well, I discussed this in my article on how we are to understand morality [*Wie sollen wir Moral verstehen?*, in: *Aufsätze 1992-2000*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2001, 163-184]. My starting point was a general conception of what is characteristic for any kind of morality. I believe that every morality has some conception of the morally good, and I took my definition of what it means "morally good" from Rawls: we consider a person to be morally good when she acts as we wish she would act. Now, this seems to me to be a general conception; in the special case in which

we have a non-traditionalist morality, and that means for me a contractarian morality, we need (in my opinion) a somehow *absolute* concept of the good – and that simply means a *grammatically* absolute concept, i.e., I'm not simply speaking of what is good for me or what is good for him, but of what we want from each other, and the question is how to define it. In this case, in which we have a symmetrical contractarian position, my definition is the following: morally good is what is equally good for everybody.

You have here to do firstly with two terms: one is "morally good", while the other term appears in its definition as contractarianism offers it, and that is "good for". But then, another term enters the stage: "equally good for everybody". I have been criticized for this "equally"; my critics ask: "what does it mean?" Well, it is not the best word to be used, but with this word I try to do justice to the fact that in this moral contract the persons do not only compare what they get out of it with what they would get if they would not make a contract, but they rather compare their position *within* the contract to the position of the other people. And here comes in this word "equally", because if you just had the contract without any kind of equal consideration, we could say that if a person comes better off with than without the contract, then the other person too comes out better off with than without the contract, but then I'd have just a contract, with no reference to justice. This is why another element must come in, in order to take seriously the aspect of justice: I have to refer to equality, and this happens when I define the morally good as being equally good for everybody.

ethic@: Does all this imply a sort of ethical naturalism?

Tugendhat: I would consider myself to be a naturalist, and to be a naturalist doesn't mean that one is able to apply simply some generalities which exist in other species to our species, but it means that whatever happens in human action is ultimately based on our genetical constitution. We are speaking, nevertheless, of the genetical constitution of *human* beings and not of any other animal. That is why, for example, I think that when we ask what

is the central aspect of human beings we should be aware of another question: if there is a central aspect, in one way or another it must have been *that* aspect which made it possible for this species to advance within biological evolution. Where this specific aspect of predicative language comes in, I can immediately say what advantage it has for survival, while for example, if we take the concept of liberty (and if liberty is not defined in any more complex way, if it just means that we are able to do one thing or another), it certainly doesn't help survival. The consideration of biological questions comes in unnecessarily, I believe, in philosophical reflection, and it comes anyway somewhere at the border. I believe that certain facts are fundamental, and when I claim this, I must be able to say – and I think that it makes sense to say it – that this aspect came up in biological evolution (of course we don't know how) and was responsible for a large part of what we consider to be human characteristics.

ethic@: If we understood you correctly, you are not a methodological naturalist: you don't accept that one can reduce philosophical methods to empirical science, since conceptual qualification is important for philosophy and for ethics.

Tugendhat: Yes.

ethic@: Do you think that socio-biological studies may have relevance for philosophy in general and for your moral theory particularly?

Tugendhat: I must admit that in the moment I do not feel very competent to answer this question. I have written an article on this subject about four years ago and re-reading it I am not very happy about it, but one thing seems to me to be clear: both in humans and in other species we have altruistic action, but we cannot come to any conclusion from the way this altruism works in other species to the way it works in the human species, because it works in very different manners. I make a further distinction between what I call a *normative* altruism (and I think that in the discussion with biology this kind of altruism should

have precedence) and what we may call "*spontaneous* altruism". But both in my opinion are quite different in their functioning.

In the case of other species, altruism simply means that an animal does something which is not in its own interest, but in the interest of others, and the question is how this is to be explained. Well, at least with regard to other species it seems to be explained by their genetical constitution. In the case of human beings this obviously doesn't work, because it has to be explained in part (at least when we have normative altruism) by this whole system of learning and justifying what we call "moral norms", and this for example presupposes language. We have to understand imperatives and one characteristic of this is that we can always also *negate* the imperative, whereas this kind of liberty doesn't seem to exist for other species.

ethic@: Did you follow the recent polemic between Habermas and some neuroscientists about the freedom of the will, with Habermas claiming that this kind of studies were denying the freedom of will? What do you think about it?

Tugendhat: With regard to the discussion which is being carried on (I think more in Germany than everywhere else), I'd describe the situation as the following. There are some American physiologists who did find out that there is a sort of physiological precedence when a person decides to do something, but this is a very small insight, even if a very interesting one. Then we have, especially in Germany (I don't know the situation in the USA), some professors of brain physiology who made very large claims, consisting mainly in saying that, since brain physiology is a normal scientific enterprise, and since every normal scientific enterprise presupposes determinism, determinism is true and therefore free will cannot exist. On this point they believe to have found something new, but they are just at the level of 19th century philosophy. In the meanwhile there has already been a long tradition, more in the Anglo Saxon world than in the German world, about what has been called compatibilism, i.e. the idea that determinism and free will are not incompatible.

Here comes in a purely philosophical distinction concerning the criteria of what we call responsible action (I prefer this term to "free action", because the word "free" is highly ambiguous), i.e. the criteria of what allows us to make reproaches to other people and also to ourselves. I think you can make here a purely phenomenological distinction and this is a task of philosophy. Therefore, there is not really any serious discussion between the clarification of free will offered by philosophy on one hand and what scientists claim on the other hand. Scientists do not have any alternative conception.

I think that there are open problems in the way in which philosophy clarifies free will and it is still an important question to find out what is the physiological counterpart of the fact that we are able to suspend our wishes in relation to others which we consider as rational – and it would be very interesting if one day, let say in fifty or hundred years, physiology will be able to contribute to this discussion. But the present debate is completely misleading because the physiologists do not base their argument on anything which they have found out as scientists, but simply on an old-fashioned dogma which says that if there is determinism, then there cannot be free will. Therefore I consider this discussion between Habermas and some German physiology professors a pseudo-discussion.

ethic@: In the last decades bioethical issues became a major topic in the philosophical debate. Which place do these issues have in your moral thinking?

Tugendhat: You should specify what you understand under "bioethical issues"? Because the word bioethics is used in a rather loose sense. If what you mean by it is the application of ethical questions to certain marginal cases like death, some kinds of illnesses, or how we should behave towards embryos or animals – well, that would be one conception of bioethics. Now, if you ask me how this relates to ethics, you indeed put your finger on a question which for me is difficult, because I have a conception of morality as a mere system of reciprocal demands, and if this is all we can do, then the great question is: how are we going to behave in all those cases in which the subjects cannot reciprocate?

In some recent papers I have tried to show that an ethics of compassion as it has been developed by Schopenhauer (and in a way I'd say utilitarianism is close to it because in both positions we have a non-reciprocal conception of morality; but let me stay with Schopenhauer) the question simply is: in which way does compassion enter a morality which is primarily contractarian, even if symmetrically contractarian?

I'll make first a distinction between the person who acts (the onlooker) and the person who suffers the action (the outlooker). The onlooker will always have an interest in that the others do not act badly, that they act morally, and that includes as a main point: altruistically. Now, there is a second source of altruistic action, namely compassionate action. When we praise altruistic actions done out of compassion, we can praise them from the point of view of our contractualistically based morality. We also praise the fact that each person develops her own capacity of compassion and as we do that from a moral point of view. We are not going to praise some particularistic act of compassion, like the one I do for my cat, for example, but a generalized compassion. And in this way compassionate action may play a role in a morality which has a symmetrical contractarian basis.

This leads of course to certain contradictions. The great problem with a purely compassionate ethics is that it is not general: people are compassionate but they may be also cold, so we cannot leave it just to their good judgment of when to do what. But once compassion enters, once we have a moral interest in compassion, then the compassion which we are like to foment, will be a generalized one, and to me this seems to be essential: compassion ethics only works when compassion is generalized. Once this happens, an element of generalization comes in, which is more universal than the generalization in normal ethics, because compassion is also related to beings which cannot reciprocate. This leads to difficulties between a purely contractarian conception and this other conception which arises out of contractarianism but has its main source in compassionated action which is now to be generalized and could include, for example, animals. Therefore we have contradictions: how should we behave when we

have a human interest to kill animals and otherwise we have altruism towards animals. I think this is a difficult problem which cannot just be solved in a simply way.

ethic@: What is your position in the debate about eugenics? There is an idea that if we start to modify the human genoma, we could modify the nature of human beings as moral beings...

Tugendhat: Well, this is a discussion that Habermas has made. We have to start with those questions which are in the foreground. The first thing that biogenetics is going to do is try to get rid of inherited diseases, and you have to change the genoma in order to achieve this goal. Then you get in a difficult situation in which you act on qualities, which cannot be clearly considered diseases, so that you rather try to improve certain traits. One could say: Why not improve capacities? But then another problem arises, which Habermas doesn't have touched: the problem of justice. Who are the first people who are going to be treated in this way? This could create social injustice. There comes in a quite normal problem, i.e. a problem of justice. I believe there is one point which should be forbidden by law, and that is when parents are

not interested in an improvement, but rather in a change according to their aesthetical preferences, for instance, if the child should rather be musical than intelligent, if he should have blue eyes instead of brown eyes etc.

There is book by Bruce Ackerman, that I admire very much, which was published in 1980, *Social Justice in the Liberal States* [New Haven / London, Yale University Press, 1980], and has a very nice chapter on these problems and I think he gives a solution which seems plausible to me. Those parents, or whoever decides on the changes which are going to be made, must think about how the person who is going to be changed will react to this change once she gets rational capacities and she can talk to those who changed her. What will she say to those people? If the answer of the parents would be "well, we just liked it", then the intervention would not be justified. If they say "well, we wanted you to have greater advantages in the fight for life", the answer will arise questions of justice perhaps but is not wrong in itself. What is bad is that a person can simply decide about the qualities of other persons, and if the ultimate justification he can give to the child is just "well, I liked it more", and not "well, I thought that would be better for you", then it has been a wrong decision.