ISSA Proceedings 2006 – An Ideal Of Reasonableness For A Moral Community

1. *Summary*

In this paper I intend to explore the relationship between the pragma-dialectical ideal of reasonableness and the educational objective of providing the framework for a moral education that overcomes ethical relativism. Crucial in this direction is Ernst Tugendhat's (1988) concept of a "moral community", as the community of all people who decide to understand themselves as moral persons. I shall contend that the best and proper way to foster the development of a moral community lies in the Philosophy for Children concept of a "community of inquiry". I have discussed earlier (Vicuña, 1999) the important role that Philosophy for Children can have in achieving this purpose. Now, I shall explore further the important function that learning to argue in a rational and reasonable way has in the building of such a community. Finally, I shall argue that following the pragma-dialectical ideal of reasonableness and the rules for a critical discussion in the teaching of argumentation will provide the necessary grounds for building this moral community of universal mutual respect.

2. *Introduction*

In order to illustrate the problems presented by a relativistic approach in the field of ethical education, I would like to propose two examples of the kinds of controversy that involve ethical related issues in Chile:

(1) To the question whether Pinochet should be brought to trial for the crimes against human rights committed under his regime, there are two opposing standard ways of answering:

A) Yes, because he said that not even a leaf would move under his rule without his knowing about it, so he must have known about those crimes and, since he had all the power, he must be considered responsible for them. Those crimes should be punished. Therefore, Pinochet should be brought to trial, so that he can be punished.

B) No, because he is an old and sick man and his memory are weak. Therefore, he is no longer able to defend himself. Bringing to trial an old and sick man, unable

to defend himself, is against Chilean law, and also against human rights. Therefore, even if Pinochet were guilty, he should not be brought to trial.

(2) To the question whether the "pill for the day after" should be freely distributed in public hospitals to any woman who asks for it, there are also two opposing standard answers:
A) Yes, because every woman is free to decide whether she wants to become pregnant or not. The pill is an emergency contraceptive that can avoid unwanted pregnancy when accidents have created the possibility of pregnancy. Therefore, the "pill for the day after" should be freely distributed in public hospitals to any woman who asks for it.
B) No, because the pill is abortive, abortion is a crime and crimes should be prevented. Public hospitals would become accessories to crime, if they distributed the pill. Therefore, the "pill for the day after" should not be distributed in public hospitals.

There are, of course, many other examples of ethical controversies in which we can distinguish the same kind of opposition between two irreconcilable views. Some of them have to do with euthanasia, homosexual marriage, abortion law, neo-nazis' right to free association, and so on. The awareness of the difficulty of settling these issues in a way that satisfies everyone may lead to skepticism and relativism.
Among the Ancient Greek thinkers the observation that there can be opposite views on almost any subject led to the rise of skepticism. In the sixth century before our era, Xenophanes questioned the existence of any criterion of true knowledge and claimed that if, by chance, a man came across the truth, he would be unable to distinguish it from error. According to Leo Groarke (1990, p. 33), "… Xenophanes seems to be the first to invoke the contrast between opposing points of view [to question the possibility of knowing the truth]." In his criticism of the current views about the gods, Xenophanes claimed that if oxen and horses could draw, they would make their gods in their own likeness, and he also remarked that while Aethiopians had gods with snub noses and black hair, Thracians had gods with grey eyes and red hair. Groarke (1990, p. 33) adds:
Given such antitheses, Xenophanes concludes that no one can know clear truth, and that conjecture (*dokos*) is wrought over all things (frag.34). According to Sextus [Empiricus], he compares the search for truth to a search for gold in a dark room because one cannot know when one has found it. (AM 7.52)

Other forerunners of Greek skepticism are the sophists Gorgias, who expressed doubts about the possibility of existence, knowledge and communication, and Protagoras, whose saying: "Man is the measure of all things" introduced relativism, stating that there is no absolute knowledge and that each man's views are equally valid versions of what is going on.

The kind of argument that characterizes the sophists is seen in the *Dissoi Logoi* (*Twofold Arguments*), an anonymous treatise found attached to the works of Sextus Empiricus. Rather than defend a definite point of view, it deals with a variety of topics by recounting standard arguments ("put forward in Greece by those who philosophize") for and against a series of opposing points of view, suggesting that they are equally convincing. (Groake, 1990, p. 49)
I would like to suggest that we could easily assemble a similar collection of opposing arguments on contemporary ethical issues. We would probably find that the same standard arguments are repeated over and over again. Are we to take a skeptic and relativistic position in the face of this?
In his article on Skepticism in Paul Edwards' *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Richard Popkin (1972) says that skepticism, as a philosophical methodology, was first formulated in the third century before our era by the leaders of Plato's Academy. These thinkers rejected Plato's metaphysical doctrines and concentrated on Socrates' method of questioning and on his remark "All that I know is that I know nothing". We don't possess any of their writings, but from later writers such as Cicero, Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes Laertius we can get an idea of the kind of arguments they developed.

According to these sources, both Arcesilaus and Carneades reacted against claims made by the Stoics concerning the reliability of some perceptions, which they considered to be signs of the true nature of reality. Arcesilaus and Carneades pointed out that there was no criterion for distinguishing between a perception of this kind and one that merely appeared to be so; there were no intrinsic marks or signs, which these supposedly "real" perceptions possessed and which illusory ones did not, so that there was no justifiable criterion for separating one type from the other. From this, they concluded that:
1. we must suspend judgment (practice *epoche*) about whether reliable representations of objects actually exist,
2. no assertions about what is going on beyond our immediate experience are certain, and

3. the best data that we can acquire only tell us what is reasonable or probable, but not what is true.

But even skeptics knew that one thing is to live and another to philosophize. We cannot go on "suspending judgment" all the time, when we are continuously faced with urgent problems that require urgent decisions. If, for instance, my thirteen years old daughter were raped I would need to make a quick decision for (or against) the "pill for the day after".

As Groarke (1990, p.17) rightly points out, it is a mistake to interpret ancient skepticism as unmitigated: "The case for the unmitigated nature of ancient scepticism is founded on the sceptics' claim that they suspend judgment (practice *epoche*) on the truth of any claim", but the Greek concept of truth is different from our concept, Groarke explains. For Greek philosophers "truth" (aletheia) meant realist truth, and this is the target of the skeptics' attack:
(…) sceptical arguments are put forward as an attack on realist truth, countering the notion that we can transcend our subjective outlook by arguing that our beliefs are necessarily relative to human nature and perception, the culture that we live in, philosophical commitments, and so on. This reasoning culminates in the decision to suspend judgment on the truth of any claim, but here as elsewhere the concern is truth in the realist sense. The rejection of such truth leaves room for the acceptance of belief in an anti-realist sense, however, and in view of this, the negative side of scepticism is compatible with beliefs that are defined as relative to human nature, sense impressions, forms of understanding, psychological propensities, and custom and convention. (Groarke, 1990, p. 20)

The distinction between unmitigated and mitigated skepticism is fundamental here. While mitigated skepticism can be illuminating both as a method of approaching ethical controversies and for taking reasonable decisions in the face of ethical problems, unmitigated skepticism is untenable, as its opponents have argued from Greek times on.

3. *The problem of ethical relativism*
Closely connected with the problems raised by skepticism is the question whether it is possible to found ethical predicates in our time. The relativistic approach maintains that it is not possible to establish what is right or wrong absolutely. These predicates are relative to the cultural environment and the particular beliefs of the individuals involved. As David Wong (1994) explains:

Moral relativism (…) often takes the form of a denial that any single moral code has universal validity, and an assertion that moral truth and justifiability, if there are any such things, are in some way relative to factors that are culturally and historically contingent. (Wong, 1994, p. 442)

The questioning of the possibility of establishing moral truth and justifying moral assertions leads to undesirable consequences for such noble human purposes as building a common life, world peace, justice and fraternity. If there is no way of establishing what is right and wrong, and it is not possible to justify moral assertions, there is no other alternative than the recourse to violence, as Ernst Tugendhat (1988) has shown.

The special case of my country's recent history prompts me to look for an answer that overcomes moral relativism. The Chilean situation is that of a country that recovered its democracy after long years of military dictatorship and is still trying to heal the wounds of its violent past. Many people in Chile declare that they aim at the ideal of "national reconciliation", but few are willing to take the necessary steps that might lead to it. One of the main stumbling stones is the difficulty to establish the truth about the causes that led to the violent overturning of a democratic government and to the persecution of its supporters that ensued, especially the fact that this persecution used methods that violated human rights: it was directed against those who had been already defeated, were unarmed and frightened, and in many cases at the mercy of their captors.

Those who had been in favor of the coup, and even participated in Pinochet's government, usually face the issue of reconciliation with a suggestion that we should not keep looking at the past, but concentrate in the future and in the people's "real" problems. On the other side, those who had been persecuted or have lost one or several members of their families at the hands of the repression, state that before reconciliation there must be truth and justice, meaning by this that until the country knows what really happened to the victims of human rights' violations and the criminals are punished, there cannot be reconciliation in Chile. "Neither forgiveness nor oblivion" is the slogan frequently heard from them.

If we took a relativistic approach to ethics, we would have to say that overcoming this difficulty is impossible. Each side has its own story, its own perception of how things happened, and this is "the truth" for each of them. Starting from this assumption, it would be obviously very improbable that a national reconciliation could be brought about in Chile.

A way out of this problem can be found in Ernst Tugendhat's (1988) solution to the problem of the foundation of ethics in our time. According to Tugendhat, there are two ways in which ethical predicates can be founded; one he calls the "authoritarian" way and the other, the "autonomous" way. The authoritarian foundation of ethics rests on an appeal to a religious or a traditional authority, for example, when we say that stealing is wrong because God said: "Thou shalt not steal". In Tugendhat's view, this and similar foundations are no longer acceptable in modern, post Kantian times. The appeal to "superior truths", as he calls these religious or traditional beliefs, which are invoked to support ethical propositions but cannot be founded themselves, is no longer possible, because the idea of a rational confrontation between the competing founding predicates would be illusory (Tugendhat, 1988, p. 142).

The solution that Tugendhat proposes is to found ethics on an autonomous personal decision of willingly submitting oneself to the rules of a moral community determined by universal mutual respect. The reason anyone would have for making this decision is his or her desire of living in a community governed by moral norms. Thus, belonging to a moral community is in the individual's best interest, and this is the motivation for submitting to the community's norms. This autonomous foundation of ethics is weaker than the authoritarian, but is the only one that is possible in our time. If a person makes the decision in favor of morality, he or she submits him/herself to the rules of a moral community determined by universal mutual respect, which is equivalent to live in accordance with Kant's categorical imperative, and this, in Tugendhat's view, is the same as the impartial application of the *golden rule*. (Tugendhat, 1988)

I have argued elsewhere (Vicuña, 1999), that an important consequence that follows from Tugendhat's ethical theory is that ethical education has to be approached in a dialogical way, appealing to the children's and the young people's motives for making the decision in favor of morality, and that the best setting for doing this is the building of a "community of inquiry" as it is regularly practiced in Philosophy for Children.

4. *The concept of a "Community of Inquiry"*

By a "community of inquiry", the people involved in philosophy for children mean the group formed by the teacher and the students who are engaged in philosophical inquiry. According to Lipman et al. (1980, p. 45),

When children are encouraged to think philosophically the classroom is converted

into a community of inquiry. Such a community is committed to the procedures of inquiry, to responsible search techniques that presuppose an openness to evidence and to reason. It is assumed that these procedures of the community, when internalized, become the reflective habits of the individual.
The authors go on to mention certain conditions that are prerequisites for the construction of a community of inquiry. These are "the readiness to reason, mutual respect (of children towards one another, and of children and teachers towards one another), and an absence of indoctrination". And they add: "these conditions are intrinsic to philosophy itself, part of its very nature, as it were…" (Lipman et al., 1980, p. 45)
Several features of the community of inquiry may be considered to coincide with those of Tugendhat's moral community. They could be summarized, it seems to me, in two:
1. the requirement of mutual respect "of children towards one another, and of children and teachers towards one another", which I take to be stated so explicitly in order to stress the egalitarian character of the community, and
2. the requirement of reasonableness and rationality, expressed in the phrases "committed to the procedures of inquiry", "responsible search techniques", "openness to evidence and to reason", "reflective habits", "readiness to reason", "absence of indoctrination".

Tugendhat's moral community "determined by universal mutual respect" is certainly present in embryo in the community of inquiry, and, more importantly, the children who experience for themselves what it means to be a member of a community of inquiry are better prepared to make a personal decision in favor of morality, because they have experienced what it is to be treated with respect, to care for each other, to help each other and to feel responsible. They have become aware of their moral feelings and they realize that they want to be respected and to live in a society where all members respect each other equally. They are also well equipped to deal with ethical controversies, because they have acquired the "reflective habits", the commitment "to the procedures of inquiry" and the "responsible search techniques" that are required for this purpose.

Moreover, in the community of inquiry, there is a common quest for knowledge and understanding that manifests itself in mutual challenge and cooperative thinking, at the same time:
[In the community of inquiry] students listen to one another with respect, build on

one another's ideas; challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another's assumptions. (Lipman, 1991. p. 15)

The mutual relations of the students described here go beyond mere intellectual curiosity. Their mutual challenge and cooperative thinking produce the "self correcting" effect of the community and the "personal and interpersonal growth" of its members sometimes referred to as "caring thinking":
As the children discover one another's perspectives and share in one another's experiences, they come to care about one another's values and to appreciate each other's uniqueness. Thus they construct through dialogue a small community whose commitment is to inquiry and whose members are caring participants in that community. (Lipman et al., p. 199)

The concept of "caring thinking" calls attention to the importance that affective and emotional aspects have in the building of a community of inquiry. Becoming a reasonable person, in this sense, implies learning to care for and to respect each other. There is no better way for preparing children to willingly become members of a moral community of universal mutual respect.
One may want to ask: why is it that engaging in philosophical inquiry can help develop good reasoning, as well as reasonableness and "caring thinking" as a basis for a moral life?
I would like to suggest that the answer to this lies in the rational procedures of this inquiry and the values of respect for each other, for the inquiry's procedures, for consistency and for honesty that it entails. These are features of philosophical inquiry, of scientific inquiry, and of critical thinking in general. And, as we shall see, they are also characteristic of the pragma-dialectical ideal of reasonableness and the "rules for critical discussion" formulated by it.

5. *The pragma-dialectical ideal of reasonableness*
The community of inquiry's commitment to reasonableness can be described as the willingness to practice the critical and reflective attitudes that are characteristic of philosophical thinking. On the other hand, the community of inquiry is also modeled on scientific inquiry.
According to Lipman (1991), the expression "community of inquiry" was probably first used by Charles S. Peirce in relation to scientific inquiry, to stress that scientists use similar procedures in the pursuit of identical goals. I interpret this to mean that scientists around the world form a community whose members

understand each other and cooperate with each other, even if they live far away from each other. They can do so because they use the same scientific language and follow the same rules and procedures for conducting experiments, evaluating the relevant evidence and testing their theories.

In addition to this, scientific inquiry is marked by the fact that scientific conclusions are always provisory, they are always open to be revised in the light of new evidence, and scientists are fond of inviting challenge in order for science to progress. Gilbert (1997, p. 137) describes the Popperian approach to scientific progress as follows:

Put simply, the view postulates that scientific hypotheses are put forward, then placed in a position where they can be falsified (Popper, 1979). If they are falsified, then they are abandoned and a newer, better view is adopted. This accounts for progress.

The pragma-dialectical ideal of reasonableness, on the other hand, has several features in common with scientific inquiry and philosophical inquiry.

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004, p. 123) explain that, in the study of argumentation, a concept of reasonableness is indispensable, because it is necessary to appeal to "a rational critic that judges reasonably" in order to be able to indicate whether or not an argumentation is valid.

At first it seemed obvious to look at the model of scientific inquiry and to ask the philosophers of science for their concept of reasonableness.The process of scientific research is often regarded as the paragon of reasonableness. Even though it is pointed out nowadays that irrational elements play an important role in devising scientific theories, many epistemologists still regard the process of scientific research as the prototype of a purposive rational discussion and the most pronounced exchange of ideas. (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 125)

Unfortunately, there is no agreement among philosophers of science on a concept of reasonableness. In fact, according to van Eemeren and Grootendorst, looking for an answer in this field raised more problems than were to be expected.

In formulating their pragma-dialectical ideal of reasonableness, the authors reject both the "anthropological" concept of reasonableness that prevails among some argumentation theorists and the "geometrical" concept of reasonableness favored by formal logicians. The reasons for this are that the first is relativistic and the second is only attainable in mathematics and formal deductive logic. In order to overcome the limitations of an excessively relativistic and an excessively normative approach, they adopt a "critical-rationalistic" ideal of reasonableness.

Characteristic of this ideal is to conceive argumentative discourse as part of a critical discussion aimed at resolving a difference of opinion. Therefore, argumentation should be treated as "a rational means to convince a critical opponent and not as mere persuasion" (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 10) and the dispute "should not just be terminated, no matter how, but resolved by methodically overcoming the doubts of a rational judge in a well regulated critical discussion." (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 11).

The central features of this ideal can be summarized as follows:
1. Since we cannot be certain about anything, we ought to be skeptical about any pretension of acceptability, no matter who presents it and no matter what it is about.
2. The critical perspective centers pre eminently on discussion and stimulates that each party's standpoints be systematically tested against the doubts of the other party.
3. In this way, argumentation is made to become explicit and this, in turn, can be submitted to questioning until the difference of opinion is resolved in a way that is acceptable to all parties involved. (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004)

It seems to me that a healthy skepticism, the willingness to examine every claim in the light of reason and evidence, the effort of doing this through philosophical dialogue, analyzing and evaluating reasons and keeping an open mind to take into account all possible objections, and all proposed alternative ways of looking at the problems, are features of the community of inquiry that closely resemble the pragma-dialectical perspective of reasonableness just cited.
In addition to the ideal of reasonableness, another important contribution of Pragma-Dialectics to critical thinking is the formulation of the rules for conducting a critical discussion. I have attempted elsewhere (López & Vicuña, 2003) to show that the principles underlying these rules go far beyond the requirement of rationality manifest in such rules as command relevance and the use of appropriate argumentation schemes. There is in the rules a concern for respecting freedom of speech, responsibility, consistency, truthfulness and avoidance of manipulation, which are indicative that the principles underlying them have much more to do with ethical concerns and "caring thinking" than it would seem at first sight.

6. *Conclusion*
The ethical and political controversies of our time are not so different from the

problems that gave rise to Greek skepticism. Just as these thinkers adopted a mitigated skepticism, as a philosophical method, and chose to suspend judgment on the absolute reality of their perceptions, while examining and questioning their own and each other's beliefs in discussions modeled on a Socratic method of questioning and answering, so the members of a "community of inquiry", the participant of a "critical discussion" and the members of a scientific community practice a mitigated skepticism as a way of avoiding dogmatism, progressing in knowledge and understanding and respecting the diversity of perspectives that enrich human life.

The pragma-dialectical rules for a critical discussion, formulated by van Eemeren & Grootendorst, and their philosophical ideal of reasonableness give support to the Philosophy for Children belief that the building of a community of inquiry develops reasoning skills, reasonableness and caring thinking in those involved in it. These, in turn, are fundamental for the building of a moral community of universal mutual respect.

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