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The moral conduct. Ethical dilemmas, the role of the deontological code in social work

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Abstract. The most acute symptom of modernity is the ethical component of society, the so-called spiritual crisis. The essence of moral crisis consists in reducing religiosity; the major effects of diminishing religiosity are: blind obsession for money, selfishness, proliferation of the lack of honesty, decline of the family as a social institution, public proliferation of sexuality, increase of discord, amplification of conflicts of all kinds (between individuals, between the individual and society, between social groups, between generations). The real world alienated itself and even broke away entirely from the world of spiritual, social and moral life. Nowadays, we talk about science, politics, religion, culture, economics, as if they were different fields, as if the involvement of a problem from one field into another field would not be allowed. In this sense, culture should not be involved in matters of science, morality cannot be compatible with business; and in politics we cannot guide ourselves by moral principles. Such attitudes lead to antisocial and deviant patterns of behavior: lying, violence, discrimination, corruption, tax evasion, crime etc.

Keywords. moral conduct, ethical dilemmas, deontological code, social work

“ Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe the oftener and more steadily I think about them: the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me” [1] .

The most acute symptom of modernity is the ethical component of society, the so-called spiritual crisis. The essence of moral crisis consists in reducing religiosity; the major effects of diminishing religiosity are: blind obsession for money, selfishness, proliferation of the lack of honesty, decline of the family as a social institution, public proliferation of sexuality, increase of discord, amplification of conflicts of all kinds (between individuals, between the individual and society, between social groups, between generations).

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Guenon, in *The Crisis of the Modern World*, noted that “nothing and nobody is any longer in the right place; men no longer recognize any effective authority in the spiritual order or any legitimate power in the temporal; the “profane” presumes to discuss what is sacred, and to contest its character and even its existence; the inferior judges the superior.

Ignorance sets bounds to wisdom, error prevails over truth, the human is substituted for the Divine, earth has priority over Heaven” [2] The models of ethics and patterns of behavior, offered nowadays to young people by the society, are poor and shallow: superficiality, easy glory, benefits without work, enrichment overnight, violence etc.; these are, in fact, anti-models that young people imitate unconsciously in the absence of real models.

The return to traditional moral values is the only chance to overcome this crisis. In this context, it should be noted that, since the dawn of the Romanian culture, the core values of our people’s ethos have been crystallized: rationality, humanness, aspiration for good and beauty. Most of the times, in explaining the lack of moral reference, of moral conscience, we allege the failure of the educational role of school, family, church, mass media. However, the fault is rarely assigned to politicians, managers, employers and even scientists.

According to the author of this work, each of us, in our field of activity, are morally compelled to initiate educational strategies and policies, in order to balance, as much as possible, the economic performance with the social one, to permanently show our liability and moral, social, professional responsibility, according to the positions we hold. Some authors believe that, in our society, including in the field of education, there is a “crisis” (lack) of moral values and a certain lack of hope about the overcome of this crisis.

The same author noted that the higher does a society polarize the consensus around a number of common values, the more stable it becomes morally. The chronicles and annals include important elements in the sphere of morality (customs, laws, “types” of people, and the practical function of morality: “to give life”).

The values cherished by chroniclers were: faith (loyalty), virtue, courage, temperance, kindness, wisdom, reason). Nicolae Bălcescu stated that “Over the laws of men, we acknowledge and adore an absolute moral law: Justice” [3]. In addition, Bălcescu recommended the Romanians to guide themselves by the following principles: “*Do not do to the other what you consider that the other should not do to you: do to the other what you think that the other should do to you*”, “*justice is the first degree of perfection, but brotherhood comes afterwards*” [4].

Vasile Conta, founder of the Romanian philosophy, has addressed several areas: economy, politics, pedagogy, sociology, aesthetics, morals, etc. He gave a materialistic explanation of the social and moral phenomena, showing their relationship to the physiological phenomena and, in general, to the environment, subjecting them to determinism.

He showed that the morality’s aim is to train the human soul, to improve people’s social progress. Dimitrie Gusti, considered to be the founder of sociology (of modern education, social sciences, the initiator of many social and cultural institutions: Social Romanian Institute, Cultural Foundation, the Village Museum, the National Council for Scientific Research etc.), takes into consideration both the individual and the social group. From his perspective, ethics is seen as a tool for shaping our personality (aiming at what is “useful”, i.e. the practical purpose), training and developing higher consciousness and moral attitudes.

The quality of the social worker’s moral conduct is noticed through the decisions that he/she makes. Ethical issues arise when the social worker meets a situation that involves difficult moral decisions.

Therefore, it is necessary for the social worker who faces certain *ethical dilemmas* to assess his/her own values, his/her own professional values, the values of the assisted person, the values of the institution where he/she works etc. After identifying and defining the ethical dilemma, the social worker has to decide which of the values involved are to be taken into consideration, in order to solve the case.

When taking an ethical decision in social work, we should know how the profession sets its priorities; we should identify the principles and moral values of the assisted person, which may differ from the values of the social worker who counsels the case; all these (and others such as the values and principles of the colleagues who are part of the counseling team) make moral deliberations difficult.

Situations that may lead to moral dilemmas may be:

- A young mother of two minor children practices prostitution because she does not have any material and financial means to support herself. She tries to avoid detention for prostitution by getting pregnant again. Lacking financial means and being pregnant, she asks for help;

- a 17 year old teenager tells you that she is pregnant, that she does not want to have an abortion; however, she thinks that it would be better to have an abortion because the parents do not agree with keeping the child; financially, she cannot afford to take care of the child, because the possible “future” father does not want the baby and she asks you for help;

- a young man from a foster home is sexually assaulted; he is infected with HIV and is engaged in homosexual relationships;

- you learn that a group of pupils from a famous high school in your town use ecstasy, the so-called “soft drugs”; this causes a deviant and aggressive behavior, with repercussions on the other high school youth.

Take the example of the young prostitute. Many persons, even the specialized ones, consider that this is a simple case, which does not trigger moral dilemmas; others, on the contrary, identify some moral principles and values, the problem becoming thus complex, and involving a difficult moral deliberation which entails the responsibility of several actors: the practitioner (the social worker concerned), the employing institution (which was asked for help), the assisted person, the colleagues from the advisory committee and, why not, the entire society.

We note that moral dilemmas bring about conflicts that involve at least two valid debts (responsibilities) which, however, in some *de facto* circumstances, cannot be complied conjunctly because it gives rise to a conflict *per accidens* (available in certain circumstances) and not *per se* (intrinsic relation, logical contradiction between two converse duties; it is *mandatory* to tell the truth and it is *forbidden* to tell the truth).

In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 1788), Kant presents his ethical system that is based on the belief that reason is the highest court of morals.

From this perspective, there are two ways of taking a decision dictated by the will: a conditional or hypothetical imperative, arising from a subjective inclination and following a particular individual purpose, and a “categorical imperative”, which is subject to a universally valid and necessary objective law. Kant formulates thus the principle of the “categorical imperative”, considered as the foundation of morality: “You should act in such a way so as the maximum of your actions be imposed as a universal law” [5].

Meditating on the Kantian thought, and based on the experience acquired in the field of social practice, we conclude that the resolution of ethical dilemmas lies in the *prioritization of obligations* according to *particular circumstances*.

Ethical dilemmas differ from case to case; thus, we cannot develop a typology of moral dilemmas; therefore, given their large number, a moral compass is required, an orientation guide, which is, in our case, *the social worker's deontological code*, its role being to make the social worker aware that the decision should be, morally, the most appropriate in connection to the professional values, to his/her own moral values, bearing in mind the professional standards.

The government strategies in the field of social policies in each country include different premises concerning the geographical area, the historical, economic, cultural, social conditions, under which the specialists from each country can establish the ethical principles of their own profession.

Thus, in our country, in 2003, FNASR [6] completed the code of ethics for the profession of social worker; code that was discussed by the professional community of social workers at the National Conference of Social Work held in Oradea, in September 2003. This code is divided into two chapters:

- *Ethical values and standards*
- *The social worker's responsibilities in his/her professional activity*

A very old code, which emphasizes the very old moral conduct is also the one from the beginning of modernity from the Antim monastery[7].

Conclusions:

As an extremely important issue to the profession, the majority of social workers recognize the existence of a *basic core* that includes four fundamental values [8]: the respect for self-determination; promoting individual and collective well-being; equal opportunities; social justice.

Social work practice cannot function without solid ethical principles. It is well known that an ***ethical principle*** makes particular reference to the basics of conducting a moral life accepted within a community, in our case, to the basic concept of social work practice. The social worker must demonstrate that [9]:

- is aware of his/her own values and of their influence on social work practice;
- respects the uniqueness of each person, understanding the possibilities for the positive development of the socially assisted person's life;
- complies with the ways of promoting the individual's right to choose, the right to privacy, confidentiality and protection;
- is aware of the forms of assistance granted to the people experiencing difficulties in their social development;
- by specific means, he/she is able to identify the issues of discrimination, racism, injustice, faced by the assisted person, and also the context in which he/she is situated;
- the social work can be practiced without humiliating the assisted person or without negatively affecting the assisted individuals, groups, communities.

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