

Valid Action

Conference given by Silo in Las Palmas, Canary Islands, September 29, 1978

... What actions are valid? This is a question that people have answered, or attempted to answer, in many different ways. They have tried, almost always on the basis of the goodness or the badness of an action, to discover what it is that makes an action valid.

In other words, since antiquity people have attempted to answer what has been known as the question of ethics or morality. For many years we have been concerned with consulting others about what is moral and what is immoral, what is good and what is bad. But fundamentally, our interest has been to discover what it is that makes an action valid.

People have given us a variety of answers. Some have given us religious answers, some have given legal answers, and others ideological answers. In all of these answers, what we have been told is that there are certain ways in which people ought to do things, and other ways of doing things they ought to avoid.

It has been very important for us to obtain a clear answer to this question, because a person's whole way of life follows from whether his or her actions go in one direction or another. All the varied elements that make up our lives find their place according to the direction that we take – my present situation corresponds to the direction that I take toward the future. So this question about which actions are valid and which are invalid, what is good and what is bad, affects not only the individual's future but his or her present as well. And it doesn't affect only the individual – it affects groups and even entire peoples.

The various religious positions have offered their solutions. So it is that if one is a believer in a certain religion, one must obey certain religious laws; one must follow certain precepts inspired by God. And that is valid for believers in that religion. But we find that different religions cite different precepts. Some religions say that one ought not to perform given actions so as to avoid a certain turn of events; others say it is so as to avoid a particular hell. Sometimes these religions, which in principle are universal, do not agree among themselves; they agree neither in their precepts nor in their commandments.

But what is most troubling in all of this is the situation of so many throughout the world who, though they may in good faith want to obey these precepts, these commandments, cannot do so because they do not feel them. And so for nonbelievers, who are unable to keep these commandments – and who, according to the religions, are also the children of God – it is as though they have been forsaken by God. It is not because a religion occupies the whole of the world geographically that it is a universal religion, however, but rather because it occupies the hearts of human beings, independent of the condition in which they live, independent of the latitude at which they live. And so religions present us with certain difficulties in regard to their answers about ethics.

This has led us to consult the judicial systems, inasmuch as they, too, are shapers of human conduct. These legal systems form our conduct and shape our behavior by laying down certain rules about what one ought to do or ought not to do in one's relationships, in one's social behavior. There are codes of many kinds to regulate relationships, extending even to

penal codes that establish punishments for various crimes, for behavior considered unsocial, or asocial, or antisocial. Legal systems, too, have tried to give their answer to the question of human conduct, in terms of what is good behavior and what is bad behavior. And like religions, they have given us their answer, and that is fine – fine for those who believe in a given legal system. Each legal system gives its own answer, and that is fine for that historical moment, fine for a given type of social organization – but none of this speaks to the individual who must follow one of these systems of conduct.

Although reasonable people will undoubtedly agree that it is interesting for social behavior to be regulated as a means of avoiding total chaos, such regulation is a technique of social organization, not a justification for any particular morality. And in fact, depending upon their development and depending upon the way they view their world, various human communities have regulated behavior legally or judicially in ways that are sometimes in striking contrast to one another. So it is clear that legal systems have no universal validity. They serve for a period of time, for a particular type of social structure, but they do not serve for all human beings or for all times and all places. And most important of all, they say nothing to the individual about what is good and what is bad.

We have also consulted various ideologies. These ideologies are more development-friendly, so to speak, providing explanations that are quite a bit more colorful than either the somewhat dry legal systems or those precepts and laws handed down from above. Some of these doctrines characterize the human being as a kind of rapacious animal, a being that develops at the expense of everything else, that will proceed without regard for anything else, even without regard for other human beings. A kind of will to power, then, underlies this morality. Having appeared romantic to some, this morality is in fact success-oriented, and it says nothing to the individual about how to handle those times when things go badly in this quest for power.

There is another kind of ideology which tells us that, since everything in nature is in evolution, and the human being itself is the product of that evolution, and since the human being is the reflection of the conditions that prevail during a given period, then human behavior will be a reflection of the type of society in which a person lives. Thus, one class will have a certain type of morality, while a different class will have another. According to this point of view, morality is determined by objective conditions, by social relations, and by the mode of production. Then there's no need to worry, because one does what one is mechanically driven to do, even though for public relations purposes people talk of the morality of one class or another. Being limited to this mechanical development, I act as I do because I'm driven by mechanical forces to do so. But where is the good and where is the evil in all of this? There is only the mechanical clash of particles in motion.

Other rather singular ideologies tell us, for instance, that morality is a social pressure that, like a kind of super-ego, serves to contain the force of impulses. Then, the compression brought about in the cauldron of the consciousness is what allows those basic impulses to be sublimated and gradually channeled in other directions.

So our poor friend, seeing himself variously defined by these often conflicting ideologies, finally sits down by the side of the road and says, "What am I supposed to do? On one side I'm constrained by social pressures, and yet at the same time I have impulses that apparently can be sublimated – if I'm an artist. But if I'm not, it's either lie down on the psychoanalyst's couch, or wind up neurotic." So morality appears as a way of controlling those impulses, which sometimes, however, still boil over.

There are other ideologies, also of a psychological nature, that explain good and bad on the basis of adaptation. But a morality of adaptive behavior – behavior that enables one to fit into one's society or, to the extent that one doesn't fit in, results in one's being segregated from it – entails problems of its own. That is, it says that the best thing you can do is just to walk the straight-and-narrow and try to "fit in." It tells us that what's good and what's bad is based on one's degree of adaptation, one's conformity to one's surroundings. And that's fine – it's another ideology.

In periods of great cultural exhaustion, as have occurred time and again in past civilizations, there tend to arise short-term, immediate answers to the question of what one should and should not do. I am referring to what could be called the "moral schools of decadence." As various cultures fell into decline, there arose moralists who tried to adapt their behavior as best they could in order to give some direction to their lives. Some said things like, "Life has no meaning, and since life has no meaning, anything goes – as long as I can get away with it." Others said, "Since life has little meaning (laughter), I should just do whatever I like, whatever feels good to me, regardless of how it affects anyone or anything else." And still others said, "Since I'm stuck in this bad situation, since life itself is nothing but suffering, I should just do what I have to do, do my duty and keep a stiff upper lip – I should be stoic." And that is the name of these schools of decadence, the Stoic schools.

Even though these schools represent are what in effect "emergency" answers to these questions of morality, behind them there is also ideology. The basic ideology appears to be that all meaning has been lost, and there is a corresponding urgent response to that loss of meaning. Today, for example, we find some who try to justify action with a theory of the absurd, into which the idea of "commitment" has been smuggled. But this is like the coercion imposed by the banks – that is, somehow I'm "committed" to something, and therefore I must fulfill my obligation. Yet it is difficult to understand how commitment can be established if the world I live in is absurd and ends in nothingness. Nor can this last position give the person who holds it much assurance.

The various religions, legal systems, ideological systems, and the moralities of decadence have all recognized the importance of the justification or lack of justification for human actions. So it is that they have all endeavored to give answers to this serious question of behavior in order to establish a morality, to define an ethics.

But what is the basis of truly valid action? The basis of valid action is not given by ideologies or religious mandates or beliefs or laws or social regulations. Even though all of these things have great importance, none of them provides a basis for valid action. Instead, the basis of valid action is given by the inner register that an individual has of that action. There is a fundamental difference between the valuation of an action when that valuation is seen to come from the outside, and when it is based on the internal register that human beings have of the actions they carry out.

And what is the register of an action that is valid? A valid action is experienced as giving one greater unity. At the same time, this action gives one a feeling of inner growth; it is something one desires to repeat because it has the flavor of continuity in time. Let's examine these aspects separately – the register of internal unity, on the one hand, and continuity in time, on the other.

In the face of a difficult situation, I can choose among various ways of responding. If I'm harassed, for example, I can react violently to the irritation produced in me by that external

stimulus, seeking in this way to relieve the tension provoked in me. If I react in this violent manner, I can experience relief as that tension is released. Thus, the first condition of valid action has apparently been met – faced with an irritating stimulus, I remove it, and in doing so I un-tense myself, and in relieving myself of tension I have a register of unity.

But an action cannot be said to be valid simply because of that momentary relief of tension if this feeling does not continue in time; indeed, without this continuity the situation that occurs is exactly the opposite – a feeling of contradiction is produced in me. Suppose, for example, that at moment A I produce a release tension by reacting violently as I have previously described, but at moment B I find that I am not at all in agreement with what I did only a short while before. That kind of release of tension is not unitive, inasmuch as the succeeding moment contradicts the preceding one. To be valid, an action must also meet the requirement of giving one unity through time, without gaps or subsequent contradictions. We can all find many examples in which what seems to be a valid action at one moment is not so in the next. In such cases a person cannot coherently seek to prolong that action and that attitude, because the register is not one of unity but rather one of contradiction

And there is yet another point to consider: the register of a sensation of inner growth. There are many actions that we carry out in the course of our daily lives that relieve various tensions. These actions have nothing to do with morality; we carry them out, and we release tensions. This alleviation of tension produces in turn a certain pleasure within us, but it doesn't go further than that. And when that tension arises once more, again we discharge it, and in capacitor-like fashion the charge rebuilds, until at a certain point it discharges once again. Finally, with all that charging and discharging like a capacitor, we find ourselves with the sensation of being trapped on an eternal wheel of actions, endlessly repeating. Even though there is a sensation of pleasure at the moment the tensions are discharged, we're left with a strange taste when we realize that if life is simply this wheel of repetitions, of successive pleasures and pains, then it can never be anything other than absurd. So it is that today I feel tension and I discharge it, and tomorrow the same . . . and so, like night follows day, the wheel of actions turns endlessly, independent of all human intention, independent of all human choice.

There are, however, actions of a different type, actions that we may perhaps have carried out only a few times in our lives. These are actions that give us a sense of great unity at the moment we do them. In addition, they give us a register that, through having done them, something has become better in us. These actions offer us a future project, in the sense that we feel that if we could repeat them in the future something in us would continue to grow, would continue to improve. These actions give us unity; they give us a sensation of inner growth, as well as a sensation of continuity in time. These, then, are the registers of valid action.

I have never said that this type of action is better or worse; nor have I said, coercively, that this is something that one must do. Rather, I've outlined proposals related to valid action and the systems of registers that correspond to these proposals. I have spoken of the actions that create unity and those that create contradiction and, lastly, of how valid actions can be perfected through repetition. And to complete that system of registers of valid actions I have said: "If you repeat your acts of internal unity, nothing can detain you." This refers not only to the register of unity, the sensation of inner growth, and to continuity in time, but also to the possibility of improving valid action, since clearly not everything that we do turns out well on the first try. In fact, quite often when we attempt new and interesting things, they don't turn out very well at first, but we know that with practice things can be improved. So it is that valid

actions can also be perfected. Repeating those acts that give one unity and inner growth and that have continuity in time is something possible, and it is what constitutes the improvement of valid action.

In very general principles we have indicated the registers of valid action, and highest among these principles is the one known as the “golden rule.” This principle says, “When you treat others as you want them to treat you, you liberate yourself.” This is not a new principle – it is thousands of years old, and in many parts of the world, in many cultures, it has withstood the test of time. It is a universally accepted and valid principle that has been formulated in various ways – sometimes in the negative, as in “Do nothing to others that you do not want them to do to you.” That is simply another approach to the same idea, as is the formulation, “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” Of course, it is not exactly the same as saying, “Treat others as you want them to treat you.” But that’s all right; however they may have phrased it, since ancient times people have invoked this, the highest of all moral principles, the highest of all principles of valid action.

But how do I want others to treat me? Even if we take it as given that it is good to treat others as I want them to treat me, exactly how is it that I want to be treated? I will have to answer this question by saying that if other people treat me in certain ways they are treating me badly, and if they treat me in other ways they are treating me well. I will have to answer this in terms of good and bad. Once again, I will have to return to the eternal wheel of defining valid action according to one theory or another or one religion or another. For me, a certain thing is good, but another person may see this differently. And there will never fail to be people who treat others very badly, while still claiming to be applying the same principle, because supposedly these people like to be treated badly.

This principle that speaks of treating others according to how I want them to treat me, according to what would be good for me, is all very well. But it would be even better if I knew what would be good for me. So that’s how things stand, and we’re interested in turning now to the basis of valid action, and the basis of valid action lies in the register that one obtains from this action.

If I say that I should treat others as I want them to treat me, immediately I find myself asking, Why should I? But it’s as if there is some internal process or some way in which the mind functions that creates problems inside me when I treat others badly. But what type of function could this be? If I see someone in a very bad state, if I see someone suddenly cut or injured in some way, something resonates inside of me. But how can something that is happening to another person echo inside of me? It seems almost magical! It happens that when someone is in an accident, somehow I experience, almost physically, the register of the accident in that other person.

As students of these phenomena, you know that to every perception there corresponds an image, and you understand that there are images that can cause certain points in one’s body to tense up, just as other images can cause them to release tension. If every perception is linked to a representation, and that representation in turn has its register – that is, a new sensation – then it is not so hard to understand how when I perceive a phenomenon there is an internal image that corresponds to that phenomenon. And when that image is mobilized, certain parts of my body or intra-body can experience a corresponding sensation, since they have been modified by the action of that image. I feel “identified” when someone is injured, because the visual perception of that phenomenon is accompanied by the triggering of a visual image and, correlatively, an unleashing of coenesthetic and tactile images. In addition,

these images carry with them a new sensation that ends up provoking in me a register of the other's injury. So it cannot be good for me to treat other people badly, because when I do I have a corresponding register in myself.

Let's look at this almost technically. In order to do that, we'll simulate the functioning of the mental circuits, step by step, even though we know that the structure of the consciousness works as a whole. But for the sake of illustration, we can separate out a "first circuit" that is comprised of the initial perception and its representation, then a re-taking of the representation, and finally an internal sensation. And we can separate out a "second circuit" that has to do with action, whose results might be described as follows: For every action that I launch into the world, I also have an internal register. That feedback is what allows me, for example, to learn things through doing them. If there were no such feedback from the actions I take, I could never perfect them. I learn to type, for example, by repetition; that is to say, it is through trial and error that I record these actions. But I can record actions only through performing them. It is through the doing of actions that I have a register of them.

Here I would like to make a short digression. There is a serious prejudice that at times invades the field of education: the belief that one can learn by thinking about things rather than by doing them. Clearly, one learns because one has received data, but no datum is simply memorized. It always corresponds to an image, which in turn mobilizes one to new activity: checking, testing against experience, rejecting, and so forth, demonstrating the ceaseless activity of consciousness, not some supposed state of passivity within which the datum somehow resides. This feedback is what allows me to realize, for example, that "I typed the wrong key." As I type, I register the sensation of correctness or the sensation of error. In this way, I gradually perfect the register of correctness, I become more fluent, and little by little the correct way of typing becomes automatic. All of this is related to the "second circuit." The "first circuit" relates to the example of the pain in the other person that I register inside myself, while the "second circuit" relates to the register I have of actions that I perform.

*All of you here know the difference between those actions that we call cathartic and those that we call transference. Cathartic actions refer basically to the discharge of tensions and go no further than that. Transference actions, in contrast, allow us to transfer internal charges, to integrate contents, and to facilitate healthy psychic functioning. We know that there will be difficulties for the consciousness when there are mental contents that, like islands, are isolated from one another. If we think in one direction, for example, but feel in another and, finally, act in yet a third, we can see that things won't "fit together" and that the register we obtain will not be one of completeness. It seems that only when we build bridges between our inner contents does psychic functioning become integrated, allowing us to advance a few more steps. There are some very useful transference techniques that can mobilize and transform problematic images. One example of such techniques is presented in literary form as guided experiences, some of which appear in the book *Tales for Heart and Mind: The Guided Experiences, A Storybook for Grownups*.*

However, we know that, in addition to the work of images, the actions we carry out are also capable of setting transference and self-transference phenomena in motion. But there are actions of different types. Some actions allow us to integrate our internal contents, whereas other actions are terribly disintegrative. There are certain actions that a person never wants to repeat, because they produce such an overcharge of grief, such regret and inner division in the one who performed them. Unfortunately, however, such actions remain strongly linked to that person's past. So, even if the person does not repeat such actions in the future,

nonetheless those actions continue pressing from the past, with the consciousness unable to resolve them – unable to translate, transfer, and integrate its contents. As a consequence of all this, the person is prevented from having that sensation of inner growth that we spoke of earlier.

It is not, then, a matter of indifference which actions one carries out in the world. There are actions that give one a register of unity, and there are other actions that give one a register of contradiction and dis-integration. If we study this carefully, in light of what we know about cathartic and transference phenomena, the matter of one's actions in the world with respect to the effect of those actions on the integration and development of one's contents, will be much clearer. And, of course, all this simulation of circuits we have gone through in order to understand the meaning of valid action is part of this complicated subject.

Meanwhile, our friend keeps asking us, "What should I do?" Even if we have only a minimal knowledge of these things, we register it as unifying and worthwhile when, through simple words and deeds, we offer what we know to that disoriented person, who is without references in his or her life. Even if no one else offers help to this person, we make what we have available – as we offer so many other things that allow people to overcome pain and suffering. And in doing so, we will also be working for ourselves.

Las Palmas, Canary Islands, September 29, 1978
Revised by the author, October 10, 1996