

## Quotation IV: Should we abandon ethics?

**In short, the actions of man are never free, they are always the necessary consequence of his temperament (i), of the received ideas (ii), and of the notions, either true or false, which he has formed to himself of happiness (iii), of his opinions, strengthened by example, by education (ii), and by daily experience (iv).**

*-Holbach, Paul-Henri Dietrich*

I. Holbach's statement is challenging a fundamental discipline of philosophy: Ethics. If man is not – never! – free, he is consequently unable to be good or bad; only a person (cf. Singer: Self-conscious being which thinks itself as distinctive entity in past and future) is gifted with the power to decide – and only this allows us to make ethical judgements about the decisions the person has made (which doesn't mean that good decisions can't result in bad actions, but this is another problem).

II. In the following, Holbach's statement is going to be stripped down to its basic principle by referring to some of his most important intellectual forefathers. (Points i – iv refer to Holbach's quotation, point v is an addition):

- i. According to Freud, man's actions and decisions are heavily influenced by his *Trieb* (sexual drive); he may not be conscious about his mental restrictions, but the *Ueber-Ich* is subconsciously in charge. All of man's actions are basically compensations concerning his sexual desires. He is therefore not free to decide independently.
- ii. Following John Stuart Mill, man can only be free if he is taught freedom. To achieve this goal, he should live in a society which strongly emphasizes the freedom of speech and grants a person to pursue his own idea of happiness, as long as he doesn't treat the freedom of anyone else (cf. John Stuart Mill: On Liberty). Mill clearly states that the right education is crucial concerning the upbringing of a free person and only possible in a society applying the above mentioned rules.
- iii. According to Maslow, man must satisfy his basic needs like shelter, clothing nutrition etc. (cf. Pyramid of needs) before he is enabled to think about ethical problems. Due to the external circumstances, an inhabitant of a slum won't think about the ethical dimension of stealing – he just wants to satisfy his existential need to cease his hunger.
- iv. In accordance with Popper, man thinks in terms of so-called "problem-fields" (*Problemfelder*) not only while scientifically working, but also in everyday life: If a person has his arm cut off, he won't be able to think about a philosophical problem. Due to the pain, his only concern will be to ease his suffering by – for example – getting medical treatment.
- v. In modern quantum physics, it is empirically proven that there exists objective chance (cf. Anton Zeilinger: *Die spukhafte Fernwirkung der Quantenphysik*). Let me illustrate the importance of this statement by an example: We want to shoot a photon (which is a quant) at a half-permeable mirror. The photon has (statistically) a chance of 50% to get through the mirror, otherwise it is going to be reflected. It is now virtually impossible to predict if the photon is going to pass or not. There exists no natural law predicting the behaviour of the single photon being shot at a half-permeable mirror – we can only make a prediction based on statistic material. If this insight is transferred to the human mind, it

becomes clear that there are at least some thought processes which do not correspond to the classic conception of physics, which is causality. This might be a strong argument against determinism, but it also implies that man is not free: If his actions are merely the sum of chance, he is not in control of himself.

All in all, there is strong evidence that man is not always free; the external circumstances, his psychological characteristics, his education and last but not least the physical world he lives in are strongly shaping and influencing his behaviour, his actions and his thinking.

III. Seen the evidence above, why shouldn't we abandon ethics? Why should we categorize actions as good or bad, if man – as a sheer product of his biological, physical and psychological forming – can't be held responsible for them?

- i. First, the degradation of man to a simple behaviourist "actio et reactio"-machine (as shown in I.i-I.iv) misses the point that man, even though his physical environment might be harsh and unpleasant, doesn't necessarily lose his free will. A good counterexample is the well-known catholic priest Maximilian Kolbe, who was imprisoned by the Nazis and put into a KZ. He sacrificed his life in order to save a Polish family father. Following Kant, only the good will, stripped from its practical consequences, can be called "good" – in extreme situations, morality thus becomes heroic, which shouldn't be its purpose. But it shows, that man indeed has a free will and the means to act according his ideas.
- ii. On one hand, the insights of the quantum theory are true – on the micro-level of physics; on the other hand, macro-physics is strongly dependent on causality: Einstein's theory of relativity opposes the quantum theory, which has also been proven true. As long as physicians can't combine the micro- and macro-level of physics, one has to be careful about the ethical consequence of quantum physics, especially if this would mean to abandon ethics.
- iii. The most convincing argument is also the simplest: What is the alternative to ethics?
  - a. If ethics are abandoned, our whole legal system becomes obsolete and with it one of the most important principles of a democratic society: Legal certainty which prevents arbitrariness.
  - b. To abandon ethics would mean to justify Hitler; if we perceive Hitler only as the product of his environment – for an example look at the great inflation: Hitler was unemployed, malnourished and homeless – or his psychological traits – for example Hitler's problems concerning relationships with women – we can perfectly justify his crimes because his actions were basically determined. This reduction ad absurdum reveals the intolerable consequences which goes hand in hand with the loss of ethics: Anything goes – man can do, whatever he wants, because he is not master of himself. He has lost his trait as moral subject and is legitimated to steal, rape and murder as it pleases him.

The reason why we should keep ethics is rather practical: We can't do without it. There is no choice but to *assume* that man is free – as long he isn't immanently stressed through an exceptional situation like an accident etc.; the alternative would be to surrender to a brutal state of nature as it was described by Hobbes. We should keep ethics for our own good – the alternative is just unbearable.