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# The ethical-political dimension as constitutive of political psychology

## *A dimensão ético-política como constitutiva da psicologia política*

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### Abstract

#### Objective

This theoretical essay aimed to understand how ethics in Political Psychology is constituted by the ethics-politics syntagma, in which its ethical rationality is its political rationality.

#### Method

A literature review was carried out since Machiavelli, in which politics has been understood as the technique of the act of governing, totally divorced from its ethical dimension.

#### Results

In Political Psychology, the ethical axiomatics is politics itself. Its politics lies precisely in its ethical dimension. In Aristotelian terms, Political Psychology shapes itself as a praxis, that is, as an ethics, from which its political dimension is not detached. The issue of ethics concerns the political positions that its theoretical systematization occupies in the context of contemporary culture in the face of the challenges that emanate from it. And its axiological axes find value in the notions of justice and freedom.

#### Conclusion

Thus, politics in Political Psychology is about ethics. Its political practice is, in the stricto sensu, its ethical practice. Its ethical-political axiological dimension is ultimately aimed at human freedom.

**Keywords:** Ethics; Politics; Psychology.

### Resumo

#### Objetivo

Este ensaio teórico teve por objetivo compreender como a ética na Psicologia Política se constitui pelo sintagma ético-político, em que sua racionalidade ética é sua racionalidade política.

#### Método

Realizou-se uma revisão de literatura desde Maquiavel, em que a política tem sido entendida como técnica do ato de governar totalmente divorciada de sua dimensão ética.

#### Resultados

Na Psicologia Política, a axiomática ética é a própria política. Sua política reside exatamente em sua dimensão ética. Em termos aristotélicos a Psicologia Política se conforma como uma práxis, isto é, como uma ética, da qual não se desvincula de sua dimensão política. A questão da ética diz

*respeito às posições políticas que sua sistematização teórica ocupa no contexto da cultura contemporânea diante dos desafios que dela emanam. E seus eixos axiológicos encontram valor nas noções de justiça e de liberdade.*

### **Conclusão**

*Assim, a política na Psicologia Política trata de uma ética. Seu fazer político é, em sentido strictu sensu, seu fazer ético. A sua dimensão axiológica ético-política pretende, em última instância, a liberdade humana.*

**Palavras-chave:** Ética; Política; Psicologia.

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We can't begin this text without recalling that,

Dealing with ethics is challenging, especially when the word 'ethics' is immediately associated with another word: 'morals'. In our daily lives, we don't often distinguish between ethics and morals. We usually use the two terms synonymously, whereas, as we shall see, scholars make distinctions between them. But, even if the two terms are not synonymous, there is no denying that their meanings are closely related, that their meanings are mixed up in everyday life in such a way as to lose sight of meanings that are essential for the production of research that is neither ethically nor morally committed. (Silva, 2009, p. 37)

Understanding this factual reality of ethics and morality in everyday life is fundamental to thinking about a transformative and engaged Political Psychology (Martin-Baró, 1991; Silva, 2009, 2012) whose central object is power itself and the relationships that derive from it. We are not treating ethics here as an element that acts as a judge extrinsic to the scientific object, but rather as an element that is imbricated in the 'what to be done' of the field and is therefore in itself constitutive of it. This is a complex subject that requires a lot more space than this article allows. However, here we intend to share some notes that will allow us to problematize the very contemporary nature of the psychopolitical field in the light of historical and epistemological elements.

People hold beliefs, convictions and opinions for reasons that are often not clear either to themselves or to those with whom they interact. This reality is the subject of English thinker Graham Wallas (1858-1932). In his view, the technocratic assumption that political opinions are determined by rational calculation is a mistake and this is one of the stances that will give rise to the emergence of a Political Psychology deeply concerned with the vulnerability of democracy to the technocratic manipulation of political opinion. In *Human Nature in Politics* (1908), Wallas proposed that the political opinion of the crowds could be better understood and even controlled by exploring their unconscious. For him,

In politics the most important of these special questions of conduct is concerned with the relation between the process by which the politician forms his own opinions and purposes, and that by which he influences the opinions and purposes of others. (Wallas, 1908, p. 22)

By focusing on the political nature of human beings, the author opens an important debate on ethics and politics as constituent elements of political behavior. In a way, it is posed as an intellectual challenge to understand the interrelations between ethics and politics. In other words, it is relevant to reflect on the ethical dimension of politics and the political dimension of ethics.

This raises the question 'How can we think about ethics in Political Psychology?' or 'What are the ethical consequences of studying political phenomena in the interdisciplinary field of Political Psychology?' Our position is that this relationship can be thought of in terms of the ethics-politics syntagma. Not losing sight of the fact that syntagmas are minimal units that hold a relationship of determination between them, in this article I will consider two issues that arise from this dynamic. The first refers to whether politics in Political Psychology can constitute an ethics and the second

refers to how political and collective phenomena, objects of Political Psychology, can be understood from this syntagmatic dyad that unfolds in the ethical and moral behavior that defines the multiple possibilities of life in the polis.

Syntagmatic thinking is not based on a logic grounded on the principles and parameters of language. Its gaze is directed towards conceptualizations of “the world materialized in language and effected by language” (Matos, 1999, p. 44). So, if the units and structures of language are manifestations of general cognitive capacities, which conceptually organize reality, how can we not think of the interaction between ethics and politics as organizing elements of human life in its fullness? If we think that Political Psychology considers the political life of human beings, whether as individuals or as a collective, we need to understand that ethics in Political Psychology is the “ethics of life” that Dussel (1998) addresses.

Such ethics is defined as the critical passage towards an awareness of negativity, which is understood as overcoming the beliefs and conceptions that individuals internalize and which naturalize suffering, weakness and undervaluation. Dussellian ethics denaturalizes the suffering of individuals and highlights the social and cultural conditions imposed on them and which act as determinants of subjectivation processes. In this context, becoming aware of this situation has a critical and liberating character.

This awareness emerges from the denunciation of oppression and of the oppressed’s suffering that leads to a psychopolitical state that deconstructs naturalized discourses and places, rejecting a way of life in which oppression and suffering are acceptable and determinant of human existence. The Dussellian perspective of the “ethics of life” implies a process of (political) awareness that opens up opportunities for individuals to become active participants in power relations: they stop being subjected and start appropriating freedom.

Thus, in this article we will consider a Political Psychology in which politics and ethics are constitutive of existence and require a critical approach that imposes on Political Psychology a commitment to individual and collective life that denounces both inequality and exclusion naturalized in society and generates actions aimed at changing this reality.

There is therefore no way to dissociate the “ethics of” life from the very genesis of Political Psychology, since in its instrumental dimension it is expected to break – or at least point to elements of rupture – with the hindrances to social change (Silva et al., 2018). The ethics of life produces not only general principles of life in society, but is based on the processes of awareness, de-ideologization and de-alienation (Martín-Baró, 1991; Montero, 2003; Silva, 2009) that allow for the emancipation and autonomization of subjects as they break with worldviews that naturalize injustices, exclusion and inequalities.

As Montero (2007, p. 529) points out, the critical stance taken by Political Psychology,

is based upon the relationship between those included in social benefits and those excluded from them, based on relatedness, and is an epistemological conception changing the understanding of the modes of producing knowledge which has an ethical foundation rejecting exclusion in its many forms. Its ethical orientation and political character have a democratic foundation and aim to strengthen civil society while developing a conscious citizenry.

### **Digressions, from Machiavelli, on Ethics and Politics in Political Psychology**

In proposing to systematize *Machiavelli’s Political Psychology*, Fischer (1997) recalls that this task has not been carried out as yet and that those who have sought to analyze the psychological

aspects present in Machiavelli's work (1469-1527) have been as scattered as the author himself who in focus. According to him,

As with most political theories, Machiavelli's propositions on political order and foreign affairs are based on a number of important assumptions about the inner workings of human beings. Although the resulting political psychology is crucial to his overall thought and fairly consistent, Machiavelli does not present it in any orderly fashion but scatters it across his writings according to his rhetorical purposes. (...) As with most political theories, Machiavelli's propositions on political order and foreign affairs are based on a number of important assumptions about the inner workings of human beings. Although the resulting political psychology is crucial to his overall thought and fairly consistent, Machiavelli does not present it in any orderly fashion but scatters it across his writings according to his rhetorical purposes. A number of Machiavelli's major interpreters, I believe, would agree with this assessment.' But none of them has provided a comprehensive and sustained analysis of Machiavelli's political psychology; instead, they have inserted psychological references across their own works, resulting in similarly disjointed and often incomplete presentations that attenuate their theoretical significance. (Fischer, 1997, p. 789)

It is not our aim to delve deeper into Fischer's debate, but to highlight the relevance of Machiavelli's thought in the constitution of Political Psychology and for the debate on the relationship between ethics and politics in the psychopolitical field (Dorna, 1998; Silva, 2009, 2017). Dorna (2018, p. 72) points out that "His empirical knowledge of reality and of the action to conquer and retain power not only correspond to a particular man, but to the psychological model of the man of power that Machiavelli constructs as a paradigm of the political". In the same vein, Knoll (2018) notes that Machiavelli shows that human emotions, desires and passions play an important role in political analysis and theory as he develops a psychology of motivation that is politically focused on the driving forces of political behavior and actions. According to Knoll (2018, p. 59):

Knowledge about the goals and motivations of human behavior is crucial for an analysis of politics because political decisions are often caused by emotions, desires, and passions. A study of Machiavelli's political psychology of motivation is by no means only of interest for a historian of political ideas. On the contrary, an adequate understanding of the human drives is still highly relevant for an appropriate understanding of contemporary politics.

By inaugurating political science - and Political Psychology (Le Bon, 1910/1921) - as Nicolaus Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in 1532, he brought about fundamental ruptures in the relationship between state and religion. This perspective has led to a mistaken view that the author proposed a politics reduced to the technique of governing, totally divorced from its ethical dimension. In reality, he inaugurated an ethical thought that was dissociated from religion and, therefore, secular. As Amaral (2012, p. 29) points out, the

(...) outstanding characteristic of Machiavelli's thought is the complete rejection of the Christian ethical legacy of Medieval times and the constitution of a secular morality based on naturalism. This will lead us to the secularization of politics, a movement of rupture with medieval political thought that linked politics to religion, to the Church.

In the words of Machiavelli (1532/2018, p. 361):

I am not unaware that many men have been, and still are, convinced that worldly affairs are controlled by Fortune and God, so that even prudent men are unable to rule them and have, indeed, no remedy against them. Hence they would think it useless to sweat about these matters very much, and instead to leave control to chance. This conviction has been embraced more often in our time because of the great upheavals in affairs, beyond anything humanly imaginable, which we have seen and are seeing every day. At times, when reflecting upon these upheavals, I myself am somewhat disposed to such

a belief. Nevertheless, since our free will ought not to be destroyed, I think it may well be true that Fortune is the mistress of half of our actions, but that even so she leaves control of the other half-or nearly that much-to us.

In fact, in Machiavelli's writings ethics emerge as essentially political, of effective action. Certainly, in *The Prince*, the author's perspectives on how political authority should act in the face of a new historical situation are included. In positioning himself, he takes for granted the need to revise his conception of political authority and goes on to claim the right to freedom of human action, power, in opposition to the divine designs that guided medieval life and morals (customs) and granted all power to God (and his representatives on earth!).

It was no small thing in his time to state that God and fortune do not decree an implacable fate for men and that they have the power to decide, to some extent, on their destinies. Therefore, there is a clear break with the morality in force up to that point and he himself represents the changes resulting from the transition from medievalism to modernity. Another way of thinking ethically emerges and guides actions in political life, the actions of those who do politics.

The confusion about the absence of ethics in Machiavelli is based on the understanding that his thought contains the foundations of opportunistic action and self-centeredness in particular interests, when in reality he brings with him an ethics of consequence. This misreading loses sight of historical time and, as Le Bon (1910/1921, p. 5) rightly pointed out, of the fact that,

the illustrious writer formulated precise rules regarding the art of governing the men of his time. Of his time and not of another. It was for having overlooked this essential condition that the book, so admired at first, was later attacked, when ideas and customs had evolved and ceased to reflect the needs of the new times. Only then did Machiavelli become Machiavellian. Having a grasp of reality, the eminent psychologist was not looking for the best, but only for what was possible.

For Le Bon (1910/1921), Machiavelli became the first political psychologist with the writing of *The Prince*. In seeking to guide governance and tackle the problems of his time and not those of another, he began to dedicate himself to life and to take a secular view of ethics, which is confused with the split between ethics and politics. What we see is an absorption of ethics by/into political life:

In short, Machiavelli's moral conception does not admit the existence of a pre-existing Good or Evil defining human acts, but it does admit the existence of good or bad acts according to whether or not they observe the good of the community. Therefore, Morality in Machiavelli loses its autonomy and transcendence and is entirely absorbed by Politics. (Amaral, 2012, p. 34)

In this way, it is clear that for Machiavelli ethics/morals and justice are not elements that predate the emergence of the state, since they are the result of the social conditions of his time. Both morality and justice are social derivations whose purpose makes sense according to the need for conservation and the state's own need to maintain social order. Merleau-Ponty (1977, p. 211) points out that the author points to the concreteness of reality and is misunderstood for this:

How could have he been understood? He writes against good feelings in politics, but he is also against violence. Since he had the nerve to speak of *virtue* at the very moment he is sorely wounding ordinary morality, he disconcerts the believers in Law as he does those who believe that the State is the Law. For he describes that knot of collective life in which pure morality can be cruel and pure politics requires something like a morality. We could put up with a cynic who denies values or an innocent who sacrifices action. We do not like this difficult thinker without idols.

In Political Psychology, the ethical axiom is based on politics itself, since politics does not exist without an ethical dimension. This peculiarity of Political Psychology is based on an original

ethical situation that occurs in the encounter with the Other, as proposed by Lévinas (1997). For him, the encounter is prior to speech and refers to the idea of existence inevitably related to the otherness of the Other. Along the same path, Merleau-Ponty (1977) sees in Machiavelli a philosophy centered on the relationship of human being to human being and the constitution of a common history between them.

To a certain extent, the issues present in Machiavelli's Political Psychology have intrinsic ethical implications, because by privileging time, the author pays attention to the circumstantial, the contingent, to the political decision made at the moment when the ruler is faced with the imponderable of otherness and needs to produce/render material the art of politics. By focusing on his reality and the problems of his time, Machiavelli produced a work that articulates the dimensions of time, space, government, ruler, otherness and appearances and inaugurates a political position of resistance and contestation of the authority exercised by the divine and his church. In short, Machiavelli dissociates political life from the Christian conception of eternity and links it to the earthly world, where it becomes separate from or even above God (Walker, 2010).

Victor Coutinho Lage reflects that Machiavelli pays attention to the customs of his time and is not limited by interpretations that reduce him to a tradition of thinking that privileges instrumental rationality of fitting the means to the ends", because, actually he,

(...) emphasizes the fusion between calculation and chance, the political decision taken in the contingency of temporality and in the expectation of the unknowable. The past, the present and the future enter into this game of producing and displacing the authority and subjectivity of the ruler and the state. Machiavelli could never provide a political manual for the ruler, a method of how to govern, since government is an art of *virtú* in the face of fortune, of the sovereign's ability to deal with contingency and have the people on his side: "[m]any ways exist to cultivate such affection [the affection of the people]. However, they vary so much from people to people that it is not possible to establish a sure rule, and I will keep silent about them" (Machiavelli, 2007, p. 101). The resilience of the traditional code (customs) means that the prince cannot present himself naked to the people. (Lage, 2011, p. 57)

Machiavelli's ethics are not based on universally valid principles because he is interested in the concrete actions of human beings. In his thought, human action, the forces in conflict on the political scene, and the mastery of circumstances take center stage. From a hermeneutic point of view, Machiavelli has no room for apriorisms in the analysis of political life, since the consequences of actions – not the way in which they occur – are central to his conception of the world.

Thus, in political life, an a priori ethical judgment is not possible, which is diametrically opposed to the common sense that states the dissociation of ethics in Machiavelli and from which the pejorative adjective 'Machiavellian' is born. In fact, the term contains a moralizing stance towards politics that is the opposite of what Machiavelli's thought proposes. Even though it is an established popular expression that alludes to a lack of morals, ethics and perversity, it has nothing to do with Machiavelli and his thought.

Between *should-be* and *becoming*, Machiavelli produces a realistic ethics, an immanent ethics, a political ethics, an ethics of action, which aims to understand not an ideal human being, but a real one, as he presents himself in everyday life. In the face of utopias, Machiavelli favors the search for the effective truth of things.

In Book XV of *The Prince*, the author shares his desire to produce something useful (this term not being associated with the nineteenth-century utilitarian philosophy):

But the intention of my writing is to be of use to whoever understands it; thus it has seemed to be more profitable to go straight to the actual truth of matters rather than to a conception about

it. Many writers have conceived of republics and princedoms which have never in fact been seen or known to exist. Since there is so great a discrepancy between how one lives and how one ought to live, whoever forsakes what is done for what ought to be done is learning self-destruction, not self-preservation. For a man who wants to practice goodness in all situations is inevitably destroyed, among so many men who are not good. Hence a prince who wishes to retain his power must learn not to be good, and to use, or not to use, that ability according to necessity. (Machiavelli, 1532/2018, p. XV)

Focused on reality and not on the utopian imagination that marked medieval times, he inaugurated modernity and political theory by abandoning the Aristotelian idea of 'good government' present in Aquinas. There is, therefore, a need for moral/ethical regulation, rules of conduct for human beings, both in the private and public spheres, but ethics is incorporated into the political sphere and guides power relations. In this sense, the ethics present in Machiavelli are about the individual who acts, who faces the difficulties and adversities of life and changes his world.

Despite what is said about Machiavelli, he is one of the great ethical philosophers of modernity, as Merleau-Ponty (1977) has already pointed out. As the French author points out,

There is a way of repudiating Machiavelli which is Machiavellian; it is the pious dodge of those who turn their eyes and ours to toward the heaven of principles in order to turn them away from what they are doing. And there is a way of praising Machiavelli that is just the opposite of Machiavellianism, since it honors in his work a contribution to political clarity. (Merleau-Ponty, 1977, p. 223)

## Contemporary Digressions on Ethics and Politics in Political Psychology

Machiavelli is a man of a new era. He is living through the transition between the end of medieval times and the birth of modernity and also new stage in the history of political thought (Nosetto, 2020). As Pavel (1992) points out, this is not just a political time in which the crisis of late-medieval communities and the birth of modern states coexist. In fact, Machiavelli is a product of this transition, which produces a worldview of the political world as an additional planet in the wider cosmological universe. This change rendered political orders artificial creations immanent to the human imagination and capacity for decision, and no longer to divine designs. It is important to note that Nicolaus Machiavelli is a thinker in transition, both because he lives in a time of change in political regimes and because he lives halfway between the theological order that divinizes classical political power and modernity that humanizes and secularizes politics.

Returning to this context is important because it contains an important key to reading Political Psychology, underpinning its foundations: the problem of emotions, feelings and affections in politics and in the emergence of political subjects, as well as in relation to power and its exercise. That said, there is no possibility of dissociating ethics and politics, since it is consolidated as a traverser, either by its presence or by its absence.

Being a Renaissance man, he turned his gaze to the ancient classical thinkers and sometimes reinterpreted them, while at other times he broke with them conceptually. Aristotle and Cicero are some of the authors with whom Machiavelli engaged in an intense and critical debate that often placed him in an antagonistic position to – resulting in drastic ruptures – the medieval worldview based on principles that resisted passing to make way for change and a new worldview that founded a humanism constituted as a philosophy whose issues were the relationships between humans, as well as the constitution of a situation and a history common to them.

Platonic idealist or Aristotelian realist positions that produce utopian situations give way to a model of practical realism. Machiavelli leaves behind the notions of the good, the beautiful

and the one that constitute Aristotelian-Thomist metaphysics and focuses his attention on the material elements of everyday life, factual reality. In Machiavelli's view, there is no a priori good, nor does politics depend on encounters with substantial virtues that make human beings good and fit to exercise political life because they possess such virtues. To encounter these principal elements is to encounter God and to be anointed by grace with the ability to govern and even to guarantee the salvation of those governed. The guarantee of salvation was imposed as an ethical duty in medieval times.

Diverging from this view, Machiavelli shows that there are multiple forms/possibilities of ethics. In Machiavelli, the relationship between ethics and politics is based on the distinction between private morality and public morality, the former concerning the sphere of individual actions and the latter the sphere of collective actions. To break with medievalism is to break with Thomist perspectives based on their Christianization of Aristotelian thought. Since man is characterized by his political activity and given that only through this activity can the human being self-determine its present reality and his future, it follows that ethics, in Political Psychology, is inseparable from his political thought and emotional experiences as it originally appears in Machiavelli and will develop over the following centuries.

Ethics and politics are thus intertwined in psychopolitical thought. In these terms, ethics in Political Psychology is inscribed in the syntagma ethics-politics. This syntagma refers to the core of the intellectual and praxeological psychopolitical experience. If "Machiavelli founds a new morality which is that of the citizen, of the man who builds the state: an immanent, mundane morality, it is no longer the morality of the individual soul, which should present itself to divine judgment 'beautiful' and clean" (Gruppi, 1986, p. 11), we can understand that this action needs to generate changes in reality and in the ways in which human beings interact, with political awareness (Silva & Euzébio Filho, 2021) being an element of emancipation of and within political life. From this perspective of the ethics of action, the ethics of life that Dussel (1998) deals with, Martin-Baró (1996, p. 16) states that,

This critical awareness of the surrounding reality and of others thus brings the possibility of a new praxis which, in turn, makes new forms of consciousness possible. (...) consciousness does not therefore consist of a simple change of opinion about reality, a change in individual subjectivity that leaves the objective situation intact; awareness presupposes a change in people in the process of changing their relationship with the environment and, above all, with others. There is no true knowledge that is not essentially linked to transformative knowledge about reality, but there is no knowledge that transforms reality that does not involve a change in relations between human beings.

This praxis, the result of the encounter between theory and practice that Martin-Baró tells us about, finds its roots not only in Machiavelli, but also in different classical thinkers. We must bear in mind that for Aristotle (2004), ethics represented a part of his political theory aimed at guiding citizens's praxis in the Greek polis, because since man is a hybrid being between the animal and the supreme divinity, the ethical conduct of the individual in his political community meant the necessary resource for the realization and self-development of his human essence – *zoon politikon* (Lastória, 2002).

Socrates pointed to the issue of morality within the Athenian polis, in the practice of customs (*ethos*) by correlating it with the notion of *psyché* (soul) as the "inner voice of conscience" as an imperative aimed at guiding individual conduct, which is an essential task for the success of the democratic experience (Lastória, 2017).

In contemporary times, many are imbrications that lead us to find in the ethical-political syntagma the foundations of a political psychology based on action. Agnes Heller, in recovering

Aristotelian ethical thought free from the Christianization that Aristotle went through in medieval times, pointed to the relationship between ethics and politics as a constitutive element of Psychology:

On elaborating the concept of the good, the philosopher therefore began to determine the diversity and particularity of men, starting from the concreteness of the human psyche (...). This attempt to deduce the good from individual human aspirations will then allow him to base ethics on a concrete individual psychology. (Heller, 1983, p. 207, translated by the author)

In such terms,

No matter how thoroughly psychology (and ethics) have explored the different spheres of consciousness, no matter how concrete and scientific the results of the analysis of the various particularities of consciousness may have been, a model of the general structure that is deeper and more complete than Aristotle's has not yet been developed. It is surprising to see that the innumerable contradictions of the psychology and ethics of modern times - despite the incomparably greater wealth of their knowledge - find an almost natural solution in the naive Aristotelian division (...) Aristotle, on the other hand, rightly introduces the fact of reflection (of social content), which makes it unnecessary to conceive of the whole of ethics as a function of the particular psychological element. Here he approaches the object as an analyst and not as a logician; he distinguishes and dissects instead of deducing. In this way, he can place the phenomena of consciousness in the right place. And in this way, he manages to remove the rigid boundary between instincts and morality, behavior and reflection, managing to introduce the social fact into psychology. (Heller, 1983, p. 192, translated by the author)

The questioning of the ethical dimension in Political Psychology, although not recent, should gain new impetus as the political sphere is also undergoing a critical period, diagnosed by some authors as the "shrinking of the public sphere" – as formulated in Sennet (1993). The shrinking of the public sphere as a result of the advance of conservatism around the world is most clearly seen in this second decade of the twenty-first century and is guided by a (reductionist) understanding of political behavior (Silva & Euzébio Filho, 2021) as a moralizing behavior that hides its intentions in principial and religious views that conceal power interests and find their roots in medieval positions – the ones Machiavelli broke with.

This advancing essentialist vision makes us think that the ethical-political dimension of a transformative Political Psychology needs to generate ruptures and depends on how human action is established, the interests at stake and the possibilities of emancipation from or maintenance of the *status quo* that is committed to a naturalized model of power based on reductionist perspectives of reality. This is a process of liberation that involves recognizing and accepting the existence of others who may not be or look like us, and who may have different ways of being in the world.

The ethical-political syntagma must be read taking into account the modern ethos and consciousness as a distinctive element in processes of social change and transformation of reality. The exercise of power is part of the nature of the psychopolitical field and needs to break with absolute perspectives on the idea of truth that end up homogenizing a reality that is the result of the heterogeneity that renders it complex. The complexity of the ethical-political nature of Political Psychology involves disputing the truth and cannot do without understanding the dialectic of consciousness-alienation as a concrete, material process that can represent a way of producing liberation without falling into utopian idealisms. Certainly, utopia is inspiring and has a purpose in the struggle for change, but it cannot obscure the disputes, contradictions, conflicts and antagonisms that are typical of human nature and that guide the ethics of action and responsibility. In this regard, Martín-Baró (1991, p. 38) defends the critique of knowledge by saying that

Political psychology, by its very nature, is dedicated to the exercise of power, to shaping social reality. In this sense, the criterion of truth cannot be limited to the proof of positive data, but must be that of verification, in one of the possible etymological senses of the term: “*verum facere*”, to make true. It’s about making true the political realities that are the horizon of the Latin American peoples. It’s about turning the affirmation of the alienation of the majorities into a dialectical moment that will be negated by liberating verification, in other words, helping to “verify”, to make real and true the process of liberation of these majorities. Thus, the fact of alienation is only a moment of historical truth; truth will always be a process in which, often, what is being made - is made possible by knowledge - will transform the fact. Just as praxis often disproves the positive affirmation of ideological discourse, the political truth to be made will reveal the historically specific “falsehood” of many positive facts found.

Since its historical emergence, none of the classic authors of Political Psychology have ignored the dimensions of morality and politics when reflecting on human behavior within the *polis* (Silva, 2016, 2017). However, a careful examination of these issues would reach beyond the limits of this text. We can say that Political Psychology emerges from the interdisciplinarity with other fields of knowledge (Silva, 2012, 2017) and presents within it a socio-cultural ethos typical of its time (Parisi, 2008). Ethics and politics meet, permeate and give meaning to the psychopolitical field as they affect the theoretical, methodological and analytical corpus of Political Psychology, as well as the practices that derive from it. Ethics and politics mediate values in the course of concrete power relations. The issues between Ethics and Political Psychology, in such terms, are part of the problem of the relationship between Ethics and Science, a relationship that must be understood in the cultural context of modernity.

### **Digressions on the Relations Between Ethics and Politics in the Production of Scientific Knowledge and Social Criticism**

To the extent that modern science is constituted by the separation between facts and value judgments, it acts as a potential instrument of control and the exercise of power. Although such a separation is not concretely achieved because the idea of neutrality is unsustainable and has serious ethical implications for human development, this position has served to generate and maintain colonialities and contain collective actions that could generate social change and emancipatory and autonomizing processes. An example of this can be seen in the fact that the great wars have made use of scientific – and technological – knowledge to maintain and expand the space of power and influence. Russia’s Ukraine War is the most recent example of this.

The modern scientific project, as Lastória (2002) points out, seems to have developed since its inception, harboring an endogenous contradiction between scientific (and therefore true) knowledge on the one hand and questions of an ethical-moral nature (judgments and opinions) on the other. It seems to purposely ignore the interests and disputes that organize the scientific community and its institutions, but also try to impose which knowledge produced can be legitimized or not (Bourdieu, 1976; Parisi, 2008; Sabucedo & Rodriguez, 2000; Silva, 2012). Such fragmentation is part of hegemonic Political Psychology, but finds its basic syntagma in Political Psychology proposals qualified as Liberation, Critical or Marginal (Hernandez & Guaresch, 2020; Hur & Lacerda Jr., 2016; Montero, 2007). These Political Psychologies start from a hermeneutics of collective and political actions or from a philosophy of praxis or liberation (Dussel, 1998).

As we approach the ethical doctrines of philosophical works, from Classical Antiquity – such as Aristotle – to the modern ones – such as Kant and Spinoza – the problem of ethics reflects the situation of their societies and of the crises of the civilization of paradoxes of men wandering in a forest of reasons – technical, scientific, economic, political, cultural – almost incapable of finding

reasons for their own path or normative reasons for their action, as highlighted by Vaz (1988). It seems undeniable, in such terms, that ethics and politics represent, today, the critical deadlocks experienced by humanity in a society of fatigue built in a capitalist and neoliberal context or even in a society of hatred that does not welcome misunderstanding, conflict, as a constitutive element of life (Han, 2015, 2018; Rancière, 2010, 2014). Political Psychology, which is shaped as a liberating praxis, is imbued with ethics, and can itself constitute an ethics of life in the Dussellian perspective and from which the political dimension – the ethical-political syntagm – is not detached. The work of Political Psychology is based on an ethic that is an inseparable part of political life and must confront the contradictions of everyday culture (Fernandez-Christlieb, 2004; Marin-Baró, 1991).

Aristotle states that the sciences should abide by the division of the teleological structure of human activities. There would be sciences whose *telós* is directed to the contemplation of things in their essence (theoretical), as well as those whose purpose lies in the improvement of man himself (practices) and, finally, those of guiding technical practice aimed at the improvement of objects (techniques). For the philosopher, knowledge of the practical type (praxis) is reduced to only two sciences, ethics and politics, since only they would aim at the self-improvement of man, given his generic essentiality, that is, as a communitarian being – rational and political. It is in such terms that ethical actions will be considered by Aristotle as an expression of the praxis through which men carry out their social and political nature. Within Political Psychology, the dimension of praxis, in the Aristotelian sense, shapes the ethical-political syntagma.

In this way, locating the place of ethics within Political Psychology is about introducing into the field of our cogitations a historical, sociological, political, philosophical and affective debate about the world in which we live, the ways of existing in the world and how Political Psychology takes sides in relation to the problems of contemporaneity. The issue of ethics concerns the political positions that its theoretical systematization occupies in the context of contemporary culture in the face of the challenges that emanate from it. As in the treatises on ethical doctrines within philosophy, it deals with its position in the face of the problems and crises experienced by civilization.

Once awakened to its ethical-political nature, Political Psychology can and should inquire about the normative dimension that is inherent to it, that is, it can and should seek to reflect itself as an ethical science from the perspective of its practical purpose. Such a reflection, however, cannot pass by the analysis of its own politics.

Politics within Political Psychology is a politics for the common good; or in the terms of Heller (2008), it is designed as a politics for the human-generic, for the “we” human community. This dimension of politics, in turn, already reveals its intrinsic relationship with ethics in Political Psychology, since a politics that is oriented towards the human-generic transcribes its ethical character as a collective praxis. Even the individual – a particular unit of the social circuit – is conceived as an ethical category – a category that already appears in Heller (2008) – and, in these terms, as a political and social category. Here we have the ethical dimension of Political Psychology. As analyzed by Vásquez (1990), the subjects or agents of political action are concrete, real individuals, but as members of a determined social group (group, class, party, nation).

Acting politically, individuals defend the common interests of their respective social group in their relations with the State, with other classes, groups or peoples. In politics, the individual embodies a collective function and his or her actions are in the common interest. In morality, on the contrary, although the collective is always present – because the individual never ceases to be a social being – the intimate, personal element plays an almost exclusive role; in fact, in his moral relations with others, the individual acts as such, that is, making personal decisions, internalizing

general norms and assuming personal responsibility. Although the moral norms that regulate the acts of the individual have a collective and not an individual character, it is the individual who must personally decide whether to comply with them or not and assume the respective responsibility for the decision made.

The ethical-political dimension, encompassed by Political Psychology, reaches beyond this individual plane, and although, in the final analysis, it is the real individuals who consciously take part in politics, their individual acts only acquire political meaning to the extent that they are integrated into the common or collective action of the group. The political conception of Political Psychology, in these terms, is an ethical conception. It is an intrinsic link between ethics and politics. Political rationality is also ethical rationality.

The ethical-political inflection within it points to the inclusion of those excluded from political life within the *polis*. Such a political premise can be made possible, in turn, if it is integrated into an ethical and normative dimension of axiomatic content: a just and egalitarian society. The political praxis possible in Political Psychology is circumscribed as a signifier whose topos finds a place in a collective ethic in the horizon of the common good – or human-generic, according to Heller (2008).

The axiomatic ethics of Political Psychology finds a place in its own politics. Ethics as an element that is amalgamated with politics, as in Machiavelli (2018), is improved in the perspective of the liberation that materializes in the “ethics of life” and of the commitment to the denunciation and struggle against inequalities and is consolidated as a possibility of being/doing Political Psychology as a praxis of the possible. Their political activity is, in the narrow sense, their ethical activity. And its axiological axes find value in the notions of justice and freedom. Its axiological ethical-political dimension is ultimately aimed at human freedom.

To think of Political Psychology as an ethics means to consider it as a human praxis. It means acknowledging that, in addition to an epistemology, it includes a teleology, and is constituted by a double telos: one critical and the other ethical-political. Critical insofar as it is intended to have a critical knowledge of politics, culture and society. And ethical-political since it intends to point out the horizons for human emancipation: ethics and politics as praxis for liberation.

In such terms, Political Psychology conceived as an ethics can only coincide with an interdisciplinary Critical field: critical, above all, of oneself, of politics and of society. Undoubtedly, it is in the critique that its emancipatory, autonomizing and libertarian potential resides. In this vein, Montero (2007, p. 525) points to the fact that,

Liberation is then an ethical-critical-empowering and democratizing process. A Political Psychology aspect of liberation should be one taking an account of social power as a force acting in the configuration of the human psyche (Martín-Baró, 1990, p. 78) and therefore enabling it to transform the life-world, the environment, and society.

## Final Considerations

We do not, on the other hand, propose conclusive answers to the problem of ethics dealt with here. Certainly, several issues in this exercise of recomposing the matrix of ethical thought by means of approximation and the attempt to locate it within Political Psychology must remain open. They are more indications of questioning strategies than conclusions.

To the relations developed between ethics and politics, Machiavelli imposes a re-evaluation that involves an immanent morality, proper to political action, which brings the common good as a

criterion and is estimated according to its results. Ethics becomes part of politics and aims not only at the survival of the collectivity, but its development in the face of the (private) interests of isolated individuals. The common good becomes a principle that depends on the concreteness of reality and is not subject to a hierarchy of general, abstract and absolute values given a priori.

Those who exercise the function of the State are responsible for managing collective interests without submitting to the demands of private morality the decisions that refer to the collective well-being or security of the community. On the other hand, liberal individual existence seeks to preserve the right to endanger both one's immediate personal good and one's own life, in the face of a moral value considered superior by one's conscience. In this case, this fragmented and solipsistic form of consciousness privatizes ethics and impedes the transcendence of human collectivity.

In this brief text, I sought to problematize ethical-political aspects of a transformative Liberation Political Psychology, which is aware of the need to act in the world and to persuade the individual to act correctly, identifying his particular good with the good of the community. Social change cannot take place when individual interest is selfishly imposed over the collective as the right to recognition of the diverse, the different and the plural is denied. From this perspective, all acts or procedures that are manifestly useful to the community and to overcoming the inequalities that are distinctive of oppression and barriers to liberation will be moral/ethical.

The *what to be done* of a Political Psychology that commits itself to the particular interests of one or of a few makes it immoral and unethical. This possibility of Political Psychology of a scandalous but real nature, committed to those who only have in view the satisfaction of private and selfish interests, which conflict with the interests of the collectivity, produces a scientific knowledge that erects and consolidates boundaries between those who possess and those who are marginalized, excluded, and acts to alienate, ideologize, to oppress and colonize, being itself the harbinger of an *anti-ethics of death*.

Therefore, talking about ethics and politics in Political Psychology reveals our perspectives on being in the world and leads us to various possibilities for the exercise of the science of reason and citizenship. However, we are committed to an affective perspective of Political Psychology that seeks to understand the complexities of human life and to work so that society, based on participatory collective and responsible work, becomes a more democratic, fair, equalitarian and equanimous place.

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