

THE NEO-KANTIAN NOTION OF WE-SUBJECT BETWEEN PHENOMENOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL PHILOSOPHY SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Rickert's reflection on ethics, with a special focus on the notion of *Wir-Gemeinschaft*, and assesses its relevance to the current philosophical debate on the sources of moral normativity. To this purpose the paper firstly examines the social notion of self developed by Rickert against solipsistic theories in ethical and theoretical fields. The second point is to bring to light the presence of a thought of the other in Rickert's philosophy: albeit this proposition is apparently reminiscent of certain virtuous phenomenological positions recognizable in the current debate on sources of normativity, yet it does break away from it on account of the symmetry it establishes between the I and the you. Finally, on the basis of these inquiries, I conclude attributing to Rickertian philosophy a theory of normativity in the first-person-plural (We) featuring a radical redefinition of the Kantian notion of autonomy in the social sense.

KEYWORDS

Normativity, Neo-Kantianism, Phenomenology, We-Subject; Metaethics

Das Selbst ist ein *sozialer* Begriff. Das „allein“ gedachte „Selbst“ bedeutet kein Selbst mehr. Der Begriff des Solipsismus schließt eine *contradictio in adjecto* ein.

(Heinrich Rickert, *System der Philosophie*)

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Christian Krijnen for her precious insight into Rickertian philosophy, which has made possible the ideas herein presented.

Um sittlich zu sein, hat der Mensch sich nicht nur autonom zu verhalten, sondern die Werte, die er freiwillig anerkennt und in Gütern zu verwirklichen sucht, auch durch das Ganze der *Gemeinschaft*, in der er wirkt, bestimmen zu lassen.

(Heinrich Rickert, Systematische Selbstdarstellung)

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Heinrich Rickert is most renowned for his research in logic and gnoseology (Rickert 1892, 1902) and he never developed a moral theory, strictly speaking, nonetheless his inquiries do provide interesting suggestions even in the field of ethics. Noticeably the system outlined in his work *System der Philosophie* also included a lengthy section dedicated to active life, which was never actually published, but which is partly preserved in his bequest (see Faust 1939, XVIII; see e.g. Rickert 1932). This paper examines Rickert's reflection on ethics, specifically expounding on the promising notion of *Wir-Gemeinschaft*. Indeed, in spite of the fact that such notion never received a comprehensive definition by Rickert (Bohlken 2002, 195), as I herein explain, it can prove fruitful within the current debate on the sources of moral normativity set about by Christine Korsgaard (1996). The concept of we-society, as an I-you relationship, is in fact reminiscent, in some ways, of certain phenomenological positions of Levinassian character presented in that debate (see e.g. Smith 2012; Crowell 2019), albeit ultimately leading to a diametrically opposite outcome.

In fact, it is true that for Levinas, and likewise for Rickert, the central core of ethics and, more generally, the beginning of every philosophy (Rickert 1921, 188) is the relationship I-you, nonetheless the framework within which such notion is embedded and developed by the Neo-Kantian philosopher leads to a rather unique conclusion. My first step is to outline the major features of the notion of *Wir-Gemeinschaft* and the context of reflections within which it is set, so to illustrate both the fecundity of this Rickertian notion in the debate on the sources of moral normativity and the distance separating it from certain phenomenological positions.

2. THE WE AS BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING

Rickert first appeals to the notion of we in the theoretical field, with the aim of rebutting to the solipsistic and egotistic theories according to which "I myself alone am the world" (Rickert 1921, 186). Contrarily to reducing the world to the self and therefore – so to say – introjecting everything that is into the subject, Rickert sustains a social notion of the self: "The self is a social concept. The 'self' conceived 'alone' means no more self" (Rickert 1921, 189).

We must notice that Rickert attains this notion of social self by applying to the concept of subjectivity what he calls the heterological principle. According to such principle – which Rickert opposes to the Hegelian dialectic² – “the *negation* of the thesis, or the ‘antithesis’, is not enough. What matters is the heterothesis in as much as it is the *positive complement* of the thesis” (Rickert 1932a, 99). By this principle the whole is, in other words, formed by both one and the other, by thesis and heterothesis, and their relationship preserves the *relata* in their uniqueness. On the grounds of this principle Rickert can therefore reckon that there is no self without the you, the latter intended as another self (Rickert 1921, 188), and that philosophical reflection can begin only on the basis of this interrelation (Rickert 1925, 137). In fact the I and the you reciprocally require each other and cannot be separated (1921, 188). For this reason all forms of solipsism are bound to express a contradiction in themselves (1921, 189; 1925, 137).

Rickert places this I-You relationship also at the heart of his ethical reflection (Rickert 1914, 215). In spite of the fact that his paramount interest lays in the axiological sphere, as it is well known, Rickert’s writings actually contain particularly promising indications also concerning the ethical subject as *Persönlichkeit*. In the field of ethics Rickert defines the we as “a social connection” [soziale Verbindung] (1934, 50), whereby this connection does not merely produce a sum of its parts, but a whole. This means that the I and the you are not juxtaposed parts, but rather they are interconnected members, they are complementary to each other. In such *ethical* connection [*ethische Verbundenheit*], the I and the you are free non-objectifiable subjects, they are – in a Kantian perspective – ends one to the other (1934, 50). The we-society is hence that relationship that forms a whole composed of free subjects.

In this sense the notion of we-society clearly influences Rickert’s very idea of ethics: ethics is *primarily*, though not exclusively, denoted as social ethics, because in our daily life there are no isolated subjects, but rather members of particular we-societies which establish their members’ duties. Among these we-societies Rickert significantly counts not only the nation and the state, but also family, the workplace and all social networks.

On the basis of this framework of reflections, we can recognize in Rickert the existence of a social moment as the determining factor of the ethical sphere. In fact, in spite of accepting the Kantian notion of autonomy, Rickert does not endow it with the distinguishing feature of active life: even the theoretical field is indeed characterised by a practical behaviour (Rickert 1921a, 165), intended as a taking of stance towards the yardstick of theoretical value and on the grounds of which there can be an objective knowledge. Therefore, in Rickert’s perspective, it is the social moment that determines the sphere of ethics and such social moment, in turn, features the heterological relationship I-you as its minimal social unit. More

² For an overview of the heterological principle and its relationship with Hegelian dialectic see Faust (1927, 13 ff.); Levy (1927, 65 ff.).

precisely, the I and the you are persons, in other words they are members of the social whole to which they belong and which configures the specific duties of the subjects involved. In this sense, every we-society is a bearer of values, towards which the free individual takes a stance, recognizing them as duties.

We must now observe two effects of this re-definition of ethics in the social sense. Firstly, by focusing on the social moment, and still without renouncing the Kantian notion of autonomy, Rickert re-defines the very scope of ethics as presented in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In fact he refuses any ethics founded on generalizing maxims, which he considers incapable of guiding human action in practical life (Rickert 1934, 52): because the ethical subject is a historically determined subject, embedded into the culture of its belonging. On account of the socio-historical connotation of the subject, Rickert considers the appeal to a system of generalizing maxims as something, in the least, useless to the purpose of deciding the subject's duties. The rejection of part of Kantian ethics nonetheless leads Rickert neither to sustaining some form of particularism or relativism (see Zijderfeld 2006, 103), nor to embracing some form of radical collectivism (Bohlken 2002, 203). In fact, on the one hand Rickert establishes ethics on what he significantly calls the ethical social principle, for which "each and every one must want all members of society with whom we are in a social relationship to embody the fundamental value of ethics, i.e. that, likewise to us, they become and remain autonomous persons" (Rickert 1932, 7); and yet, on the other hand, such principle does not lead to a mere subordination of the individual to society (Rickert 1921, 331; Bohlken 2002, 203). In fact the individual can critically distance himself from social customs to evaluate their validity through rationality (see Bohlken 2002, 203), and at the same time, as we shall see, the customs provide a primary orientation to action, a primary form of normativity.

This first effect is followed by a second one implied in Rickert's ethics and which may aid the current question on the sources of normativity put forth by Korsgaard. We may define such problem in the following terms: where does the normative force of moral instances originate from? Why should we behave morally?

On the grounds of the philosophical framework outlined by Rickert, we may put forth a twofold answer. Firstly, according to the social re-definition of ethics, a duty emerges from a value when we recognize in such value a *common task*, an objective validity (Rickert 1902, 702). The normative force of an ethical value is bound to the *extra-individual* nature of such value, for which it is recognized as a common duty for the we as an I-You relationship. An instance is therefore normative in the proper sense when it involves the members of the we-society: it is not the result of a personal inclination and it is not left up to the individual's will. With reference to the subjective perspective, we can observe that the normative force of the value corresponds to the taking of stance by the subject who determines himself on the basis of the axiological sphere. In this sense the normative force rises from the

assumption of a value as a guide for action, as a law, to which the subject recognises an *objective validity*. For this reason, as Staiti notes (2017), we may speak of a self-normativity viz. autonomy of the person (Rickert 1914, 192).

A second answer follows this first one. Rickert sees values as embodied by the various social actors who are bound to duties towards the we-society, intended as a whole, and towards the single members of such we (1934, 50). Such incorporation of values can clearly be seen in the heterological relationship between I and you: the I recognizes cogency to the values carried and individualized by the other and responds to them by deciding either to consent or dissent, but at any rate cannot avoid to confront them, since the you always remain bound to the I. In this sense, Rickert refutes any ethics founded on a neutral subjectivity: i.e. a subjectivity that is not historically and socially determined and which takes a stance on the sole basis of universal principles (see Rickert 1934, 49). Certainly a universal vocation lingers even in Rickertian ethics (see Bohlken 2002, 206) but it is nonetheless led back to a more concrete sphere by the notion of we-society, without which ethical values could not be thought (Rickert 1921, 128). The notion of we-society indeed opens the path to a non-formalistic and non-individualistic conception of ethics, yet maintaining within itself the Kantian notion of autonomy intended as self-legislation. In fact, the normative force of duties emerges, from within the we-society, in the interrelationship with the other and with others: “As a rule, we are even members of different we-communities, or, as we can also say, of different 'social circles'. The duties we have as willing people are determined by the different content of these circles, and only when they are, they get 'practical', i.e. socio-moral meaning” (Rickert 1934, 51).

We should now observe that, by such reflections on the we-society, parenthetically, Rickert offers some suggestions for what we may define as a *Neo-Kantian thought of the other*. According to this perspective the other is never *completely* other than I, but rather it is always the other for the I, the “neighbour” (Rickert 1914, 217). The other remains an essential member of the social sphere; whether this other be hated or loved, they always remain my neighbour. By virtue of such co-belonging, the I must regard the other as a subject and not as an object, i.e. as an autonomous social person. This nonetheless does not mean – we should remark – that the ethical subject must *supinely* consent to the moral standards conveyed by the other and by society: rather he acts morally if he fulfils the values to which he recognizes an objective validity. In this sense, the subject, albeit consistently connected to the other, remains yet always an individual, and *vice versa* if, on the one hand, “every man is an individual factually different from all the other men”, on the other hand, “every man as an individual, *at the same time*, remains a member of the society in which they live” (Rickert 1934a, 156). A consequence of this peculiar status is that human beings are capable of preserving their uniqueness within the social cohesion which provides them with moral standards to live by, but

does not require mere subordination to such moral models. In this sense, we can reckon in Rickert two levels of normativity: 1) one that we may call the *proto-normative sphere*, given by the customs established by the we-society and followed reflexively or irreflexively by the subject 2) a normativity given by the subject's critical examination of the proto-normative material, carrying values and moral instances, in the face of which the subject takes a stance. On the grounds of such distinction, ethics are articulated into an individual moment and a social one, the latter characterised by a clear symmetry between subjects.

3. THE I AND THE OTHER BETWEEN SYMMETRY AND ASYMMETRY

In Rickert's reflections on the relationship I-other we can recognize a symmetry between the two poles of the relationship: the I and the other in their co-belonging are, so to say, equal subjects, i.e. they are the constituents of a social connection, of a we within which the moral meaning of their actions is inscribed. This symmetry collocates at the centre of ethics an individual moment, i.e. the notion of autonomy, as well as a collective moment, the we-society: thus eliciting the possibility of rethinking the normative problem on the basis of a perspective in the first person plural, we may say, a *we-perspective*. According to such theory, the we-society, as "patterns of expectations, traditions preserving implicit knowledge of how to do what [...] tacit conventions regarding what is part of this or that enterprise and what is not, what is appropriate and what is not" (Margalit and Ratz, 1990; see Bohlken 2002:195) would constitute that proto-normative material from which - and only beginning from which - a first-person moment can take shape. As above mentioned, in fact, Rickert intends such moment as the taking a stance on behalf of a subject that determines their own conduct with reference to a value, conveyed and individualized by the we-society of which the subject is an essential member.

Now, in that symmetry between I and you we can recognize the difference separating Rickert's ethics from the virtuous project of a Levinassian-inspired second-person phenomenology, the latter currently proposed by S. G. Crowell (see e. g. Crowell 2019) and W. Smith in his book *Phenomenology of Moral Normativity* (2012). Both of them believe that at the origin of normativity there is a radical asymmetry between the addressee of a moral demand and the addresser from whom such demand is made. Such asymmetry carries the reflection to a sphere in which the central issue is not the *connection* between I and you, but rather the demand addressed by the you to I, given the fact that "I cannot exchange places with the addresser" (Crowell 2019, 11). In this sense, Rickert's position, perhaps closer to Darwall's Kantian one (2006)³, stands - with opportune revision - as an

³ On the difference between Rickert's position and the Kantian one of Darwall see my forthcoming paper Redaelli (2021).

unicum in the current debate on the sources of normativity, which, alongside second-person theories exemplified by Darwall, Smith, and Crowell, includes first and foremost Korsgaard's first-person theory, which recognizes reflexive deliberation as the source of normativity (Korsgaard 1996; 2009).

Between these two extremes, i.e. the first person and the second person theories, we may place Rickert's ethical reflexion. On the one hand, Rickert shares with Korsgaard the attribution of a certain centrality to the notion of autonomy as taking of distance, but with reference to a value and not to desires or impulses. On the other hand, Rickert's thought may be likened to Crowell's and Smith's positions, on account of their shared criticism of solipsism (see Crowell 2013; Smith 2012) and of a certain appeal to the role played by the other; Rickert, however, places the other at the same level of the I and conducts his inquiry by *a logical approach*, rather than a *phenomenological one*.

To fully understand Rickert's position we must now dedicate closer inspection to his argumentative strategy, which resorts to the I-you heterological relationship as an answer to the criticism of solipsism. In fact, the notion of solipsism is, for Rickert, a non-concept, because there is no I without you and there are no morals without society. The I and the you are correlates of a whole in which neither has priority over the other (see Rickert 1925) and of which both are inseparable members. In spite of the fact that both are autonomous subjects, i.e. persons; indeed there are no isolated persons, but rather the persons themselves are always social persons (Krijnen 2016, 68; Rickert 1921, 328 ff.).

This social connection is the peculiar feature of the human being and significantly persists – Rickert remarks – even in the extreme case in which the other may be an enemy (Rickert 1914, 217-218). Even in this borderline case it is unavoidable to treat the other as a you, as an autonomous person, never reducing them to an object of our action. In this way Rickert seems to once more remark on the equal importance that must be attributed to the I and to the you, within a philosophy hailing *relation*, rather than separation, at its core and bringing to light the inextricable bond between the subjects and the reciprocal duties rising from their connection. It is only within this bond, in fact, that we can recognize a first-person moment, intended as a *taking of stance towards the values embodied by the community and the other*.

Rickert reaches this conclusion by resorting to the social character of the self, from which this herein research began and to which the philosopher refers at different levels of his layered reflexion. In the first place, he does not fail to remark over the social nature of human beings as an anthropological fact. Since the moment of birth, the human being is accepted within a community and his existence could not take place if not within the social network [sozialer Kreis] (Rickert 1934a, 154-55), within the various forms it takes on: family, state, people, and the whole of humanity. This social character of man is confirmed by the anti-social tendencies

that man may happen to experience and which indeed presuppose, in Rickert's view, a society, a community in which they can manifest. Secondly, alongside asocial values, whose validity is independent of the community of subjects, Rickert recognizes also the existence of social values among which he collocates ethical values. According to Rickert, the validity of ethical values as social values depends on the diverse forms of *Wir-Gemeinschaft* (see Krijnen 2016, 68). Finally, as Krijnen has brought to light, Rickert uses a broad notion of social as the condition of realization of values (Krijnen 2014, 36; 2016, 69). All of these notions reverberate in ethics, one field of inquiry in which the social dimension plays an essential role against all forms of solipsism and egoism.

Concluding, on the basis of the central position of the social moment in the field of ethics we may observe that in Rickert the normativity of moral instances rises, on the subjective side, from the interrelation with the other as an autonomous being bearing values. This nonetheless does not mean that the I obey the other, but rather that they assume the value embodied by the other as guide for action, according to an autonomous behaviour, whose scope is yet redefined by the notion of society. Indeed Rickert remarks that the content of duties is determined on the grounds of such we and that such duties are realized only within the social network, the relationship I and you. By establishing this we-society, Rickert seems to bring together, in an original way, a first-person moment, given by the notion of autonomy as stance-taking, with a you-second-person moment that is co-original to the former and which leads to a first-person-plural perspective. According to this first-person-plural perspective, normativity originates from a proto-normative foreground, from a material that is already given through the other, yet this does not undermine the role of a first-person moment, which takes the form, in Rickert's reading, of a taking a stance in the face of value.

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