# COMMENT ON QUERALTÓ: A GENUINE PRAGMATIC ETHICS

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I want to be fair to Ramon Queraltó, to whose article I have been asked to write a reply, by first summarizing his arguments in a way that does at least some justice to the nuances of his paper, even though what I do here is not really a review. I don't like it when commentators try to sum up a paper in a single sentence, and then respond just to that. I would rather err on the side of including too much rather than too little of what I want to comment on.

And first, I would take the liberty of translating Queraltó's title as "An ethical mutation for our contemporary technological culture: ethics and human happiness," which I assume he means to be a play on words. Using the word "mutation" seems to me to be an attempt on his part to appeal to the audience of *Ludus Vitalis*—as is his key concept: the "reticulated" network (of ethical values or assumptions or constructs) which he opposes to a traditional hierarchical set. What I want to emphasize, at the end, is the lack in Queraltó's essay of what I consider to be a truly Pragmatist ethics, in spite of his claim that his approach is "pragmatic."

## I. SUMMARY

Queraltó hints at his philosophical sources when, in one of the first footnotes in his introductory section 1, he cites as "classics" Jose Ortega y Gasset and Martin Heidegger. They are often called "existentialists," but I am assuming that he intends to underscore the "pragmatic" character of their analyses of our historical epoch, viewed as "technological." His main intend in any case, as suggested in a prior footnote, seems to be to present to this audience the views he espouses in his *Ética, tecnología y valores en la sociedad global: El "Caballo de Troya" al revés* (2003). He also cites other books

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of his: *La estrategia de Ulises* (2008), *Razionalita tecnica (*2002), all the way back to *Mundo, tecnología y razón* (1993).

In the parts of these books most relevant to this essay, Queraltó focuses on a distinction between technology as instrument—tools are put aside after being use—and "mediation," which cannot be put aside. On this side of the split, human existence is always accompanied by tool use: wherever there are humans, there is technology. But Queraltó's main point, in this respect, is to differentiate our epoch from earlier ones; "technical digitalization" is a new stage in the history of the human species. As Queraltó sees things, he says, this shows up not only in studies of the social impact of technology, of contemporary politics, of community life today, even domestic life, but also in the various branches of philosophy, in epistemology, ontology, logic and methodology, above all in ethics. And it is on this that Queraltó focuses his attention. He states it as his purpose to "analyze the elements that today define the impact of technology on ethics."

Queraltó states this as his thesis: "Technological rationality is the characteristic rationality of our era; at its root, this is the very essence of the culture of our era" (my translation, in paraphrase, of pages 167-168). Queraltó then says that his analysis will show what is the "indispensable condition for weighing ethical problems today, indeed, what is necessary for the very possibility of ethics in a technological world" (again a paraphrase).

After this introduction in section 1, the rest of the essay follows this outline: 2. Technological rationality as social rationality in today's world. 3. The nucleus of the mutation (note the term used), with subdivisions: 3.1. "Values" as the mutational variable. 3.2. Hierarchical versus systemic adaptation. 3.3. "Reticulation" as contrasted with hierarchies. 4. The "new way" in which ethical values present themselves in today's society. In this part, Queraltó substitutes for the "theoretical" way of the old hierarchical approach (without excluding that entirely, he adds) a "pragmatic" way to make values "truly effective in today's world." And this is where he introduces his "Trojan horse in reverse" metaphor: as pragmatic, it is internal within contemporary society, but unlike the classical Trojan horse, aimed at the destruction of a society, it is "reversed," as offering the possibility of reconstruction, of balanced development (page 183). 5. Conclusion: An argument in favor of an ethics aimed at human happiness.

Queraltó begins this argument with recognition that some people say these are bad times for ethics. He replies that he doesn't think so; indeed, our times offer an historical opportunity to enrich ethics with new points of view that might be able to contribute better than earlier ones to the general "existential" well-being of humankind today.

He also recognizes that some would say he has opened the door to relativism. To this he replies that pragmatism doesn't imply relativism;

indeed, a pragmatic ethics is absolutely opposed to relativism, precisely because not any and every value contributes to the resolution of moral conflicts. Queraltó also recognizes that a pragmatic ethics will not come easily. He says that in the system he has proposed the elements needed would be manifold; indeed, they introduce a complexity that is quantitatively and qualitatively new—and he admits that in the old hierarchical system things would have been less complex.

He then points to a major difference, that in his pragmatic system rules will be highly provisional—though he says that doesn't mean they would be "invalid or incorrect." This provisional character is a function of the rapidly changing social situation today. Still, this provisional character—though many think it's a negative thing—has an advantage that makes it worthwhile. When you get down to cases in a pluralist, multicultural society, flexibility and adaptation are even necessary. This opens things up to enrichment in morality, for example, to greater tolerance of differences.

Still more concretely, a pragmatic ethics attitude can do no less than come face to face with a fundamentally new reality; it must continually revalue values. This is another result of looking at ethics in a systematic way, faced with the unavoidable dynamism of life today. (At this point Queraltó refers to his 2006a, 2006b, 2007, and his *Estrategia de Ulises,* 2008.)

However, in order to carry out such a continual reevaluation of values, we need to look at human life as such. And why, precisely now, do we need to look at this? It's for the reason—he says he spelled it out at the beginning—that ethics exists for life and not the other way round. We can't think of this task that we have undertaken as something erudite, as something that results from mere argumentation, no matter how plausible. We have to look for connections with life itself.

Stated differently, he says, to adopt a pragmatic base, the clear question must be: What good does it do for human life to constantly reevaluate values? But this is no task for mere "existential" reflection; if we were to stop there, we would not have crossed the pragmatic frontier. To do that, consistent with everything said so far, we have to be very clear about what "pragmatic" means here, and that gets us to the root of ethics proper: Why? Queraltó thinks the reason is clear. If reevaluation pertains to the very nucleus of ethics—and if this is conceived as a basic response of human beings in order to adjust to existential reality, to life as it is today—then we have to say that such reevaluation must be the most important reference point for the adjustment.

What purpose then, Queraltó continues, does this reevaluation serve with respect to life today?

And the answer can't be anything merely anthropological. There are many possibilities related to the "essence" of being human, from merely existing as human in the ontological sense, or in terms of religious revela-

tion, to philosophical anthropology. If not any of these, the question still needs an answer—and it can't be merely "instrumental." This is no game as to whether or not we're dealing with ethics in a pragmatic sense; we need to take a radical look at the question; and merely saying "we could not live without morality" or "without ethics society would fall apart" or "human life would be a struggle of all against all," or anything else of this sort wouldn't be good enough.

No, something with a deeper meaning for human life is called for. And what is that? What does human life today demand in a general and overall sense? Why in fact should humans today choose to be ethical? And, in my "humble opinion" says Queraltó, here there is only one possible answer: we want to be happy.

Okay, but that seems to get us nowhere; there seem to be as many definitions of what it means to be happy as there are, have been, or ever will be individuals in the world. Moreover, what does ethics have to do with anything undefinable, or which can't actually be discovered in reality, or which has such an immense scope?

Nonetheless, this fact that ethics must exist to bring about human happiness still remains the conclusion of this whole effort. A pragmatic ethic for today's world must be an ethics of human happiness. (At this point, Queraltó again points to another of his publications, *Ética de la felicidad*, 2004, to spell out the tasks involved in providing the details.) But for now, and this is his final conclusion, if ethics today is to be truly pragmatic, it must be an ethics of human happiness.

## II. MY REACTION

I begin by pointing out some similarities between Queraltó's approach and those of some American Pragmatist philosophers.

His rejection of "instrumentalism" as the core idea of a Pragmatist approach to ethical and social problems echoes Larry Hickman (1990), who claims to be updating John Dewey's (1935) thought as applied to a philosophy of technology.

Second, his manner of arguing for his point of view by running through all the known versions of traditional ethics before settling on a pragmatic approach reminds me of William James in his famous essay, "The moral philosopher and the moral life" (1897; see McDermott, 1967]). What James concludes, however, is different from what Queraltó suggests; namely, that the moral philosopher must "satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can*" (without generating still more demands—or, in James's own words, "more complaints"). Queraltó, instead, retreats to a traditional general value of happiness (most people associate that with Aristotelian ethics) that James includes among those he feels he must reject in favor of his

Pragmatist (capital P) approach. James's list of competing ethical systems sounds more traditional than that of Queraltó, but I will assume that, under his "hierarchical" category Queraltó means to include the following:

1. "Human in the ontological sense," if it doesn't, might refer to something like a Kantian categorical imperative ethics.
2. "Religious ethics" covers a broad range.
3. "Philosophical anthropology" seems to refer to relatively recent systems, and some would even include under this heading the "existential ethics" (say of Ortega y Gasset) that Queraltó refers to at the beginning—in which case he would be trying to make it more "pragmatic."
4. I have accused him of falling back on the happiness-based ethics of traditional Aristotelianism.

The next set he refers to might all claim to be as opposed to traditional hierarchical views as Queraltó is:

5. Under his "merely instrumental" heading, Queraltó probably would want to include various forms of Utilitarianism.
6. When he refers to "human life would be a struggle of all against all," Queraltó seems to be referring to one source of utilitarianism, a Hobbesian approach to ethics (and politics).

And finally some would say he should have included more recent ethical theories, such as:

7. Neo-Kantian social contract theories such as that of John Rawls (1971); or, in a very different form, the explicitly neo-Kantian ethics of responsibility of Hans Jonas (1984).

Whatever the list, whether of traditional hierarchical ethical systems or of those claiming to be more adapted to a modern, pluralist, multicultural society, Queraltó surely must anticipate responses from defenders of these views. I assume that he would probably be expecting intellectual replies—though his attitude always suggests that he can best his adversaries in any argument. I suspect that his opponents won't be easily convinced, so a first part of my reaction has been to point out the range of those who are likely to disagree. Contemporary ethics is a jumble, and this situation may be what Queraltó is referring to when he recognizes that some people say our times are "bad times for ethics."

In my reaction, I fall back on my *Philosophy of Technology: In Search of Discourse Synthesis* (*Techne* 2007) and the comparative approach I advocate there. I argue that the universe of philosophies of technology (and his "new ethics for a technological society" is surely intended to fall within that universe) includes four sub-universes (along with subdivisions and combinations of those): metaphysical views, anti-metaphysical "scientific" views, and two sets of ethics-as-politics views, so-called "progressive" and radical. (People tend to think first of radicals in terms of Marxism, and

there have been attempts to produce "Marxist ethics"—see Truitt 2005—however counterintuitive that may sound; but this fourth subdivision of the universe of philosophies of technology is broader than just that.)

In spite of his "pragmatism" claim, I suspect that most impartial observers are going to think of Queraltó's approach as falling within the metaphysical quadrant—or at least see it as an "existentialist ethics" upgraded to be more pragmatic than the versions found in Ortega y Gasset or Heidegger. If critics are even more negative, and emphasize the Aristotelian tinge associated with his final appeal to happiness as the ultimate test of his pragmatic ethics, that would be even more reason to think of him as falling within the broad metaphysical quadrant.

However this may be, Queraltó's approach is certainly going to be opposed by those with more "scientific"—utilitarian or otherwise—approaches to ethical (and social) problems today, such as that of Mario Bunge (1989). And they are probably also going to object to his disparagement of social studies as ways of dealing with contemporary social problems—for example, in technology assessment or environmental assessment or even econometric approaches. An example here would be Kristin Shrader-Frechette's (1991) "equity"-based, Rawlsian, improved version of technology assessments. Still another approach would be by way of engineering ethics, or other versions of so-called applied ethics.

Marxists and other radicals are, equally clearly, going to say that Queraltó has not strayed anywhere near far enough from traditional hierarchical views in his defense of pragmatism in ethics. They are likely to say there is more than just a hint of a scent of traditional ethics—even, at root, of religious ethics—in his appeal to happiness as the ultimate test.

Then I come to the fourth of my quadrants, the so-called "progressives"—so like Social Democracy or Green Party advocates in Europe. Since that is where I see myself as standing within the universe of philosophies of technology, that is where I will focus the rest of this response to Queraltó.

For most of us who see ourselves as falling within this group, a merely ethical approach to social problems today is not enough; the best ethical approaches today are also political approaches. Faced with a global problem—such as climate change—or even a local problem such as the introduction of an unsustainable new technological development in your community, a merely ethical response is not what is called for. If Queraltó wants to be truly pragmatic on such issues, he is going to have to get involved—or work with others who are involved—in trying to do something concrete to alleviate the problem or oppose a particular initiative. In this sense, Queraltó's ethics remains way too abstract. (When I have criticized other philosophers in this fashion, they have sometimes replied that they are in fact involved in trying to do something in local causes. But

for me, that is not enough; activism has to be built right into ethical discourse of the kind Queraltó offers if it is to be truly pragmatic.)

Queraltó has mentioned the "resolution of moral conflicts" and "getting down to cases in a pluralist, multicultural society," but he never does that in this essay. The hard part for an American Pragmatist ethics resides precisely here. For us who take this stance, ethics has to be not only pragmatic but concrete; it is necessary to take a stand on particular issues that people consider to be moral. And disagreements almost always turn political: something needs to be done to resolve particular cases in our "pluralist multicultural society" (to quote Queraltó); we need concrete "resolutions of [specific] moral conflicts" (to quote him again). We need to *actually do something* to resolve these conflicts, in my activist formulation of a Pragmatist ethics.

And if Queraltó does not think ethics should go that far, I would just offer this final point. I used to try to teach ethics to medical students and young doctors (residents) in hospitals using a case method, and it always amazed me how resistant they were to making difficult choices; they always wanted to fall back on something like a code of ethics of the profession to provide their answers—something very much like the hierarchical approach that Queraltó claims to have gone beyond. So in the end, I ask him, as I asked those students: if you're not going to do something to resolve these concrete issues, at least will you say what you think is right or wrong with respect to them? What do *you*, each one of you, think is the right answer in these tough, concrete cases?

A pragmatic ethics, I would say, demands at least that much, as a bare minimum. And I would say it demands even more: to actually get involved in an activist way with trying to work out solutions for individual social problems in our technological world. That would be a truly pragmatic ethics (and politics) in an American Pragmatist sense.

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