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***SPINNING ETHICAL PLATES
IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC AND SUSTAINABILITY***

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Abstract: This article discusses ethics in times of pandemic crisis (COVID-19) taking into consideration the sustainability paradigm. Two related ethical approaches are discussed and contrasted. On the one hand, the relational embodied ethics of the commons is discussed in the background of the pandemic of COVID-19. On the other hand, “lifeboat ethics” is interpreted in considering the pandemic situation. The main goal of the article is to compare the two ethical approaches as a way of dealing with our shared predicament in times of a pandemic, a state of exception, and based on that, to additionally derive conclusions about their application in further crises in the Anthropocene, whereby the primacy of sustainability is presumed.

Keywords: the commons – lifeboat ethics – relational embodied ethics of the commons – pandemic – COVID-19 – relational autonomy – global solidarity – public health – sustainability

1. Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century marks a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene era, that is based on the recognition of human activities as the main force impacting environmental changes (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). The epoch of Anthropocene enflames discussions about the responsibility of humanity, whereby most interpretations are rather pessimistic. The scientific data overwhelmingly refer to existential threats to humanity and the environment (Barnosky et al., 2012). In emphasizing the impacts of human actions on nature the frontier of society and nature is reinterpreted as being entangled rather than divided. The fragility of the Earth as the only habitat for humanity is the new presumption for progress going beyond the imperative of economic growth (Federau, 2023).

In the Anthropocene epoch, the idea of sustainability is the only rational response, suggesting a primacy of the last in decision-making. Sustainability has to be recognized as the only plausible normative framework for human action. However, sustainability is a broad paradigm requiring a more specific normative explication in particular circumstances and contexts. Thus, this paper discusses what the ethics of sustainability demand of us.

The COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11th March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2023). This state of exception included the inversion of the primacy of the ethical value of individual autonomy. The values related to Freedom of choice by individuals were subordinated to public health. The pandemic crisis gave rise to ethical issues and calls for ethical reflection, thus conclusions for future dealing with exceptional events under the primacy of sustainability can be derived.

Taking into consideration the Anthropocene epoch, the primacy of sustainability is presupposed. The SDGs represent a call for action on the one side a commitment on abstract values on a global scale. On the other side, these SDGs offer a pragmatic way for contributing to the leading idea of sustainability. The pandemic event of COVID-19 is a state of exception (Agamben, Giorgio.2008), which requires exceptional norms and rules. Therefore, the normativity in pandemic times is through the lenses of two different ethical approaches explicitly discussed – lifeboat ethics by Hardin (1968) and relational embodied ethics of the commons (Mandalaki, Fotaki, 2020).

2. Lifeboat Ethics and the Tragedy of the Commons

Garret Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" (1968) demonstrates that sustainably managing common resources is essential for long-term survival. However, "the tragedy of the commons", as Hardin phrases this, is due to the inherent dilemma of short-term individual self-interest, there is an incentive for abuse and overuse of shared resources at the cost of collective well-being and shared common interests. Here emerges the free-rider problem consisting in the dilemma of individual's optimization of their own self-interest at the cost of others and the sustainability of the collective good (Hardin 1968).

A distinction between "common goods" and "public goods" is essential for clarifying this point: common goods are depletable and rivalrous; in contrast, public goods are not depletable and not rivalrous. This means that when people use common goods, they deplete its supply. In contrast, other people's usage of a public good does not deplete them. Thus, there is, supposedly, no harm to collective well-being when public goods, such as clean air and effective police services, are being used. Such public goods are in this sense not rivalrous and not depletable. We share both public and common goods, but the challenge with the use of shared common goods comes to exist because the

goods under consideration are not public goods.

Initially, the material common resources are in focus in economic debates, whereby resource allocation and the rules for users and non-users are of importance (Ostrom 1999). The “tragedy of the commons” is challenged by Elinor Ostrom, 2009 Noble Prize recipient for her work on political economics, claiming that extending the commons would overcome the dilemma and create a new economic and social understanding of collective wealth. In summary, Elinor Ostrom's approach to resolving the tragedy of the commons involves promoting self-governance by user communities, developing tailored and adaptable rules, and recognizing the importance of local knowledge and trust.

The logic of the market and individual rationalization challenge the understanding of the commons. However, in his 1974 essay titled "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor", Hardin uses the metaphor of a lifeboat to argue that, since the earth's resources are limited and depletable, if a community does not take care of itself, favor itself, at the expense of other communities, the lifeboat won't be able to hold everyone. Hardin's *lifeboat ethics* (1974) is an extension of the ethics of the commons, arguing that if stranded at sea, a lifeboat is a common resource that can save only a limited number of people. If too many people board the lifeboat, it will be non-sustainable, and everyone will drown.

Hardin's *lifeboat ethics* provides a conception of sustainability that is different from the current global understanding of sustainability. His *lifeboat ethics* predates contemporary ideas of global responsibility, as spelled out in both the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (established in September 2000) and the United Nations 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These international development frameworks have been designed to define global efforts to address environmental and economic challenges. In contrast, the *lifeboat ethics* is an argument against the idea of global responsibility, and against the idea that wealthy nations have a responsibility to poor nations.

Hardin's argument for an ethics of the commons, rooted in the metaphor of lifeboat ethics, might however be very relevant in the face of a state of exception as was experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to protect themselves, communities closed themselves off from the outside world. The idea that as members of a community, we're metaphorically in the same boat, and share a common conception of the good, against outside dangers was manifest in the way nation-states closed their borders to outside threats, villages blocked the roads leading in and out of the village from outsiders and families secluded themselves to protect themselves from virus transmission. The common good that brings us together in this example is not a common pasture (the commons) that is open to all herders in a village (as in Hardin's paradigmatic example), but rather the individual's self-interest, individuals qua

members of a community, that others within their community will not infect and spread the virus within our community. This is a powerful yet thin sense of the commons and the common good.

3. Relational embodied ethics of the commons

In this chapter we discuss the concept of *relational embodied ethics of the commons* as suggested by Mandalaki & Fotaki (2020) against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and a response to the thin notion of the commons that emerges from Hardin's *lifeboat Ethics*. First, the ethical concept is introduced in a general manner. Second, the potential of the concept in dealing with pandemic on the one side and considering a given framework of sustainability on the other side is reviewed.

3.1. Relational embodied ethics of the commons – an overview

Mandalaki & Fotaki (2020) propose to recognize the role of values of reciprocity and relationality as being intrinsic to human actions. The value-laden perspective becomes obvious once the differentiation between the commons and the process of commoning is made. Thus, a further distinction referring to immaterial and the material common resources can be made. The process of commoning evolves around the three axes of social organizing (Fournier, 2013):

- Organizing in the common: distribution of responsibilities for collective allocation of resources.
- Organizing for the common: collective use of the common.
- Organizing of the common: constant reproduction of the common through collective and reciprocal exchange.

This perspective calls for co-creation of resources and communities and participation in developing of rules, so that the pre-arrangement of institutions is in focus. Herein, the relational approach is central. Reciprocity in the process instead of material outputs of a static understanding paves the way for fluid and complex commoning (Mandalaki, Fotaki 2020, p. 747). The value-laden perspective offers new possibilities for overcoming free-riding and asymmetry and promotes a third logic of solidarity in the co-creation between the market logic and the state-ownership.

Next to relationality and reciprocity the embodiment as suggested by feminist int ethics is to be considered in commoning. Only the recognition of mutual dependance of the embodied individuals and the vulnerability of the embodied self presupposes reciprocity and responsibility in relation to the others (Butler 2015). Commoning is constantly constructed through everyday practices as a demonstration of shared values,

norms, and physical activities as well (Mandalaki, Fotaki 2020, p. 748). In including the embodied rationality of the feminist ethics in the process of the commons Mandalaki and Fotaki suggest the concept of the *relational embodied ethics of the commons*. First, the focus on abstract ethical norms is broadened through effects and experiences of the participants. Second, the recognized need for integration of the body in business ethics research is met. The effects of the vulnerable bodies on political and social activities are to be deeply explored. The recognition of the body is expressed in the concept of corporeal vulnerability, whereby social organizing refers to reciprocity and mutual embodied dependence of the others. Reciprocity is therefore a central mechanism in the embodied relational commoning in terms of the exchange of values, resources, and norms (Mandalaki, Fotaki 2020, p. 752).

In addition, to corporal vulnerability and reciprocity, the perspective of the embodied relationality is introduced. The last one is a result of the mutual recognition of the common vulnerabilities and reciprocal modus operandi. Thus, in turn, enables inclusiveness of communities' performance. The compiled suggestion of Mandalaki and Fotaki is formulated as relational embodied ethics of the commons. The recognition of the body leads to the possibility of reciprocity and relationality, so that the actors' bodies performing collectively are capable of social and political collaboration, including transformation and disruption. The suggested ethical concept is framed by the impossibility of generalized ethical patterns of action, "knowing in being" by Barad (2003, p. 829) as a philosophical understanding is of crucial importance. Figure 1 below illustrates the proposed concept of relational embodied ethics of the commons in referring to implications for the communal and individual levels of action (Mandalaki, Fotaki 2020, p. 753).

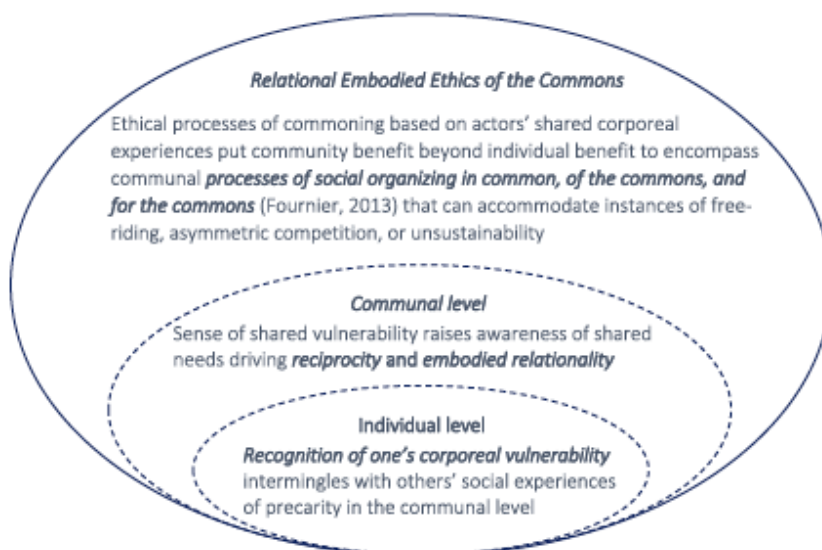


Figure 1: Relational embodied ethics of the commons for the social commoning process (Source: Mandalaki, Fotaki 2020, p. 753)

In the following chapter the relational embodied ethics of the commons is reflected upon the framework of sustainability in pandemic times.

3.2. *Relational embodied ethics of the commons in pandemic times under the primacy of sustainability*

Within the framework of sustainability, the idea of the commons is gaining in importance as opposed to the self-interest-based profit-maximization of economic-acting individuals. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the universal 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations require global and collective action in different settings upon varying interpretation and diverse actors and governance structures. Herein, applying the ethics of the commons is of crucial importance. The commoning requires not only the overcoming of the self-interest-based perspective of individuals but also a questioning of the unconditional autonomy of individuals. The limits of autonomy in times of a pandemic were clearly demonstrated during COVID-19's clinical reality. According to Jeffrey (2020), three areas of ethical issues due to COVID-19 can be defined:

- Quarantine, isolation, and social distancing referring to individual freedom.
- Healthcare workers' duty to provide care at their own risk.
- Access to treatment and limited resources.

In addition to the three main areas of ethical issues due to the pandemic, there is a global disparity of public healthcare systems – between high-income countries (HICs) and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The burden of the pandemic in LMICs on the national healthcare system is extraordinarily higher than in healthcare systems in HICs. The global disparities refer to pre-pandemic healthcare system inequalities worldwide on the one side and pandemic prevention resources and access to drugs and tests on the other side (Ho, Dascalu 2021).

These circumstances call for global solidarity and overcoming of the national protectionism. *Lifeboat ethics* is an ethics of narrow community protectionism to avoid infection. In contrast, the application of a relational approach to the claimed global solidarity offers a robust rational foundation enabling the global community to strive for the development of vaccinations and for stopping the global spread of the virus. Relational solidarity treats different actors as equals, who contribute differently to common threats. National protectionism and global solidarity can co-exist in evolving processes of collaboration and co-learning (Ho, Dascalu 2021).

Although individual autonomy is considered as the highest good in democratic societies, in exceptional times – pandemic – this good is relativized due to the social value and the common good. This overriding of individual autonomy is justified by broadening the understanding of autonomy as a non-binary interactive process that evolves over time, coined as relational autonomy (Gómez-Vírseda, C., Usanos, R.A.

2021). This extension of the autonomy concept beyond the individualistic-centered and isolated discrete decisions-oriented approach asks for relational rationality of the commons in pandemic times. In unfolding the relationality in community's performative potential for tackling inclusive action for SDGs or collaborating in pandemic times the proposition for an embodied relationality "*as an ethical process emerging through social actors' mutual recognition of shared vulnerabilities, and reliance on reciprocal practical contributions that account for their actual corporeal, localized need for interdependence*" (Mandalaki, Fotaki 2020, p. 752) is well justified. The role of the body is herewith fully recognized in designing localized ethical action. The interdependency of individuals is the underlying assumption for the commoning of equals in communities for coping with recurring exceptional states in a sustainability framework of our world.

In summary, the framework of sustainability implies a holistic and inclusive approach to social and environmental issues on a global scale, these complex issues cannot be limited in their solution to the limits of national borders. The relationality and reciprocity are guiding principles to navigate in the sustainability framework. In pandemic times these principles are accompanied by embodiment – corporeal vulnerability, social distancing, and care – as the most important element of the *relational embodied ethics of the commons*. Within this ethical approach, solidarity, and therefore civil society as locus of commoning is constantly constructed.

4. Conclusions based on a comparison of the ethical approaches

During the early panic stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, the sustainability of communities justified a lifeboat ethical response based on quarantine, isolation, and social distancing to avoid infection. Under the assumption that Covid-19 is a deadly virus for which there is no cure, closure and protectionism was a solid ethical approach. This might be viable as a means to sustainability in the sense of survival, but it is limited.

In the later stages of the pandemic, as a richer understanding of the pandemic evolved, through a weaving of the relationships between communities, between healthcare providers and between governments and pharmaceutical companies, a process of *commoning* started to evolve. Narrow community protectionism against infection (i.e., lifeboat ethics) was replaced with a broader understanding of shared and common interests with considerations revolving around:

- attempts at limiting the spread of the pandemic and the continuous evolving of virus strains.
- The development of healthcare options, where infected individuals have a better prognosis for overcoming the disease with treatment, and where

healthcare workers can provide care without being infected.

- Finally, not just access to treatment but also the development of vaccinations, the mass manufacturing of vaccinations and the global distribution of vaccinations.

Through these three stages of dealing with the pandemic, we see how the narrow sense of the commons, as manifest in the lifeboat ethics during the early stages of the pandemic, had been expanded to a much broader understanding of the common good, through a process of *commoning* and broader global solidarity (referring to relational embodied ethics of the commons). Moreover, what this comparison brings to light is the different normative demands of sustainability.

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