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### **Ethical Dilemma: Between the Language of Values and the Value of (Human) Recourses**

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**Abstract.** The main purpose of the article is to highlight the need to overcome the reductionism of elementary thinking that accepts the idea that human creatures can be controlled as a *resource*. Such reductionism leads to dehumanization of the human relations in the modern attempts to fit people in economic models. In contrast to it, humanist thinking suggests a change in the abbreviation HR), without changing the letters. Instead of talking about controlling human resources, let us talk about the construction, maintenance and development of the human potential abilities and relations (HR then stands for what).

**Keywords:** human, human resource, human relations, humanity, categorical imperative, language, values, ethical categories

#### **1. Introduction**

I will begin with some methodological specification. It is concerned with what, as a humanist by profession and education, I study: phenomena and processes. This means that I am engaged with the point of view, which allows us to form ethical dilemmas and to worry about their outcome. This point of view suggests that we worry and take care of the preservation and maintenance of humanity. Because of that, this point of view is important and necessary to us, even when we discuss subjects and fields outside the humanitarian ones, because it is their only outside corrective factor and our only border against the risk of dehumanization of society and our own lives.

We can see today numerous examples of mechanical transfer and usage of words from different areas and languages, as well as for different purposes and values. This is not a new tendency and the research of its purposes and development is not just a philological question because the state of the language reflects the social state of the people, as well. The invasion of and the mechanical acceptance of new words and phrases in our speech belong to the same kind of mechanical acceptance of which are foreign, in their meaning and usage, to the natural languages and their ways of development. Yet the changes in language reflect the changes in society. As linguists themselves admit: the resources of language let us notice and share things that are important for the human individual and for the society for a particular period of time

and in a particular place. Hence, a lack of confidence in moral values or ethical devaluation of culture caused by the absence of a clear standard of values would be firstly recognizable in the language and through the language [1]. According to other observations, being dependent on language we also judge the state of culture, because it is available and achievable through the language. The famous researcher of culture, and language Ernst Cassirer, points out, that names in the human language do not apply to substantial objects, and entities on their own, but are determined by the human interests and goals. From this point of view, the names, which represent each word, always have a limited function: "to present a certain aspect of the object, and exactly that limitation gives it its value" [2]. That function forces people to admit, that in our world, where speculation dominates, our conception of values is drawn ever closer to the model of the market value. Thus, we reach questions that are not only philological, but also ethical: *Is the language of values disappearing? Are the main ethical concepts anachronisms, or do they still have some meaning for people?*

We reach these questions when the ambiguity of the language and the statements is caused not because the language has grown old but because it has been used in ways of indication and expression that allow reduction and replacement of ethical categories with unethical ones. Accidentally or not, this replacement leads to ambivalence and polysemy.

## **2. The Problem**

Thus if incomprehension appears due to language reasons, it means that the way of expression and indication is not appropriate, and has to be changed. Otherwise intentionally or unintentionally we are the ones who cause some ambiguity, double meaning, and often a change of meaning. That is exactly what is achieved with the expression "human resource". It has been used since a long time ago, and is used massively, and constantly in official documents, academic lectures, and businesslike language.

The review of such documents, vocabulary, and language altogether, shows that "human resource" is simultaneously:

- 1) The set of individuals who make up the workforce of an organization, business sector, or economy [3].

2) Main resources, along with cash, because “Men and women are an important resource in the organization, as well as the financial capital, or the physical capital”. The difference between the two resources, according to that view, is that while the quality of all the money is the same, “The human resources have a quality and quantity characteristics, include the individuals with different needs, and interests, with different culture, demographic, and other characteristics” [4].

3) Business function that oversees an organization's human resources is called human resource management (HRM, or simply HR). The managers expect from that function “significantly added value, i.e. for it to be exclusively in service to the competitiveness” [5].

4) Professional education course from the field of “strategic management”, that is being taught in different educational institutions, and at different educational levels, where it is known as “Control of the human resources” [6].

5) The human factor of productivity. [7].

Upon our first encounter with the above list of definitions the ambiguity of the phrase “human resource” looks completely justified as a theoretical statement. It, however, is not justified from the point of view of the humanistic paradigm of meaning, the importance, and value of the human individuals and their freedom, which is presented to us by the most prominent representatives of the modern humanistic thinking, such as I. Kant. It is not justified enough, even when accompanied with an arrangement, that “To talk about human resources does not mean that humans should think of themselves as a resource, but rather that they have resources (possibilities, potential)” [8]. Why, then, is it not talked about controlling that *potential*, rather than of controlling of *human resources*?

### **3. Terms, meanings and context**

One possible answer to the above question is offered by the story of the change of concepts spread about in the early 80s of the 20th century. According to this tale, the traditional concept of managing the staff, suggests it to be viewed as a source of expenses. This does not meet the basic goals of the companies, related to increase and predictions of their revenues and profits. For that reason the concept of *managing the staff* is replaced with the concept of *the human resources*, as a source of profits, whose usage next needs to be optimized.

In this context the concept of *human resources* suggests maximum usage of the capabilities of people in order to increase the results of their work, their productivity as workers and staff so that their skills and abilities to be successfully and better exploited for the goals of the company, organization, or corporation, in which they work, i.e. to increase the profit. In this way we reach the constant value of exploitation, described by Orio Giarini and Patrick M. Liedtke as:

“If productivity rises and the amount of wages remain the same, i.e. equal to the exchange value of labor power, the labor value of the wage diminishes and the rate of exploitation increases. Under such conditions, a reduction in the rate of profit is no longer necessarily deducible. What happens is simply that the capital employed is used to exploit relatively fewer workers more intensively.” [9].

We are talking now about a situation in which an employer hires a worker or an employee with specific skills. His labor will be exploited more intensely, if the worker or employee increases his qualification through additional training and education, and then performs more operations than he did earlier but receives the same payment, because the employer has paid for his education, or the market offers plenty of unemployed individuals, ready to take his place under the same conditions. In such case who would increase the wage of the hired people if external circumstances do not force the employer to do so e.g. laws or low unemployment rate?

In a broader plan we could say that, in order for some to earn permanently, i.e. to receive added value, others have to be permanently poor, independent of the skills, and abilities, and the qualities they have. Through the exchange of labor for money, some people get paid while others profit. Anyone who has nothing to exchange is forced only to watch the exchanges of other people. And the access to exchange and how we participate in it appear crucial: the important thing is to participate and not just be a spectator of the exchange. That is why the programs for human resource development are being offered. They must provide the methods how the work of the poor and unemployed people are to acquire “market value „through further education, training and for models to be included in the labor market”.

At first sight this is something very good and even noble but after having a closer look we can notice that the lack of education or skills does not exhaust the problem and it is only a part of it. Another part of the problem is the use of words such as resources, capital, and wealth for defining human beings. The excuses and definitions

that people are “the greatest treasure, the most important capital” are not justifiable enough, no matter whether they are written down in textbooks, official documents, international programs, or strategies.

The terms “treasure”, and “capital” describe specific dimensions of ownership and profit, i.e. which is owned by somebody, and can be accumulated infinitely. According to one of the most popular and easiest to access explanations of capital - the definition of Wikipedia: “capital goods, real capital, or capital assets are already-produced durable goods or any non-financial asset that is used in production of goods or services”. And further: “In most cases capital is replaced after a depreciation period as newer forms of capital make continued use of current capital non profitable.” [10].

In this same context human capital is defined as a broad term that generally includes social, instructional and individual human talent in combination. It is used in technical economics to define balanced growth which is the goal of improving human capital as much as economic capital. However, calling the human creatures “treasure”, “capital”, or “resource” means to accept that they and their skills are property and are owned by someone else. This also means that they can be capitalized just like the property of a business or organization. [11].

Have you ever met a person, who calls himself or herself 'resource', or 'capital'? Would you describe yourself in this way? Have you ever said about yourself that you are a resource? It is most unlikely someone to talk and think that of themselves. This is how we end up at the question, which is the topic of this paper: Is the human individual 'resource'?

To answer it we have to describe the terms “human”, and “resource”, according to their basic meanings.

The “resource” has French roots. In Bulgarian it is only used in plural and means “sources or supply of funds”, “income” [12]. Connected with the word “human”, the literal meaning would be “human resources, sources, income”. Are humans supplies? Or are they a natural kind of treasures? What are their sources?

Such questions sound ridiculous, but we still reach them, owing to the expression “human resources”. If we trust the online edition *Dictionary/ thesaurus of The Free Dictionary*, *resources* in English, besides the meanings adopted in Bulgarian and already discussed above, it includes:

“The total means available to a company for increasing production or profit, including plant, labor, and raw material; assets.” [13].

The difference in the meanings, and their numbers, suggests for the mechanical transfer of the English *human resources* into the Bulgarian *choveshki resursi*. By “mechanical” I mean, that in the Bulgarian language it is not common to talk about “human resources” in the same way as in English due to the narrower meaning of the word “resources”. It is associated with inanimate objects, faceless belongings, and items like raw materials, minerals, commodities, money that can be accumulated and stored in warehouses to be spent, and which wear out. Unlike resources, human abilities, skills, labor, and the ways they are used, do not stem from a chemical-physical and geological processes, and phenomena, nor are they produced like goods or printed like money, but rather they depend on the individual features, will and purpose of the human beings.

This way in the position of the main meaning in the definition under discussion there stands the idea of the human labor, abilities and the skills as the sources and means of increasing the private (the corporal) productivity and earnings; but to think, talk and act instrumentally towards human creatures, as reserves of labor, abilities and skill, is unacceptable, because it is inhuman. Exactly that happens in the mechanical transfer of words. Therefore “human resource” would suggest the value of a human, as a “resource”, not as a human. That raises the problem of the definition given in the article “human resources” in Wikipedia:

„One major concern about considering people as assets or resources is that they will be commoditized and abused. An analysis suggests that human beings are not „commodities” or „resources” but are creative and social beings in a productive enterprise” [14].

#### **4. Are humans resources?**

The concern about terminology reminds us that the way we talk about, define, and call ourselves, has a deep meaning... Are we going to do it the way we define, think, and call things, because on this depends the way we think and act towards each other and how we appear in the eyes of others and how they appear in ours.

Whether the image we have about ourselves reflects in other people’s eyes the same way and vice versa – their image about themselves looks the same in our eyes, is

according to one or another idea for human dignity. In that sense the strongest argument today in support of the perception that the human is not a resource continues to be the understanding of Kant. He highlights especially in one of the formulations of the categorical imperative:

“So act as to treat humanity whether in your own person or in another always as an end and never as only a means” [15].

Updated this formulation would say: “So act as to use humanity whether in your own person or in another always as a purpose and never as only a resource.”

But even if we ignore Kant, shall we ignore the oldest maxim of morality – the Golden Rule that suggests: “One should *not* treat others in ways that one would not like to be treated”. With what right then can we call others in a way, in which we do not want we to be called? Why do some people talk so willingly about such things when they concern others, and they never say the same about themselves: e.g. that they are 'resources'? This explicates what important and valuable resources people are, for something that is neither human nor resource like business, organization, corporation, or society. All such things are not people, i.e. individuals with their own feelings, senses and will. They are inanimate things, despite being created by people. They are ownership, possession, property of those who own them. Who is the one that owns? In terms of economy science created by humans, that is the “owner”, who can be a single person, a group or a country.

With the understanding of ownership are connected some of the most popular ideas about it, defined by John Locke in „Two Treatises on Government”. According to him:

“Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a “property” in his own “person.” This nobody has any right to but himself. The “labour” of his body and the “work” of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with it, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. It being by him removed from the common state Nature placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it that excludes the common right of other men. For this “labour” being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others.” [16].

Because of that the main purpose of the civil government according to Locke is the free and peaceful usage of property. The well-known English thinker, as well as Kant later on, emphasizes the individual willpower that has to be realized without prejudgments of any other will. Therefore, everyone has the right to reject control or government, implemented without his agreement. In other words it is natural for all people to wish to be “owners” having in mind that people themselves are not objects, resources, materials, or goods, which can be kept in a warehouse.

Man himself is a purpose in the kingdom of purposes: he lives, communicates and cooperates with such other purposes. This is valid also for everyday life, as well as for the economy, and business relations. It is this mutuality of people as free individuals, not their subordination as resources for other purposes that makes their lives humane, and possible as a human life, i.e. ethical.

Eventually we need to mention one of the founders of the modern political economy Adam Smith. Let us remember that he became renowned for his book about ethics: “The Theory of Moral Sentiments”, not with „The Wealth of the Nations”. Today it is the opposite: “The Theory of Moral Sentiments” is less popular than the other book. Is it because we have become more economically thinking or less morally sensitive that today we are not impressed by the ideas of Smith that:

“... to feel much for others and little for ourselves, that to restrain our selfish, and to indulge our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature; and can alone produce among mankind that harmony of sentiments and passions in which consists their whole grace and propriety.

As to love our neighbour as we love ourselves is the great law of Christianity, so it is the great precept of nature to love ourselves only as we love our neighbour, or what comes to the same thing, as our neighbour is capable of loving us [17].

Today we more often hear and read complaints about the crisis of our values and the need for better morality in politics, society and life than about cases where sympathy and empathy have been displayed. This leads us to two questions. The first question is *what are the values that are in a crisis?* And the second question is *why are there such complaints, since so many different experts and professionals today are involved with the care for providing a better life for all the people, for all the citizens of a country or an association of countries like the EU?*

To the first question, in the plan of everyday life, we can answer that the complaints come from our insecurity about what we consider valuable, because insecurity is important and necessary for everyone, regardless of their individual characteristics. It is set in these values that are called “moral” or “universal” because through them we define what it is to be a “living human” and “to be human”, i.e. the *good living* and the *good man*. These two are not identical, although they share good as a focal point. They differ the same way as sleeping and breathing differ from one another in their connection. Their relationship and difference recalls the witty remark from one of the heroes in “Alice in Wonderland” by Lewis Carroll:

“You might just as well say,’ added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, ‘that “I breathe when I sleep” is the same thing as “I sleep when I breathe”!’ [18].

Thus a man can breathe without sleeping, but cannot sleep without breathing. The same way a *person* can be *good* without necessarily *living good*, but he cannot be good if he is not alive. He can be good only when he is living. Valuing the person from this point of view is equivalent to valuing life. Thus the person is valued for his uniqueness and the irreplaceability of his life, not just for being or having such „resources” as abilities, knowledge and skills granted in favor of market competition and market profits. Entrained by competition and profit some people forget what it is to be human while others - what is to live well. But life is one and if you do not live it well, it becomes impaired and worthless, and if you live well without being human, you lose your humanity. If we rely only on the religion of progress and the gospel of market acceleration to guide us although they are not human, we can expect for some people only material comfort, and for some others - neither comfort, nor humanity.

But even if we ignore the observation of Smith about moral sentiments we cannot ignore what he perceives about the working human in “The Wealth of Nations”:

“His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expense of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues. But in every improved and civilized society, this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it” [19].

According to Smith that is how one reaches the state, defined by him as:

“...drowsy stupidity”, which, in a civilized society, seems to benumb the understanding of almost all the inferior ranks of people.” [20].

## 5. Conclusion

The words of Smith sound up-to-date even now because they remind us that control performed by different levels: from governments and parliaments to company managers and directors of departments has the care and responsibility to secure the overcoming of the “drowsy stupidity”. Before that, though, they have to overcome their own drowsy stupidity, and to elementary thinking of themselves and other people. With the help of reductionism carried and imposed by abbreviations, they think of themselves as superior to those who they rule and of the rest as *resources, instruments, means*, even if most important.

The different, humanistic kind of thinking admits that the modern ways of affiliating the people to the economic models dehumanize human relations. To avoid that, a change in the abbreviation HR is needed, as well as a transformation of our thinking. The transformation suggests that instead of talking about *human resources*, it is better to talk about human relations and their construction, maintenance and development. Only on that condition something different and better than regular exploitation masked as an “optimization”, rationalization or control of human resources can be achieved.

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