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Rationality without intuition is like Fred Astaire without Ginger Rogers. About Jonathan Leighton's The Tango of Ethics (2023)

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The tango is danced by two people. The tango of ethics is danced by intuition and rationality. Both play a crucial role, both are necessary and complementary.

"These modes [rationality and intuition] interact in an endless tango between existing and acting, feeling and thinking, experiencing love and problem-solving, seeking bliss and alleviating suffering. And this tango plays out in so many ways relevant to ethics, with the confrontation between distinct modes of being that are both relevant. One may feel obliged to take sides, as if the tango were a contest to be won between two dancers, rather than a search for understanding and balance."

According to Leighton, this complex dance between intuition and rationality must be recognised in any ethical framework worthy of the name. We might add that, for him, ethics ultimately aims at the proper exercise of compassion. Thus, it is imperative to learn to dance so that compassion can be achieved more effectively. This is the starting point for *The Tango of Ethics* (2023), published by Imprint Academic.

Alleviating suffering

Since the publication of his previous book, *The Battle for Compassion* (Algora Publishing, 2011), Montreal-born philosopher Jonathan Leighton has adopted some new positions. He

no longer believes that people should be encouraged to have children, nor does he believe that simply tweaking our capitalist system will bring about the major changes our society needs. Last but not least, he has become a vegan. He could no longer “resist the cognitive dissonance between [...] [his] ethical beliefs and [...] [his] omnivorous lifestyle.” This is a feeling with which *L'Amorce* readers are undoubtedly familiar. The great animal suffering that surrounds us is indefensible and intolerable.

The urgency of the problem of suffering is the driving force behind Leighton's new book. *The Tango of Ethics* follows on from *The Battle for Compassion*, but where the latter merely sketches the outlines of an ethical approach that alleviates suffering in the world while recognising the human need to live and thrive, this new work takes the reflection further by proposing a more detailed and holistic ethical framework.

Before saying a few words about this framework, it should be emphasised that, according to the author, morally qualifying a person's action as “good” or “bad” is not a proposition with a truth value. On the other hand, it is possible to say that one situation is “good” or “bad”, or even “better” or “worse” than another. Assessing a situation is therefore a matter of description, not prescription. A situation involving less suffering is, objectively, better than a situation involving more suffering. A sow playing with her piglets in a field is a better situation than a sow having her throat slit at L.G. Hébert et Fils Ltée.

Now, what exactly makes one situation “better” than another? Leighton reviews the main ethical theories: deontology, i.e. the idea that the morality of an action must be judged according to compliance with duties or rules; consequentialism, i.e. the idea that the morality of an action depends solely on its consequences; and virtue ethics, i.e. the idea that moral good is based on the development of character and virtues. The conclusion he draws takes the form of questions: what matters to *us*? What results do we want? Subjective experience is the answer to the first question. “Feelings, thoughts, perceptions and emotions matter for their own sake, and the only reason that anything else matters is for its effect on them. Without subjective experience, there is nothing for anything to matter to!” The alleviation of suffering is the answer to the second question. So, on the one hand, we have the intuitive urge to live life to the fullest and find meaning in it. On the other hand, we have the rational imperative to try to eliminate all intense suffering from our world.

Leighton's ethical framework: xNU+

To help us focus on our priorities, Leighton proposes his simplified ethical framework, xNU+. First and foremost, this is a form of negative utilitarianism (NU). Reducing suffering takes precedence over creating happiness. The “x” emphasises intense or extreme suffering, while the “+” is the “broader recognition of deep human intuitions, including the desire to exist and flourish”.

The “x”, the rational, is easy to understand. Not all suffering is equal. Some intense or extreme suffering is more urgent than others. For example, Leighton rightly points out that some suffering is so intense that non-existence becomes ardently desired. We need only think of the miserable lives of calves. They are taken from their mothers at birth, locked in

small individual stalls where they can barely move, kept in a constant state of anaemia if milk-fed calf meat is desired, and finally slaughtered after less than eight months. The "plus" is a little more difficult to grasp and remains vague even after several readings. Is it only there for instrumental reasons? To make NU (negative utilitarianism) more acceptable and appease our ego? Leighton's answer is as follows:

"From the perspective of a rational agent who wants a strict suffering-focused framework to be as acceptable and applicable as possible: yes. From the perspective of a person who is first and foremost a human being before being an agent of change in the world: no. So how do we answer the question definitively? Well, who is leading the tango? [...] It always seems to be changing, depending on our mood and that of the "music" that is playing around us – our immediate environment. And we may have no realistic choice but to relent and become the dance."

This answer is not very satisfying. The return to the tango seems to be more of a poetic flourish than a relevant justification for adding the "+". In concrete terms, how does this "+" change negative utilitarianism? That said, this feeling may stem from a certain bias towards a "strictly suffering-focused" framework.

Euthanasia of suffering animals

The penultimate chapter applies this framework to specific ethical conflicts. Let us look at one of these, because an example will always be the best explanation. So, what do we do about euthanasia for suffering animals, in other words, "killing that is done out of compassion, to end intense suffering"?

Rationally, euthanasia aimed at reducing the number of animals that suffer is the right course of action in most cases. At least, if we think in utilitarian terms. However, if a seriously injured animal has even the slightest chance of recovery, trying to alleviate its suffering is intuitively the right thing to do. In the case of an individual, we intuitively want to care for them with love and see them recover and flourish. This closeness and the thought that our care can save a life brings us happiness, probably much more than, for example, successfully preventing the birth of a single animal destined for slaughter. Humans cannot shake the intuition that life is worth living to the fullest, yet between the two situations, the result is the same.

According to Leighton, the way to reconcile these two contradictions would be to practise euthanasia only in cases where suffering seems unbearable, and then, just as we respect the human desire to live, we should respect the animal's desire to live. Thus, we must take the necessary measures to treat an animal that has a chance of recovery, provided that this does not mean saving its life only to take it away. In this situation, that would be the right way to dance the tango.

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Some might say that the framework proposed in *The Tango of Ethics* is nothing new. Admittedly, similar ideas have often been put forward. But Leighton's book has the merit of

being an excellent synthesis. Intuition and rationality: what are their strengths and limitations? How can we reconcile the two? How can we determine our priorities? Why should the problem of suffering be our primary concern? Leighton skilfully answers all these questions and many more. Now, is the framework proposed by Leighton THE ethical framework to adopt? I cannot say. Like any framework, its applicability has its limits. Nevertheless, what is undeniable is that an ethical framework that recognises the urgency of the problem of the slaughter of non-human animals and makes it its priority cannot be entirely wrong.