

Miró Quesada's Quest for the Supreme Principle of Reason

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to outline and interpret Miró Quesada's quest for the supreme formal principle of theoretical and practical reason: the principle of symmetry. The paper explains how this quest is rooted in Kant's philosophy, as well as how Miró Quesada would have arguably reached the goal that escaped Kant himself. The paper also offers a new formulation of symmetry in ethics: "Act in such a way that, if you demand another to behave in accordance to a norm N , you commit yourself beforehand to behave in accordance to the conduct prescribed by norm N in similar circumstances". It also explains how the principle works. The paper, finally, includes an explanation of the role of symmetry in law, as well as the formalization of this in the language of logic.

Keywords: theory of reason, unity of reason, principle of symmetry, moral law, ethics, physics.

1 Introduction

What is the supreme principle of reason? How can it be found? The goal of this paper is to present and analyze Francisco Miró Quesada Cantuarias' (Lima, 1918–2019) decades-long struggle with those fundamental questions. For those who do not know him, Miró Quesada is one of the most important thinkers in Peru's history. He has an 'analytic' heart, but has dealt with the place of Latin American philosophy in no less than two books published in Spanish: *Despertar y proyecto del filosofar latinoamericano* (*Project and realization of the Latin-American philosophizing*) [6] and *Proyecto y realización del filosofar latinoamericano* (*Awakening and Project of the Latin-American Philosophizing*) [5]. In other words, he is not a regionalist looking for a decolonized way of philosophizing, but has had the wisdom to reflect on the meaning of doing philosophy in a 'postcolonial' region. For that reason, we can place him, in the

Latin American academic milieu, between the Argentinian philosopher Mario Bunge and the Mexican Leopoldo Zea [cf. 1].

This paper has two parts. In the first one, I will speak of Miró Quesada's ultimate philosophical goal and strategy, as well as how these are linked with Immanuel Kant's philosophy. We will see how Miró Quesada reads Kant in an original way, as well as how he justifies the need to retry the Kantian project. In the second part, I will outline Miró Quesada's implementation of the strategy, including its main fruit: the encounter with symmetry, the supreme principle of reason. All this will be done with a focus on Miró Quesada's 'Ensayo de una fundamentación racional de la ética' ('Essay of a rational foundation of ethics') [7].

2 Kant and Miró Quesada: Goal and Strategy

The 'Ensayo' begins with a Kantian quote that reveals both Kant's and Miró Quesada's ultimate goal, a quote from the *Critique of Practical Reason* (the second *Critique*), where the Prussian philosopher speaks of:

the expectations of perhaps being able some day to attain insight into the unity of the whole pure rational faculty (theoretical as well as practical) and to derive everything from one principle—the undeniable need of human reason, which finds complete satisfaction only in a complete systematic unity of its cognitions. [4, pp. 90–1]

A similar statement is found in the earlier *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*:

I require that the critique of a pure practical reason, if it is to be carried through completely, be able at the same time to present the unity of practical with speculative reason in a common principle, since there can be, in the end, only one and the same reason, which must be distinguished merely in its application. [3, p. 391]

As these quotes suggest, Kant's ultimate goal was to find the supreme principle of reason. It is a goal that in turn depends on the 'unity of reason'—the idea that, even though reason has theoretical and practical applications, it is ultimately one. Now if reason is one, it must know the world and derive moral duties through the same principle.¹

¹Is Kant (and Miró Quesada, who follows his steps) committing the naturalistic or is/ought fallacy? I do not think so. Kant is not proposing to find out how things are in order to derive duties from such inputs. He is not, for instance, looking for the essences and

As mentioned, Miró Quesada embraces Kant's goal. This is not only suggested by the quote at the top of the 'Ensayo', but it is also expressly asserted in it:

This ideal is what led us to the path that we are trying to traverse, in order to see how far can we get towards its fulfillment. [7, p. 211, fn. 28]

But why was it necessary to traverse the Kantian path again? Did not Kant reach the goal?

Obviously Miró Quesada thinks that Kant did not. Otherwise, he would not have felt the need to traverse Kant's path anew. But Kant himself seemingly recognized his partial failure. That is why he talks, as we have seen, of "the expectation of ... some day" being able to "derive everything from one principle". Let us not miss the following: the latter is a quote from the second *Critique*, a book that was meant "to present the unity of practical with speculative reason in a common principle", as Kant announced in the previous *Groundwork*.

In Spanish we have the following saying:

A confesión de parte, relevo de prueba.

It means that when someone confesses something, there is no need to prove the content of the confession. According to this, if Kant confessed that he did not reach the desired goal, there would be no need to prove that such is the case. The problem is that we are doing philosophy, and philosophy demands proofs not in the form of confessions but in that of arguments. So how is it the case that Kant did not reach his final philosophical goal?

This is a complex question, but it can be preliminarily answered by highlighting the division Kant makes—in his exploration of theoretical and practical reason—between the empirical world, where determinism reigns, and an ideal one, where freedom demands overcoming such determinism. In Kant this gap is generated by the different ways reason leads knowledge of the world and the identification of moral duties. Regarding the former, reason contributes to such knowledge with *a priori* categories like cause and effect; regarding the latter, it instead guides us through an *a priori* principle of freedom, i.e. the moral law or categorical imperative. In other words, Kant does not present a single supreme principle of reason but several—some of which, to make things worse, lead to different directions (the referred two worlds).

functions of things to derive ideals and moral duties from them (like Aristotle and Aquinas do). Kant is instead looking for the formal rational principle that allows us both to know the world and to distinguish right from wrong.

To the questions, ‘Did Kant fail?’, and, ‘How did he fail?’, a third one can be added: ‘Why did he fail?’ This question is highly relevant, especially for someone who, like Miró Quesada, sets for himself the same goal and does not want to fall into the same hole. Before speculating about this, though, it is useful to talk a little bit about Kant’s strategy—once again, in Miró Quesada’s account—towards his goal.

Simply put, since theoretical and practical reason share the same supreme principle, it makes sense to look for it in the realm where reason has been more successful. Now reason has done better in the theoretical realm, as the development of disciplines like logic, mathematics, and even physics shows. Therefore, it seems reasonable to start the search for the supreme principle of reason in the theoretical realm. In Miró Quesada’s words:

But in order to comprehend the way reason is used to ground ethics, one has to start from scientific knowledge ... As we have seen, the results to which Kant arrives cannot be maintained today. But his starting point is unavoidable if one aspires to ground ethics rationally. Because science, since the Greeks to this day, is the most secure knowledge the human being can obtain. [7, pp. 215–216]

Regarding this one may ask: was this truly Kant’s strategy? Is there a place where Kant says something like ‘I am looking for the supreme principle of reason and I will start looking for it first in the theoretical realm’? Not that I am aware of. This is a somewhat bold interpretation that requires support, one that the ‘Ensayo’—it is fair recognizing—lacks. A hint that this is in fact the case is the order of topics in Kant’s philosophical agenda, where the question ‘What can I know?’ is first on the list. Now if someone eventually proves that this was not Kant’s strategy, the latter, I think, still makes sense. Not only that, but it happens to be fruitful, as Miró Quesada’s implementation of it shows. In other words, the authorship of the strategy should not divert us from the value of the strategy itself.

Leaving the authorship of the strategy aside, we can return to the question of why Kant did not reach the goal.

In harmony with the strategy, Kant began his project with the exploration of theoretical reason. For that, he wrote the *Critique of Pure Reason*, devoted to answer the question: ‘What can I know?’ This is the main explicit question of the book, which in turn depends on two questions: ‘How does reason operate in the knowledge of the world?’ and ‘How does this affect our metaphysical pretensions of knowing if God exists, if we are free, and if the soul is immortal?’ Related to this, the book seeks to answer an even more technical question:

'How are the synthetic a priori judgments of physics possible?' But the meta-question, let us not forget, is: 'What is the supreme principle of theoretical (and thus of practical) reason?'

The problem for Kant, according to Miró Quesada, was in a way psychological: he could not doubt the by then all-powerful deterministic physics of Newton. According to Miró Quesada, this influence is what led Kant to see cause and effect as an *a priori* category of reason, and to look for freedom outside the natural world. All these, in turn, made impossible the finding of the supreme principle of reason. Not only that, but it also led to the:

absurd conclusion that all person's acts are conditioned by necessity in the empirical world and that, nonetheless, the person is morally responsible for his acts. [7, p. 212]

Is there a way out?

3 Miró Quesada's Quest and Encounter with Symmetry

Much has changed since Kant walked the Earth, even (or especially) for physics as a science. This opens the door to implementing Kant's strategy again with the hope of, this time, reaching the goal. Miró Quesada not only sees but seizes the opportunity and obtains two surprising outcomes: (a) the location of freedom in the natural world and (b) the discovery of symmetry as the supreme principle of reason, both theoretical and practical.

Dealing with both outcomes exceeds the limits of this work. That is why, in what follows, the paper will focus in the second one. Why this one? Because this is the ultimate goal of the whole Miró Quesadian project. Also, because I think here Miró Quesada is most successful (and groundbreaking).

Having made this choice, let us still remark that, if well-grounded, the argument for freedom in the natural world would imply the elimination of the deep cause of Kant's limits, as well as opening the chance of confidently looking for the supreme principle of reason in the same dimension.

The strategy, we know, consists in looking for the principle in the theoretical realm first. More specifically, Miró Quesada looks for it in physics. He thus embarks on a study of the development of physics in post-Kantian times with the hope of finding traces of a principle so fundamental that can be regarded not merely as the supreme principle of physics, but as an *a priori* principle of theoretical reason as well.

Miró Quesada thus offers us a brief history of physics and the increasing recognition among scientists of symmetry as its fundamental principle. This

history is central to understand Miró Quesada's philosophical breakthrough. In short, it is the history of the successive discovery of the different physical forces that operate in the universe: the gravitational, the electromagnetic, and the strong and weak nuclear forces. It is also the history of the development of their corresponding theories and the search for their ultimate unification. After all, it is not good for the explanation of how the universe works to have different theories that only explain some parts of it and that even contradict themselves.

To retell this history here is unnecessary, since Miró Quesada's account is already available in English [see 10]. Not only that, but this history can be easily verified by scanning physics' literature, like Zee's *Fearful Symmetry: The Search for Beauty in Modern Physics* [14], Stewart's *Symmetry: A Very Short Introduction* [9], or Gross' 'The Role of Symmetry in Fundamental Physics' [2].

As Miró Quesada explains, the principle of symmetry has fulfilled two crucial functions in the history of physics. First, it has served as a criterion of objectivity. Second, it has allowed the unification of some of the referred theories into bigger ones. Grand unification theory, for instance, has been able to unify the electromagnetic with the strong and weak nuclear forces (leaving, though, gravity aside). Superstring theory, in turn, has unified all the four forces, although it still lacks empirical corroboration.

Miró Quesada, it should now be obvious, is not the discoverer of symmetry as the supreme principle of physics. What he does claim to be is the discoverer of symmetry as the *a priori* supreme principle of reason—first theoretical and, due to the unity of reason, of practical as well. Miró Quesada speaks of symmetry as a constitutive feature of reason, instead of as a feature of the world. It is something that reason adds to the phenomena of knowing and of recognizing our moral duties.

With regard to symmetry as the supreme principle of knowledge, Miró Quesada says:

Once one is conscious of what this principle [symmetry] means [for physics], its function can be deduced *a priori* from the mere concept of the knowledge of reality because, despite all the discrepancies that could exist over this concept, it is undeniable that, in accordance with its constituent notes, the results of scientific knowledge must be equal for all knowing subjects. And this equates to saying that *if the knowledge of physical reality meets the principle of symmetry, then it is true.* [7, p. 236]

And regarding symmetry as the supreme principle of ethics, Miró Quesada, in turn, says:

The transition from the rational grounding of physical knowledge to the rational grounding of ethical behavior appears as a natural and unavoidable consequence of the principle of symmetry. This is so since the analysis of the concept of true knowledge of physical reality and of moral behavior leads us, logically, to the principle of symmetry. Indeed, despite the disagreements around the concept of morality ... there is something over which it is rationally unavoidable to agree: if a behavior is symmetric, then it is morally valid. [7, pp. 236–237]

In the second *Critique*, Kant defends that practical reason prevails over theoretical:

all interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative [theoretical] reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone. [4, p. 121]

As with other Kantian ideas, Miró Quesada agrees. Taking this prevalence into consideration, let us now direct the spotlight, for a moment, towards ethical symmetry.

What does symmetry, as a moral principle, command? This is the closest Miró Quesada gets to formulate (what is otherwise known as) the moral law:

If person *A* demands that person *B* behaves in accordance with a norm *N*, *B* has the same moral right (or juridical, as appropriate) to demand that *A*, in equal circumstances, behaves in accordance to the conduct prescribed by norm *N*. [7, p. 237]

If we compare this formulation to Kant's categorical imperative ("Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" [3, p. 421]), we find two limitations: it focuses on rights instead of duties and it is not structured as a command. To fix this, I propose the following formulation:

*Act in such a way that, if you demand another to behave in accordance to a norm *N*, you commit yourself beforehand to behave in accordance to the conduct prescribed by norm *N* in similar circumstances.*

As we can see, if in Kant we test the morality of maxims and the corresponding actions, in Miró Quesada we test norms (and the corresponding actions as well). In other words, we are not testing the subjective principles

that guide us in life, but the norms we impose upon others. For instance, as a professor I impose a norm of punctuality upon my students. According to the principle of symmetry, though, the norm and my behavior will be ethical as long as I reciprocate and arrive to class in time.

Miró Quesada's moral test, hence, works in three steps: 1. Identify the norm you are imposing upon others; 2. Phrase the norm as a universal one; 3. Ask yourself if you would commit yourself, in similar circumstances, to the resulting universal norm. If the answer is no, then the norm and your action are both immoral.

4 The Logic of Symmetry in Law

Let us see how Miró Quesada takes his ideas about the role of symmetry in law from the philosophical to the logical-formal realm, formalizing symmetry in the language of logic.² In 'El derecho justo' ('The just law') from 1994 [8], Miró Quesada speaks of symmetry as the sufficient condition of just laws (non-arbitrariness being the necessary condition). In short, if a law is symmetric, then it is just.

In order to illustrate how symmetry works in law, he offers the example of a law that orders borrowers to return the money that has been received by the lenders under the agreed conditions (term, interest, etc.). Let us call the lender Juan and the borrower Clara. Juan lends Clara \$ 1,000.00 for one year. According to the hypothetical law, Clara would be legally obliged to return the \$ 1,000.00 to Juan within one year. But how do you know if the law at stake is fair? According to the principle of symmetry, this will be so to the extent that, if the roles were reversed, Juan will found himself in the same legal obligation to return the borrowed money to Clara. In other words, a legal system that protects loans will only be fair if it is symmetrical. Furthermore, it would suffice for it to be symmetrical to be fair. This is what symmetry as a sufficient condition of justice means.

It would be different if, for example, the rule established that the obligation of borrowers to repay lenders does not apply when the latter are women, Latino, Buddhists, etc. Returning to our example of Juan and Clara, if after a while

²What follows in this section is a translation of a small section of another article of my authorship published by *Ideas y valores*: 'El principio ético de simetría: La teoría moral formal de Francisco Miró Quesada' ('The ethical principle of symmetry: Francisco Miró Quesada's formal moral theory') [13]. For those interested, other articles by me on Miró Quesada's philosophy are: 'El principio ético de no-arbitrariedad: La teoría moral formal de Francisco Miró Quesada' (The ethical principle of non-arbitrariness: Francisco Miró Quesada's formal moral theory) [12], 'La ley moral en la filosofía de Francisco Miró Quesada Cantuarias' ('The moral law in the philosophy of Francisco Miró Quesada Cantuarias') [11], and 'Francisco Miró Quesada's formal ethics: Interpretative overview with a translation' [10].

	SYMBOL	MEANING
1	x	Lender in situation 1, borrower in situation 2.
2	y	Borrower in situation 1, lender in situation 2.
3	R	Legal relationship 'must pay on a fixed term'.
4	xRy	x must pay on a fixed term to y .
5	yRx	y must pay on a fixed term to x .
6	R_{s_1}	Legal relationship 'must pay on a fixed term in situation 1'.
7	R_{s_2}	Legal relationship 'must pay on a fixed term in situation 2'.
8	\supset	Implication.
9	$xR_{s_1}y \supset yR_{s_2}x$	x must pay on a fixed term in situation 1 to y implies y must pay on a fixed term in situation 2 to x .
10	I	Set of fair rules of a legal system.
11	$I(xRy)$	Legal relationship or norm ' x must pay on a fixed term to y ' belongs to the set of fair rules of a legal system.
12	\leftrightarrow	If and only if.
13	$I(xRy) \leftrightarrow xR_{s_1}y \supset yR_{s_2}x$	Legal relationship or norm ' x must pay on a fixed term to y ' belongs to the set of fair rules of a legal system if and only if ' x must pay on a fixed term in situation 1 to y ' implies ' y must pay on a fixed term in situation 2 to x '.

Table 1: Logic of Symmetry in Law

Clara lends money to Juan, according to the asymmetric rule, Juan would not be obliged to return the said money to Clara, which is unfair because of the asymmetry involved.

Miró Quesada formalizes symmetry in Law with the language of logic. This formalization can be synthetized as in Table 1.

5 Conclusion

With the identification of symmetry as the supreme principle of reason, Miró Quesada would have accomplished Kant's and philosophy's ultimate goal. But is this truly the case? Is symmetry *that* important? If you ask me in passing, by surprise, I will answer yes. The reason for this, in part, is Miró Quesada's way of locating the principle (his strategy).

Symmetry is in fact the most important principle of physics. Not only of physics, but it has a strong presence in many other areas—from art to mathematics. As Stewart says:

A fascination with symmetric forms seems to be an innate feature of human perception, and for millennia it has influenced art and natural philosophy. More recently, symmetry has become indispensable in mathematics and science, where its application range from atomic physics to zoology. [9, p. 1]

With this omnipresence in mind, I think it is reasonable to see symmetry as an epistemological and moral lens through which we engage with the world (instead of a pervasive feature of the universe and everything in it). I say this without denying that I have other problems with Miró Quesada's philosophy (problems I am setting aside in this occasion).

Speaking of symmetry in art, I would like to finish with an anecdote. Many years ago, I visited Miró Quesada. He told me then that his discovery of symmetry as a feature of reason happened through art. The insight, he said, occurred while looking at a painting—a very symmetric painting. He already knew the place symmetry has in physics, but never thought of it as an *a priori* principle of reason until this aesthetic episode.

This is interesting, among other reasons, since it links symmetry to the ancient thesis that the truth, the good, and the beautiful are three dimensions of the same thing.

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