

Clowning ethics or about red-nosed morals

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Abstract: We know throughout history several human categories or distinct groups that place themselves outside of ethics. People suffering from mental illnesses, children, fools/pranksters or acrobats, etc. This category could, of course, also include sex workers, stigmatized but accepted as part of the world in which we live. Beyond all these categories of individuals that transcend ethics and morality, there is another character, a cultural archetype born at the dawn of human civilization, having a winding, unpredictable and determining evolution at the level of the collective unconscious: the clown. The clown, a hypersensitive being who does not have a security of identity and who is characterized by confusion of consciousness, violates all the rules of ethics. In this sense, he uses the abnormal and the unusual as tools of manifestation. But can its expression be considered a breach of ethics, as long as it is born outside the norms, outside the generally accepted morality, its role being to highlight what lies beyond the limit? If we assert that this archetype is useful to ethics, what then are the attributes of this utility?

Keywords: clown, ethics.

1. Introduction

The most influential ancient philosophers, whom the history of Western ethics draws upon are Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. *Etikos*, in Greek, is rooted in *ethos* (about character or about habit). Virtue and happiness are the two common conceptions from which the philosophies of the above thinkers are born. These aspects later develop in a theological sense, leading to the emergence of the ontological argument and the demonstration of God's existence. The importance of ethics, but also its characteristics, differ and change in time and space. We can thus consider that ethics today is a set of rules accepted by most cultures. The motivation of contemporary ethics is to preserve order, peace and harmony among individuals, although we agree with those who believe that we are in the

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midst of a post-ethical crisis, which paradoxically causes its self-annulment. There are, however, certain cultures, religions and geographical spaces in which common ethics are diluted, disappear or completely altered.

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2. Clown's ethics

The clown, a hypersensitive being who doesn't have a secure identity and who is characterized by the confusion of consciousness, violates all the rules of ethics. In this sense, he uses the abnormal and the unusual as tools of manifestation. But can his expression be considered a violation of ethics, as long as it is born outside the norms, outside the generally accepted morality, his role being to highlight what lies beyond the limit? If we accept that this archetype is useful to ethics, what then are the attributes of this utility?

The clown and the trickster, which Jung defines as that psychological entity on which images of evil and perpetual farce have been built, yet being in the proximity of *the Savior*, as an antagonistic and chameleon character, are often characterized as mediators, beings who create and guard boundaries. We will describe the border as a dialectic. This, in turn, has two opposite poles, separate but equally linked. Thus, the border is and is not part of what lies between the two limits, although it is what unites them. For example, sacred clown figures attempt to avoid a natural or cultural law, often failing, and in their failure signal the consequences of breaking it. Because of their creativity and the way they seek to circumvent a boundary or obstacle, clowns have been associated with nonconforming, unethical, immoral thinking.

Clowns and tricksters are generally associated with transgression, sacredness, and blasphemy, and are often used in Easter rituals as aggressors. Don Handelman in *Models and Mirrors toward an Anthropology of Public Events* says that clowns erase the difference between sacred and profane². Paul Bouissac in *By Means of Performance*³ declares circus clowns desecrate the sacred by making semiotic substitutions. For Laura Makarius, the most important function for clowns is that of transgressors and, specifically, shatters

² Don Handelman (1990), *Models and Mirrors towards an Anthropology of Public Events*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 248.

³ Paul Bouissac, *Profanation of the Sacred* in: Willa Appel, Richard Scheshner (1990) (eds), *By Means of Performance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

of the taboo of blood, as she says in *Diogenes*⁴. She argues that the use of blood or representations of blood by ritualistic clowns is common. Here we refer, of course, to the ceremonial association between clowns and Judas, but also to the violation of ethics by the vulgar exposition of the process of Christ's salvation. Makarius follows similar lines to other authors who speak of comic relief when he concludes that clowns "owe their existence only to the need to evoke something that at the same time must be suppressed".⁵ Evoking something that also needs to be suppressed could be articulated as the need for mediation.

Transgression is also a means of power. The unseemly is connected with transgression as the crossing of moral boundaries. "Dirt is displaced matter," implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a violation of that order.⁶ The affinity between inappropriateness, power and clowns was noted by Handelman⁷ and Makarius⁸ in connection with the blood ceremony, evoked earlier. Clowns and tricksters are "messy," as Barbara Babcock says. Their benefit comes from breaking taboos and rules. Because of his mistakes, the trickster pollutes and must remain marginal⁹. If the unseemly involves a set of ordered relations and a violation of that order, this is also an appropriate description of the clown, establishing the convention and an inventiveness that takes advantage of that convention. However, ordered relations are not indicators of a system that exists as a given and is revealed through acts of transgression, they are as much a product of symbolic action. The Yaqui ritual, for example, begins by establishing the convention that proposes an order to be broken, and involves, as stated above, two conditions: a set of ordered relationships and a violation of that order. If the clown embodies transition and borders in his figure, the clown does not so much move between different realities as mediate between them, and the same is true of borders. They are not dissolved; the boundary remains intact but is mediated. The movement between different realities is, in fact, a movement from one mode of symbolization to another, a reversal of the dialectic, as Mariana Keisalo-Galván states in *Cosmic Clown. Convention, Invention, and Inversion in the Yaqui Easter Ritual*¹⁰. The clowns' relationship with the context of their performance is altered by switching between modes. Convention sets the performance context: circus, ritual or whatever. When this

⁴ Laura Makarius (1970), Ritual clowns and symbol behavior, *Diogenes*, p. 46.

⁵ *Idem*, p. 70.

⁶ Mary Douglas (1994), *Purity and Danger*, Routledge, London, p. 50.

⁷ Mary Douglas, *op. cit.*, Don Handelman, *Models and Mirrors towards an Anthropology of Public Events*, p. 248.

⁸ Don Handelman, *op. cit.*, Laura Makarius, Ritual clowns and symbol behavior, *Diogenes*, p. 86.

⁹ Barbara Babcock (1975), *A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered*, "Journal of the Folklore Institute", Vol.11, no. 3, Martie, p. 148.

¹⁰ Mariana Keisalo-Galván (2011), *Cosmic Clown. Convention, Invention, and Inversion in the Yaqui Easter Ritual*, Research Series in Anthropology, University of Helsinki, Finland.

is used as a basis for a differentiated symbolization, the boundary that has been created between the context of the performance and the rest of the world is mediated, and clowns can refer to things outside the context of the performance and involve the audience in interaction. This is how the special power of clowns is created. Boundaries open a dialectic between realms divided by a boundary, becoming that boundary and mediating it through cyclic inversions.

In this regard, Arden R. King in *Forms of Play of Native North Americans* separates the various aspects of the clown's role into humorous and non-humorous, alternating between them. King sees the non-humorous side of performance as effective, and the humor as providing protection from the consequences of his non-humorous actions. According to King, humor is not discussed much, because anyone can be humorous, but only the clown has "the potential to cause non-order – to create another way of being human"¹¹. "The clown has the potential to destroy and affirm or create structure. Humor, which insures the clown against the consequences of his own behavior, occurs when "the boundaries are secure and the structure is in no need or danger of replacement."¹².

Clowning reflects reality in a way that rational thought cannot, it reveals the arbitrary, constructed nature of the world. Through the use of opposites and reversals, for Barbara Babcock in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals: Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*¹³, clowns are, par excellence, mediators who organize the world through their performance. We also know about the world that it is not based on moral constructs. Ethics appears strictly as a maneuver to organize it, and the clown reveals the world as it has been constructed by signaling what lies beyond the limit. At the same time, there is little discussion of what this means and how clowns organize the world. The clown, like the court jester, is relatively marginal; paradoxically, it is the lack of open recognition of their power that allows them to hold power. Thus, is the clown an instrument of ethics, or is ethics an integral part of the clown?

Clown and humor are inherently dialectical. Modern Western science and religion are more aligned with a unitary logic, which seeks to articulate a single principle to order things. The modern Western worldview, its conceptions of right and wrong, and its hierarchical evaluation of comedy and humor as unimportant have led to the clown being ignored, misunderstood, and

¹¹ Arden, R., King, North American Indian Clowns and Creativity. In Edward Norbeck and Claire R. Farrer (1977) (eds.), *Forms of Play of Native North Americans, 1977 Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society*, West Publishing, St. Paul, p.147.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Barbara Babcock, Arrage me into Disorder: Fragments and Reflections on Ritual Clowning. In John J. MacAloon (1984) (ed), *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals: Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, Institute for Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia, pp. 102-128.

undervalued. In the Western worldview, rooted in a dichotomy between good and evil, clowns are also seen as firmly one or the other.

Mariana Keisalo-Galván talks in her work about indigenous Mexican systems, and how the logic of “fun as evil” is a way to create dialectics, using representations of relativization, to involve good with evil, to ultimately protect against relativization and preserve significant opposition. It is not enough to say that sacred clowns are beyond good and evil, or both at the same time. Evil itself is conceptualized differently, on the one hand as the absolute opposite of good to be destroyed, and on the other hand, as the dialectical opposite of good in a system, in which good and evil are mutually defined by each other. Both are necessary in the annual cycle of death and rebirth. More importantly, it is necessary to alternate opposing powers.

Humor can be used for specific purposes in specific situations. Humor can be sharp, hostile, liberating, healing, good or bad, depending on the point of view and situation relative to the reference points evoked. Humor, in turn, can be seen as unethical. What is remarkable about humor is the potential for dialectical mediation, which makes it possible to involve relativization, create representations of it, and also stop it through reversals. Clowning and jokes are means of creating dialectics, thus mediating boundaries, reversing the way of symbolization. As a figure that allows dialogue by making reversals and offering the opposite pole, the clown is not meant to be understood in itself, but as a kind of zero point. Although prototype clowns combining play, contradiction and paradox are the best examples, these figures are the essential form.

3. Conclusions

So, the ethics of the clown stands for what for us is defined as immoral. The ethics of the clown includes the breaking of the general ethics in order to strengthen it. Morality is opposed to the clown, this being defined by the denial of the other side, thus defining the clown, but also the relationship between them, establishing at the same time the order’s pillars of resistance.

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