Ob-ligation by re-ligation. A complementary reading of Adela Cortina's cordial ethics and Xavier Zubiri's analysis of social reality

Ob-ligación por re-ligación. Una lectura complementaria de la ética cordial de Adela Cortina y el análisis de la realidad social de Xavier Zubiri

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Abstract: Adela Cortina, in her *Ethics of cordial reason*, proposes a "cordial bond" as a foundation for moral obligation: a deeply felt and intuitively known bond among people that leads to cordial recognition of one another and demands active respect for human dignity. It is, therefore, a bond that ob-ligates. Cortina, however, does not elaborate on the nature of that bond; she points at it, briefly describes it, and moves on to expound its moral implications. In this paper, I show an interesting connection between Cortina´s "cordial bond" and Xavier Zubiri´s analysis of "religation". According to Zubiri, there is a bond that "re-ligates" us to reality and to each other. In this sense, the ideas of these two philosophers complement each other. On the one hand, Zubiri´s analysis contributes to a more solid and in-depth explanation of a fundamental bond (ligation) among people and on the other hand, Cortina´s cordial ethics works out some of the moral implications (ob-ligations) of such a bond.

Key words: interpersonal bond, foundation of moral obligation, moral respectivity, open essence, being turned to others.

Resumen: Adela Cortina, en su *Ética de la razón cordial*, propone un "vínculo cordial" como fundamentación de la obligación moral: un vínculo entre las personas, profundamente sentido e intuitivamente sabido, que lleva al reconocimiento cordial y exige respeto activo por la dignidad humana. Es, pues, un vínculo que ob-liga. Sin embargo, Cortina no desarrolla una explicación de la naturaleza de dicho vínculo;

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lo indica, lo describe brevemente y pasa a exponer sus implicaciones morales. En el presente artículo muestro una interesante conexión entre el "vínculo cordial" de Cortina y el análisis de la "religación" de Xavier Zubiri. Según Zubiri, hay un vínculo que nos "re-liga" a la realidad y los unos a los otros. En este sentido, las ideas de estos dos filósofos se complementan. Por un lado, el análisis zubiriano contribuye a presentar una explicación más sólida y más en profundidad del vínculo (ligación) entre las personas y, por otro lado, la ética cordial de Cortina extrae algunas de las implicaciones morales (ob-ligaciones) de dicho vínculo.

Palabras clave: vínculo interpersonal, fundamentación de la obligación moral, respectividad moral, esencia abierta, versión a los demás.

Recibido: 03/06/2019
Aceptado: 09/09/2019

1. Adela Cortina's "Cordial Ethics"

In her book *Ethics of cordial reason*[1], Adela Cortina looks for a foundation for moral obligation. Her question is why are we morally obliged to others? In her search for answers, she dedicates several chapters to survey the history of moral and political philosophy, assessing the ideas of different philosophers and holding on to the elements that she considers most relevant.

Among other philosophers, she turns to Hume, who affirms that social emotions –most specifically, compassion– are a key element of morality[2]. According to Hume, human beings are naturally sympathetic to those who suffer and that is why we tend to be moved by other people's pain and try to help them. It is thanks to our ability to feel compassion, that we can perceive the suffering of others; it is thanks to our ability to feel indignation, that we can perceive injustice. Because these feelings are inherent to human beings and so is the tendency to help those in distress or to fight against injustice, we could say that human beings are inherently configured to act in accordance to those feelings and tendencies. To a certain extent, Adela Cortina agrees with Hume that social emotions are at the core of morality, because they bind us to each other –even to

[1] A. Cortina, *Ética de la razón cordial. Educar en la ciudadanía del s. XXI,* Ediciones Nobel, Oviedo 2007. This book has not been translated into English. Therefore, all quotes in this paper are translated by me.

[2] *Ibid*., pp. 81-99.

complete strangers– and that bond compels us to act. In a sense, emotions oblige us. However, they are not enough to explain moral obligation just by themselves; we need to include reason into the equation. For this, Cortina's next stop on the journey is Kant´s moral philosophy[3].

According to the philosopher from Konigsberg, we have the ability to self-legislate, morally speaking. Being rational means having the ability to know what we should do and not do. By asking ourselves what everyone should do in a given situation we would be able to ascertain the dutiful course of action in that situation and thus give ourselves the binding norms for acting morally. The self-legislative ability or moral autonomy binds us to ourselves, but it also binds us to others, because it obligates me to act with regard to all people and in the way that all of humanity should act. Hence –we may say–, autonomy obliges us.

There is more to the sources of morality, of course. Not only can we feel our obligations towards others or know rationally what our duties are to others, but we are also able to appreciate the value of others. In this, Adela Cortina follows Max Scheler and others, like Hartman or Ortega y Gasset[4]. They emphasize the human ability to appreciate value, which is not a purely affective nor a merely rational skill, but it is rather rooted in a deeper layer of the person, where emotion and reason are intertwined. Human beings are naturally endowed with the ability to appreciate aesthetic and moral value, but like it happens with physical senses, such ability may need educating and training.

The following analogy may help convey the idea. Everyone has taste buds, but not everyone is able to taste the valuable flavor of a good wine; we may need to develop the taste for wine through education and practice. Whoever is able to appreciate the value of something, will automatically respect and try to protect it. If someone, who is completely foreign to the wine culture, received an excellent wine bottle as a gift, would most likely not be able to appreciate what a great gift he or she has been given and probably would not be desolated if the bottle fell and the wine was spilled. But, if the recipient of the bottle were to be a wine connoisseur, his or her appreciation and reaction would be completely different. This person would really appreciate the gift, would handle the bottle with great care, and would put it in a safe place. If someone were to tamper with the bottle and break it, the wine connoisseur would be very sad and indignant. All because of the ability to appreciate the value of the wine.

[3] *Ibid*., pp. 101-127.
[4] *Ibid*., pp. 131-153.

There are different kinds of realities with different degrees of value to them. Out of all the values, there is one, of the highest kind, which is unique to human beings: human dignity. Whoever is able to appreciate human dignity –that is, the value of a human being–, will immediately realize that people should be respected and that their dignity should be protected. Hence, Cortina considers that the ability to appreciate value is also at the core of morality: it binds us to each other and it obliges us.

The last stop on the journey is Apel's and Habermas' discourse ethics[5]. According to these authors, whenever a person engages in communicative action, he or she is recognizing that the other people involved in the dialogue are valid interlocutors. Whenever the justice of a norm is authentically discussed (that is, when the discussion is taken seriously and there is an honest pursuit of justice), the speakers offer their rational arguments because they really think that the listeners are rational beings, who should not be forced, coerced or manipulated, but convinced or persuaded by the power of mere reason. We would not try to reason with a baby or a monkey, but we would just act according to our best judgement, ignoring –if needed– whatever they might seem to want. In the same way, a free man in the ancient world would perhaps not discuss with his wife or his slaves the justice or injustice of his city's laws.

On the contrary, when we argue with other people, instead of forcing them to do our will, we do not do so –sometimes, at least– just because they are stronger or the police is watching or because there could be negative consequences for us if we did not, but because we think that coercing or manipulating is not the right way to treat people. We consider that reasoning is the only legitimate way to get other people to do things according to our criteria. Ultimately, engaging authentic communicative action (not merely strategic action) implies tacitly recognizing all communication-competent beings as valid interlocutors and therefore, as beings who deserve moral respect. Communicative competence binds us together and it obliges us.

After she has surveyed these major milestones in the history of modern and contemporary moral philosophy, Cortina takes a step further in her quest for a moral basis and advances her own proposal. She points out that communicative action does not create the primary bond, but the very possibility of communication rests on an already existing bond. We can and actually do communicate because we are already previously connec-

[5] *Ibid*., pp. 159-183.

ted. "We are not individuals who decide to bond or not to bond with each other, but we are already in that dialogical bond with others"[6].

This bond is not just rationally dialogical, but it involves all the other characteristics seen before: it includes appreciating the value of the others, respecting them as autonomous moral agents, and feeling compassion when they suffer, as well as indignation when they are unjustly treated. It is a bond that includes a rational dimension, but it is emotionally felt prior to being rationalized. It has to do with the "heart", before the "head" can deal with it. That is why Adela Cortina has called it "cordial" bond, from *cor, cordis*, Latin for "heart". The cordial bond plunges its roots in the heart, where the source of thoughts and feelings are interwoven. It is intuitively grasped –like value appreciation– and it leads to a "cordial" recognition of others. It is an immediate bond, a "*ligatio* among human beings, who recognize each other as 'flesh of my flesh' and 'bones of my bones' and should therefore feel and know that they are obliged to support each other"[7]. Such a cordial recognition –founded on the cordial bond– is, according to Cortina, the source of moral obligation; a *ligatio* that creates an *ob-ligatio*.

Later I shall explain better the connection between the cordial bond and the moral obligation that derives from it. First, however, we should look deeper into the bond itself. What exactly is the cordial bond? What is the anthropological basis for it? Adela Cortina does not elaborate much on the bond itself, but moves quickly into the explanation of its ethical implications. It may make sense for her to do so, since in her research and writings she concerns herself with ethics and not with philosophical anthropology. However, the notion of an inherent cordial bond among people requires a closer examination and a deep and ample exploration. One possible way to undertake that exploration is going back to Cortina's sources of inspiration.

As we have seen, she draws upon a vast array of different authors and philosophical traditions. One of those traditions is the line of thought going from Ortega y Gasset, through Zubiri, to José Luis López Aranguren[8].

[6] *Ibid*., p. 194.
[7] *Ibid*., p. 215.
[8] These three authors exercise a great influence in Adela Cortina's philosophy. See, for instance, her recognition of their master role in A. Cortina, *Ética minima. Introducción a la filosofía práctica* (10ª ed.), Tecnos, Madrid 2005, p. 22, but also the frequent mentions of them in the same book: Aranguren appears 12 times, Ortega 8 and Zubiri 3 (for the page numbers, see the index on pages 289-295). *In Ética de la razón cordial,* although their role might not seem to be a primary one, their influence is remarkable too. She quotes Aranguren in chapters 1, 3, 5, 6 and 10, Ortega in chapter 6, and Zubiri in chapters 5, 8, and 10. Their influence is certainly a major factor in Cortina's cordial ethics and this is something that we need to take into consideration when trying to understand her proposal in depth.

It is not the purpose of this paper to analyze these authors' influence in Cortina's thinking and I shall not elaborate on it at all. However, I brought up the connection because her occasional mention of Zubiri in her works gave me the idea to read their texts in a complementary way. She knows more in-depth Ortega's and Aranguren's work and she has repeatedly acknowledged their inspirational role in her philosophy. Nevertheless, Zubiri's influence is also to be seen in her writings, whether it is a direct or indirect influence. Perhaps, the greater impact of Zubiri's philosophy in Cortina's ethics is indirect, since she learned a great deal from Aranguren and the latter's moral philosophy is strongly based on Zubiri's. Also, Cortina's husband, coworker, and co-author, Jesús Conill, is an expert scholar in Zubiri's philosophy. Be it as it may –which is beside the point in this paper–, I realized that Xavier Zubiri's philosophy can shed some interesting light on the anthropological underpinnings of Adela Cortina's cordial bond. The purpose of this paper is to show how Zubiri's philosophy can help us understand better the nature of the bond –something which Cortina does not fully explain–, while Cortina's ethics of cordial reason leads us to draw some very important concrete ethical implications of a certain philosophical anthropology –something Zubiri only very timidly implied–.

I shall now expound some of the elements of Zubiri's anthropology and then point out how they complement Cortina's cordial ethics and vice versa.

2. Zubiri's contribution to understanding the cordial bond

Over fifty years before the publication of Ética de la razón cordial, Xavier Zubiri taught a course on "The problem of man", where he analyzed, among other aspects, the social dimension of the human being[9]. He explained that there is a constitutive bond among people and he referred to it with the expression *"versión a los demás"*, which we could translate as "being turned to others"[10]. According to Zubiri, the condition of "being-turned-to" does not pertain exclusively to persons, but it

[9] A revised version of the course was published in X. Zubiri, *Sobre el hombre*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid 1986, pp. 223-440, 545-671.

[10] In all quotations from *Sobre el hombre*, the translation is mine, because there is no published English translation of the book. However, for the expressions "versión" and "vertida", I follow Nelson R. Orringer and Thomas B. Fowler who translate them as "turning" and/or "turned". See, for instance, X. Zubiri, *Dynamic Structure of Reality* (trans. N. R. Orringer), University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago 2003, pp. 38-39; X. Zubiri, *Sentient Intelligence* (trans. T. B. Fowler), The Xavier Zubiri Foundation of North America, Washington D.C. 1999, pp. 32, 92, 103, 218, etc.

is a constitutive characteristic of every real thing and of reality itself; he called that condition "respectivity" or "respective character" of reality. It means that everything is in-regard-to, referred-to, turned-to other realities and to reality as such. By virtue of respectivity, every single real thing, as well as reality itself, is a unity. I shall first discuss the respectivity of reality in general and then the special case of human respectivity.

2.1. Reality's respectivity

In his main metaphysical work, *On Essence*, Zubiri defined reality as unity. Firstly, with regard to the unity of each single entity, secondly, with regard to the unity of all of reality and thirdly, with regard to reality as such.

2.1.1. Substantivity or the unity of each single entity

Zubiri defines the single entity as "substantivity" and not as substance. Perhaps, the best way to explain briefly the meaning of this term is by contrasting it with the Aristotelian concept of substance. Simplifying Aristotle's notion as much as possible (which always involves the risk of misinterpreting it), we may say that a substance is that which exists in itself and not in something else. Therefore, being –that which is or exists– is ultimately substance. The properties of a thing, for instance, do not exist in themselves, but only in so far as they are inherent to the essence of that thing. On the contrary, the essence exists in itself and underlies the accidents or properties of the thing. The substance is the ultimate subject, that which is not predicated of anything else. Conversely, the properties of a thing are only predicates of the essence (that which under-lies; the sub-stance or *hypo-keimenon*).

Zubiri criticizes this characterization of reality and considers it inconsistent or, at the very least, inadequate. He put it this way: "Let us take a man. Let us consider one of his essential notes [*notas*]; for example, he has a beard. This gentleman shaves, and then he removes his beard. Let us continue to perform the same operation with all his essential notes. This gentleman is of such and such an age; his years are removed from him. He has such and such a complexion… He can change skin color since he sunbathes and grows darker… If everything is taken away from him, then, clearly, it is as if we defoliated an artichoke: what is left of this man if all notes are removed from him? Where is the subject?"[11].

[11] X. Zubiri, *Dynamic Structure of Reality*, cit., pp. 21-22.

To overcome the inadequacy of understanding reality as substance or substances, Zubiri proposes the concept of substantivity. According to this new concept, reality is not something that underlies the notes of the real thing, but it is the system constituted precisely by the unity of those notes. A substantivity is the unitary system of notes that constitutes any real thing. Some of those notes are essential or constitutive, while others are accidental or adventitious. The essence of a substantivity is the unitary sub-system made up by the constitutive notes.

Consequently, a substantivity consists primarily of the unity with itself, that is, the unity of its notes among themselves. The emphasis is on the unity, not on the different notes. So much so that the notes that constitute a substantivity are not, first, notes in themselves and then, "notes-of" the unity, but they are intrinsically, constitutively, "notes-of" the unity. Each note is constitutively "respective", that is, turned to all the other notes. For this reason, the unity of a substantivity is not an "additive" unity, but a "primary" unity. "Primary means that, whatever be the mechanism of its production, in that unity, once it exists, each note is a function of the others, in such a wise that only in and by reason of its unity with the others is each note what it is within the real thing"[12].

The notes or elements of a substantivity do not maintain formally their individuality within the thing. For example, the glucose in my system may be chemically identical to the glucose in a laboratory, but as it is in my body, it has the intrinsic aspect of being glucose-of my organism. There might be no difference in its chemical structure, but there is an enormous difference in its metaphysical structure: it has lost its substantivity status and it is a note-of a different substantivity, namely, myself. Thus, the primary aspect of the substantivity is its constitutive unity.

2.1.2. The cosmos or the unity of all of reality

Not only the substantivity is essentially a unity with itself, but also each substantivity forms a unity with all other substantivities. Zubiri calls the unity of all existing substantivities the "cosmos". Thus, he understands the cosmos as the one great substantivity, where every single thing would be a note-of the cosmos. Such a unity is founded on the fact that each and every substantivity is, in and of itself, "turned-to" or connected to the other substantivities. This means that the different substantivities do not just form an accidental unity only because they exist in one same universe.

[12] X. Zubiri, *On Essence*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D. C. 1980, p. 161.

On the contrary, substantivities constitute one universe because each and every one of them is intrinsically turned to the other substantivities.

2.1.3. The unity of reality as such

Respectivity is a transcendental property of reality. Every note and every real thing, just because they are real, they are intrinsically respective or turned to the outside and to the other notes or substantivities. Therefore, we could say that reality is constitutively ecstatic and unitary. Ecstatic, because each note and each substantivity is turned to the outside. Unitary, because all the notes of each substantivity and all the substantivities of the cosmos are reciprocally turned to each other, thus forming a unitary system. Every substantivity is a unitary system and so is the cosmos, by virtue of reality's intrinsic respectivity.

2.2. Respectivity of the person

Like all other realities, people are also constitutively respective, but the respective dynamism of the human reality is different from and extraordinarily richer than the respectivity of any other thing. Firstly, the person does not lose his or her substantivity status by being turned to others, like the notes of a substantivity do within the unity of the substantivity or even other realities do with regard to the cosmos. Secondly, other realities are unconsciously, unknowingly, and therefore, impersonally turned to the rest of reality, but the person is turned to reality in an intelligent manner –not just physically and biologically–. The human bond to reality is more than mere respectivity: it is "religation", a personal, intelligent kind of respectivity.

These two specific differences in the human manner of being turned to reality are connected. It is precisely because of their intelligence, that persons own themselves and for this reason, they are not just any substantivity of the cosmos, but each person is also his or her own substantivity.

2.2.1. Intelligence and "open essence"

Zubiri defines the human being as an "open essence" because of our intelligence[13]. Being intelligent means being able to grasp the real as reality. Animals, on the contrary, perceive the real as stimuli; animals do not

[13] See, among several other places, X. Zubiri, *Man and God*, University Press of America, Lanham, Maryland 2009, pp. 227-228.

have reality, but "stimulity". To apprehend the real as reality means to apprehend it as being something "in its own right" ('de suyo'). The real is not only stimulus for me, but it is much more than stimulus; it is something on its own. Zubiri does not want to use the expression "in itself"; reality is not something "in itself", meaning something that is completely independent or disconnected from me. It is not "in itself" (purely objective) and it is not just "for me" (purely subjective), but it is "in its own right"[14].

Because non-human animals perceive the real as stimuli, they are compelled by their instincts to react in a determined way. Human animals, on the contrary, apprehend the real as reality and therefore, can more than just react to stimuli; they can and must act. We can and must choose our actions. In this sense, non-human animals and all the other entities in the world, except for human beings, are "closed essences" because they have closed systems of natural mechanisms. Animals, for instance, have closed response mechanism to stimuli; they cannot possibly escape their instinctive reactions; they cannot act, but only react. The real perceived as stimulus makes animals behave in a determined way, because that is how they are configured. Reality, on the other hand, allows for space; apprehending the real as reality –again, as being something in its own right–, does not force us to react to it in a determined manner, but it leaves room for deciding what to do and it requires that we make those decisions and act accordingly. We can and must decide; we can and must act.

Consequently, being intelligent, that is apprehending the real as reality, implies having to decide how we are going to act and therefore, it involves "making ourselves". We have to make ourselves and we cannot possibly not do so. However, the way in which we make ourselves is not determined; our manner of being in the world, who we shall become, is always open; it is to be decided by us, at least for the most part.

Now, being essentially open could be interpreted as being totally undefined, but that is not what Zubiri means by "openness" or "aperture". We have to realize ourselves, but not as a creation out of nothing. "Open" does not mean "empty". Our essential aperture entails an intrinsic orientation for our self-realization: an orientation to giving ourselves to others. We are, according to Zubiri, intrinsically oriented towards self-giving love: "Yet this aperture has a certain structure: it is the going out of oneself towards another. It is ecstasy. It is the same whether it is God, a

[14] X. Zubiri, *Sentient Intelligence*, cit., pp. 23-27.

friend or a loved one. It is a going out from the self towards the other, towards another person. In the second place, it is a going out towards another person purely and simply because of liberality, i.e., without being forced to it, because then it would not be *agápe* –the love St. John speaks about (cf. 1 Joh 4:8)–, but *éros*, a desire"[15].

What allows him to make such an assertion? What justifies the passage from being open essences to being intrinsically oriented to self-giving love?

Xavier Zubiri does not offer a fully elaborated argument to support this claim. This is more like a conviction that he affirms occasionally, here and there, in different writings. However, I believe we can infer a partial argument from the whole of his philosophical anthropology. I shall begin by explaining very briefly the notion of "religation". Then I shall expound how religation among persons consists in "being turned to each other as other". Finally, I shall show that the fact that we are intrinsically turned to each other creates a bond –a constitutive bond–, which is fundamentally of benevolent character and implicates certain obligations.

2.2.2. "Religation"

The intrinsic orientation to find our fulfilment through self-giving acts is given to us by the fact of "religation". This is a term coined by Zubiri, from the Latin *re-ligare* (re-bind), to designate the fact that we are in reality and reality is in us. Intelligence is precisely my physical being in reality and the physical being of reality in me: "The 'being here-and-now present' in which the intellective act consists physically is a 'being here-and-now present' in which I am 'with' the thing and 'in' the thing (not 'of' the thing), and in which the thing is 'remaining' in my intellection. Intellection as act is not formally intentional. It is a physical 'being here-and-now present'. The unity of this act of 'being' as act is what constitutes *apprehension*"[16].

Religation does not only affect intelligence, but also the other specifically human structures: the will and the affectivity. Through volition, we tend to reality and reality appeals to our tendencies. By virtue of our affectivity, we are affected by reality and reality affects us. Religation is the radical way for human beings to be in reality and it concerns our

[15] X. Zubiri, *The philosophical problem of the history of religions*, The Xavier Zubiri Foundation of North America, Washington D. C. 1999, pp. 253-254.
[16] X. Zubiri, *Sentient Intelligence*, cit., p. 10.

intellection, our volition, and our feeling. We are tied or ligated to and by reality through all three structures. We are religated to reality and reality religates us.

Thus, intelligence –the act of apprehending reality–, volition –the act of tending intellectively to reality–, and affectivity –our being affected by reality–, are not only structures by which we are open to reality, but they are also the ways in which we are anchored in and bound by reality. Whether we want it or not, we are religated to and by reality. Therefore, when making ourselves, when we shape our own being, our personality, with every decision and action of ours, we do so necessarily in connection with reality and we are lead to do so according to the structure and dynamism of reality and of our apprehension of it. What does that mean?

2.2.3. Being turned to others as others and the nexus among persons

Religation is not only a human dynamism, but it is also a dynamism of the real as such. The real religates us and impels us to apprehend it, to go deeper into reality and to apprehend more of it. Zubiri calls this dynamism the "impellence" of the real[17].

By the fact that we are religated to and by reality, we are also religated to and by others because they are part of reality. In this first sense, we are constitutively turned to the others in the same way as we are turned to any other real entity. However, the reality of the other impels me to apprehend it and to go deeper into its understanding and by doing that, I will eventually come to recognize the other as other, that is as another person. This is what Zubiri calls "the structure of the otherness" ('alteridad' in Spanish)[18]. He explains it as follows[19].

According to Zubiri, it is not just a theory, but it is a fact that we are constitutively referred to or turned to the others. From the very moment of conception, the parents are already in the biological configuration of the embryo, shaping its reality. The mother is present in the reality of the embryo nourishing it with her own blood, hosting it, etc. By the time the child is born, the others are already in his or her reality, shaping it biologically. The first sentient intellection of the person is the apprehen-

[17] *Ibid*., p. 128.

[18] See "La condición humana de las cosas y la estructura de la alteridad" in X. Zubiri, *Sobre el hombre*, cit., pp. 241-243.

[19] The description of a child's development in the next few paragraphs follows Zubiri's exposition in *Ibid*., pp. 241-255.

sion of his or her mother. The child senses him or herself in the measure that he or she senses the mother too. One's own reality is always, from the very beginning, constitutively built by the reality of others. Then, the child receives nourishment, protection, affection, etc. not only from the mother, but also from the father and other people. They talk to the baby and relate to him or her in different ways, thus receiving the child all the input he or she needs for his or her psychobiological structures to keep forming. Before I carry out my first intellective act, the human reality that comes from others is already in me, configuring my own reality. I am referred or turned to the others from the very first instant of my existence mainly in the form of reception: receiving what they give me, that is, receiving their (self-) giving acts.

In the first stages of the child's life, however, the others are not perceived as others, properly speaking, but as objects or factors of the human reality that are present in my life interacting with me. "They are not *alter*, they are not others in the full sense of the word. They are so much not others, that they are *my* mother, *my* father, they are others that are *mine*: this is the minimum of otherness"[20]. I am turned to the others only as others-who-are-referred-to-me. I am not yet and "I" or a "self", but rather a "me".

Later, as his or her intelligence develops, the child becomes aware to be an "I" or a "self" and then, the others begin to be perceived as "others who are like I am" or "others like myself". It is only farther along the process of intellectual development that the other appears not as "another like myself", but as "other than myself", different from myself and even opposed to myself; as an "I" in its own right. On the one hand, they are like myself: they have a body like mine, they talk, think, desire, act, etc. as I do. On the other hand, they are other than myself: they have their own thoughts, desires, motives, purposes, etc.

The others are different because they are open essences too, and therefore, their actions are not predetermined or closed, but they have different options and can make different decisions. Thus, I discover persons, open essences, that is, realities that are equal to and yet different from myself, closest and yet distant at the same time.

To sum up the preceding argument, we could say that human beings are always already connected to each other, always turned to each other, even before they can possibly decide whether to relate to others or

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 242.

not. Because of our constitutive respectivity, we are always *de facto* in a nexus with the others[21]. We are actually in a nexus with the whole reality and with all the different things around us, but that nexus is not a social one. We are turned to animals, plants, objects, etc., but we do not form a society with them, because we are not turned to them as others, where "other" means "another like myself" and "other than myself". The intrinsic respectivity towards the others as others is the foundation of social reality, of personal relations and communication, and of the different nexuses that constitute societies.

Hence, the primary and fundamental character of society is not a union but a natural unity. People unite in societies because there is already a primordial and fundamental unity among them. The nexus among people is not based, ultimately, on a pact or on the need for distributing labor: "The nexus among men is primarily a unity that man does not establish, but he finds that the others have already intervened in his life (…); when the child emerges to his or her first intellectual act, he or she finds that that unity has already been accomplished"[22]. By the time we reach the use of reason, we realize that the others are already embedded in our own reality; we have survived, grown and matured biologically thanks to the help and assistance of our parents and others; we have an affective world, where the others are intertwined with our psychological structures and mechanisms; we speak a language, use certain concepts, have a set of knowledge and skills, etc. that come from the others.

I exist and I am the way I am because others have given of themselves to me: their cells, their blood and nutrients, their time, effort, affection, knowledge, friendship, etc. Everyone bears in his or her own reality the reality of the others as a donation, as the result of self-giving acts. Therefore, it seems coherent to conclude that not only there is a constitutive bond among people, but also that such a bond is of fundamentally positive, benevolent character. A cordial bond.

2.2.4. Constitutive bond and obligation to respect others

When we regard others as someone like myself but not taking in account the other-than-myself aspect, we may perceive them as an extension of myself, as a good, or even as a mere mean to my own fulfilment. Also, if we focus on the like-myself aspect of human relations, we bring forward a qualitative homogeneity among us, so that different forms of

[21] *Ibid*., p. 247.
[22] *Ibid*., p. 252.

collective life may arise, which have nothing to do with authentically personal relationships like friendship, for instance. On the contrary, if we take in account and emphasize the other-than-myself aspect, we may build "very deep dimensions of social life, like friendship or moral respect for people"[23]. Respect is an attitude founded on the apprehension and recognition of the other as other.

Allow me to insist, for the sake of clarity. On the one hand, "like myself" means "personhood": the other is a personal reality like I am. On the other hand, "other than myself" means that the other is a distinct person, a person on his or her own. The others are not just the human reality that I find in and outside of myself, with which I build my life; they are not an extension of myself, either. Consequently, I am impelled by the very structure of their reality to apprehend their personhood and their otherness and to treat them accordingly. I am impelled by the religating dynamism of reality and of my intelligence, to recognize them as respect-deserving realities. In other words, based on Zubiri's description of the "structure of otherness", we could say that the apprehension of the other as being like myself and yet other than myself is a kind of recognition that demands that we respect the other. In short, we are ob-ligated because we are re-ligated by reality and because we are religated to and by the others. Religation makes us recognize others as other persons and this obliges us to respect them, thus excluding any kind of possessive, manipulative or utilitarian approach to people. Thus, although it is true that emotions, autonomy, the ability to appreciate values, and communicative competence oblige us, deep down all those factors of moral obligation are based on a cordial bond, which is founded on religation. Religation binds us together and obliges us to each other.

In addition, Zubiri goes further to say that the otherness of the other –the distance we apprehend– does not have to imply a distant treatment in the sense of "cold" or "detached". "Distance" does not mean "barrier", but it means that there is a space between me and the other person, a field that I may handle in different ways. For instance, I can make into an "effusive field" in order to welcome the other and to give myself to the other. Thus, the other person's otherness is the basis not only for respect but also for authentic self-giving love: "Love, rather than a relation consequent upon two persons, is the originary creation of an effusive [field] within which, and only within which, the other

[23] *Ibid*., p. 246.

as other can be given. This is the sense of every possible community among men (…)"[24].

Moreover, not only can we use the otherness or distance between persons to love the other, but that –loving the other– is exactly what we are actually meant to do according to the intrinsic dynamism of our personal reality. As we saw before, Zubiri thinks that the very structure and dynamism of our open essence is meant to develop into self-giving love[25]. For this, the way to reaching complete personal fulfilment is through giving ourselves totally to others. In Zubiri's words: "In life a thing changes first to be itself [*el mismo*], although it may never be the same [*lo mismo*]; second, in order to be more itself [*sí mismo*], and third, when everything has been given, when life is so perfect that there is no more room for giving more of itself with respect to itself, there is room at least for the human being to fit into a higher possibility: that of giving itself wholly to another, and becoming in another, for example, in the phenomenon of love"[26].

3. Critical conclusion

In this section, I shall first address the question about the cordial character of the bond among people; secondly, the notion that persons are intrinsically configured to give themselves to others through love; and finally, the issue of the cordial bond implicating an obligation.

Do Cortina and Zubiri sufficiently justify the positive or cordial character of the fundamental bond among people? I believe they show convincingly enough that there is a constitutive nexus among human beings, but is it true that such a nexus is a cordial bond rather than a neutral or even a hostile one? It may be enough to look at history, to watch the news, or to read the paper in order to realize that envy, greed, anger, and all kinds of ill-disposed attitudes are also deep embedded into the human reality. Sadly, too often, people are indifferent to others, manipulate, and even abuse or kill others. Why, then, emphasize the more benevolent aspects of human relations over the negative ones? I think that Zubiri makes a compelling case for the fundamentally positive character of the primordial bond. In his description of the structure of otherness, he

[24] X. Zubiri, *Nature, History, God*, University Press of America, Washington D. C. 1981, p. 389. I replaced the word "boundary" in T. Fowler's translation by "field", because the original Spanish word used by Zubiri is "ámbito", which means both "boundary" and "the space within the boundary", but in this case I understand that the author means the space within rather than its limits.

[25] X. Zubiri, *The philosophical problem of the history of religions*, cit., pp. 253-254.

[26] X. Zubiri, *Dynamic Structure of Reality*, cit., pp. 123-124.

makes clear that human beings would be biologically and psychologically non-viable without the benevolent self-giving acts of parents, relatives, friends, teachers, and even strangers occasionally. We would survive and thrive perfectly well without the hostile and negative attitudes and acts, but we would not possibly exist without the direct and indirect benign gifts of others. In this sense, the cordial bond is constitutive, while the very real and ubiquitous inimical attitudes are not.

Furthermore, the positive aspect of the bond is a primordial fact, while the negative aspects of human reality are subsequent. Before we even start apprehending the world intellectively, the others are already benevolently intertwined with us. Thus, the bond that we first apprehend as being already established is a friendly or cordial one. Jealousy, envy, anger, animosity, etc. will come later. Sadly, they may occur very soon and very frequently and unfortunately, they make take the upper hand, but they will never have a primal or founding character as the cordial bond does.

Nevertheless, even if we can conclusively argue that the primordial bond among people is fundamentally positive, would that implicate that we are intrinsically oriented, by our very essence, to achieve personal fulfilment through self-giving love? I must say that I have not found in Zubiri's works any persuasive argument for it. He states this belief several times, but it seems more like a conviction rather than the result of a logical argument. Whether or not we are inherently meant to give ourselves totally to others through love is, to my judgment, an extremely relevant question and I am inclined to agree with Zubiri. However, I would say that he did not try to prove that we are essentially called to love, but he only pointed at it as a conviction; one, which would certainly be worth exploring. However, not many authors have studied this aspect of Zubiri's philosophy, and we can say that it remains a very stimulating open question in Zubiri's writings[27].

[27] Friedrick D. Wilhelmsen wrote extensively on it in his book *The Metaphysics of Love*, Sheed & Ward, Nueva York 1962, but he only referred to Zubiri's first works, which are not representative of the philosopher's mature thought. Blanca Castilla advanced the transcendental character of love in Xavier Zubiri's notion of person, but she also focused mainly on the first stage of Zubiri's philosophy (see B. Castilla, *Noción de persona en Xavier Zubiri. Una aproximación al género*, Rialp, Madrid 1996, pp. 352-356). Guillerma Díaz notes the enormous relevance of love in Zubiri's entire work, but she does not develop this idea (see G. Díaz, *Teología del misterio en Zubiri*, Herder, Barcelona 2008, p. 76, especially footnote 57). José Antúnez discussed briefly Zubiri's idea that self-giving love is the ultimate way to attain personal fulfilment (see J. Antúnez, *La intersubjetividad en Xavier Zubiri* (doctoral thesis), Ed. Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Rome 2006, pp. 513-521). Bosco Corrales discussed at length this same idea in his doctoral thesis *La importancia de la noción metafísica de amor en el pensamiento de Xavier Zubiri*, Universidad CEU-Cardenal Herrera, Valencia 2010, https://www.academia.edu/17582050/La_importancia_de_la_nocion_metafisica_de_amor_en_el_pensamiento_de_Xavier_Zubiri.

Finally, it remains the question whether a cordial bond among persons implicates an obligation to respect others. Xavier Zubiri believed, as we have seen, that we are essentially constituted in such a way that we are meant to be benevolent and beneficent to others, but I have not found in his work an actual argument to sustain that conviction. Adela Cortina, on the other hand, makes a compelling case for the necessary connection among the cordial bond, cordial recognition, and moral obligation. Drawing upon Scheler's notion of the human ability to appreciate value, she states that the only reasonable way to react to the recognition of value is by protecting and honoring it.

There is an inherent dynamism to values: they either attract or repel us, inviting us to act in one sense or another, but they never let us untouched or indifferent. "The logic of values obliges us to opt for the positive and to refuse the negative ones. (…) it is contradictory to say that, because something is valuable, we do not want to make it real. Hence, if someone can show that something is of value, he does not need to make any further arguments as to why we should carry it out"[28]. The only reasonable excuse for not carrying out something valuable would be the justifiable fear of putting at risk something of the same or of even higher value. Now, since human dignity is the highest value that we can recognize, there can be no reasonable excuse not to protect it, that is, not to respect people or even not to defend and help them, unless that meant hurting other people or putting them in harm's way.

That is the argument I have implicitly used earlier in my interpretation of Zubiri's explanation of the "structure of otherness" and its moral implications, but it is actually not Zubiri's, it is Adela Cortina's. She shows, in a rationally –and emotionally– powerful way, that the fundamental bond among people, which Zubiri explained as religation, brings forth the moral obligation to respect others. It is not about merely passive respect, because the basis for it is not a merely passive bond; it is a fundamentally positive, benevolent, compassionate, cordial bond. Being bound to each other biologically, emotionally, and intelligently, we are also bound to recognize each other's value or human dignity and we are impelled to uphold that dignity by respecting, protecting, and helping others. Therefore, it seems, in fact, that the cordial bond has ethical implications and that failing to recognize them, would mean not just an omission, but an active refusal to fulfil

[28] A. Cortina, *Ética de la razón cordial,* cit., pp. 142-143. The translation is mine.

our moral obligations[29]. In conclusion, recognizing others as persons and appreciating the supreme value of their human dignity demands from everyone a fundamental attitude of active respect and responsible solidarity to others.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 194.