



Maxims of Action in a Financial Co-operative: Epistemological and Theoretical Issues

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the sense and function of a set of maxims which sums up the normative foundations of professional-client relationships in a French credit union. This set constitutes the main result of an exploratory and essentially descriptive field study. Discussion attempts to show that no single moral normative framework is appropriate to account for the set as a whole, although an ethic of care seems *prima facie* relevant. However, I will argue that the particularist-generalist distinction helps to make the set intelligible, because it reveals the apparent opposition between the determinate professional roles and indeterminate family roles fulfilled by client advisors. Drawing from this indeterminateness, the article concludes on the paradoxical use of vagueness in the realization of values within an institution, and suggests a reference to the American pragmatism with respect to the theorization of the set of maxims.

Key-words: Credit union, maxims of action, theorization, care ethics, pragmatism, indeterminateness of roles

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine la signification et la fonction d'un ensemble de maximes d'action qui constituent le fondement normatif de la relation clients dans une banque française mutualiste. Ces maximes sont issues d'une enquête de terrain à visée exploratoire et descriptive. La recherche d'une théorisation a conduit à la conclusion que ces règles, considérées comme un ensemble cohérent et non séparable, ne peuvent être conceptualisées à l'aide d'un cadre normatif unique, bien que, à première vue, l'éthique du care paraisse être un candidat pertinent. Cependant la distinction entre une éthique particulariste et une éthique généraliste contribue à donner un sens à l'ensemble des maximes d'action. Elle permet en effet de révéler l'opposition apparente entre deux rôles assumés par les chargés de clientèle de la banque : d'une part, des rôles professionnels et déterminés ; d'autre part, des rôles familiaux et indéterminés. La conjonction de ces rôles suggère que la réalisation des valeurs de l'organisation repose sur une incertitude – un paradoxe que la philosophie pragmatiste américaine contribue à éclairer.

Mots-clés : Banque mutualiste, maximes d'action, théorisation, éthique du care, pragmatisme, indétermination des rôles

JEL Classification: D23, G21, M14, P13

INTRODUCTION

In this article I examine some epistemological and theoretical issues raised by a set of maxims of action which describes the relations between advisors of a financial co-operative institution and their clients. These maxims constitute the major finding of a field study which was conducted in a French credit union in 2007¹.

The present research didn't attempt to compare the set of maxims emerging from the individual experiences of interviewees with a predefined set of principles generally considered as typical of social economy². Grounded in verbal reports, it aimed at identifying, describing and analyzing the practical norms which support network's client advisors in the context of client relationships.

This article is divided into three parts. The first is concerned with a summary of the field study. The second deals with the theorization of the set of maxims. An ethic of care seems particularly relevant, but several other theoretical frameworks, i.e., a form of moral pluralism, could also be invoked. In the third part I adopt another theoretical perspective. Indeed, it examines the insight offered by the particularist-generalist distinction, as it questions the background and real function of the set of maxims.

Conclusions of the article are twofold. The first one regards realization of values within an institution. I will argue that the set of rules resulting from the field study is intelligible if it is related to interviewees' observations concerning the duality between two roles they have to fulfil, namely, as professionals and as members of a "family" constituted by the community of members. An essential aspect of this duality is that it leads to paradoxical consequences because the family role, which is narrowly related to co-operative values, remains fundamentally indeterminate. Indeed, although credit union's employees do assume a determinate role as "client advisor" or "branch manager" within their institution, they cannot play any determinate role in the sphere of family relationships--for example, they cannot represent themselves as "fathers" or "brothers" of their clients. This problem of reference is at the origin of a paradox, because the institution itself, while bearing co-operative values, intentionally encourages such an indeterminateness in representation as it helps client advisors to balance the realization of co-operative values and the attainment of economic objectives. Thus, the client advisors's duality and partial indeterminateness of roles contribute paradoxically to the realization of co-operative values.

The second conclusion relates to the theorization of the set. In this respect, the appeal to a plurality of moral theories seems unavoidable. An ideal normative framework would include all the different factors which are reflected by the maxims, especially the dimensions of caring for clients. Drawing from the observations of Rogene Buchholz and Sandra Rosenthal (2005), who resort to American pragmatism to account for the relations between a firm and its stakeholders, and more particularly from those of Gilles Deleuze (1989) on the roots of this philosophical perspective in terms of such notions as "community of brothers", I will

¹ Namely, the Crédit Mutuel d'Anjou, a subsidiary of the Crédit Mutuel Group. A detailed report was presented to the management of the Crédit Mutuel d'Anjou in 2007.

² Especially those named "Raiffeisen principles", which are derived from the work of Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen, one of the founders of co-operative banking in the nineteenth century, or the related principles stated by the International Co-operative Alliance.

suggest that an appeal to the spirit of pragmatism could allow to take the duality of roles into account, while avoiding moral pluralism. It could also help to determine the design of future empirical work, especially in order to assess the importance of the family dimension of client relationships.

1. THE SET OF MAXIMS THAT GOVERN ADVISOR-CLIENTS RELATIONSHIPS

1.1. Methodological approach

Before describing the maxims of action that emerged from the field study, I briefly summarize the methodology. It was inspired by the approach used by Frederick Bird and James Waters (1987) in order to reveal the “moral assumptions held frequently by managers” (p. 2). In the same vein, the aim of the present methodological approach, which has an exploratory purpose, was to identify the practical norms which were considered, by interviewees themselves, as expressing the normative foundations of their activity.

The sample included 28 persons (16 male and 12 female), of whom 18 are client advisors, 5 are employees in the administrative department and 5 are clients. Sample selection was only based on a minimal diversity in terms of gender and length of service. As the main objective of the field study was not to measure variables or to test hypotheses relative, for example, to the particular effect of some co-operative value or principle, but to gather a variety of descriptions of the practical norms governing the advisor-client relationships, no specific constraint was imposed on the sample selection.

Thus, this research did not start from any preconceived ideas with respect to the norms which might govern these relationships. Identifying these norms was the main subject matter of the field study.

Interviews were semi-structured. Questions focused only on values and avoided any reference to norms, rules or maxims³. The general idea was that interviewees should express by themselves normative statements in response to a variety of questions involving values⁴. They were not explicitly asked to select a system of principles they would have deemed typical of co-operation. The content analysis was conducted following two steps: first a categorization of answers and a thematic analysis of discourse, which led to isolate five

³ I use the term “maxim” rather than, e.g., “rule” or “norm”, because it has a subjective connotation which fits with the logic of the field study. I am responsible for the names given to the maxims.

⁴ The opening question concerned the nature, content and possible hierarchy of co-operative values, the second asked for examples of typical situations where co-operative values were appealed to, and the third concerned the difference, in terms of values, between the credit union and banks held by shareholders. A second series of questions was concerned with the articulation between the realization of co-operative values and the achievement of commercial objectives. A third series focused on values of solidarity and democracy. It was followed by various questions, in particular on the role of elected directors and the new strategic plan of the credit union. Eventually, the fifth series dealt with the coherence between personal and co-operative values, and with the possible contribution of interviewees to the promotion of those values. It should be noticed that all the interviews took place after a new strategic plan, which emphasized the respect of co-operative values, had been officially announced. This fact may have influenced the interviewees’ answers and favored a desirability bias. Thus, all the seven values stated in the new strategic plan were cited by the interviewees.

maxims of action; second an inventory of their occurrences, their components and the context of their occurrences.

The following maxims were identified: (1) a *maxim of care*, which can be summarized by the formula: “perceiving, attending and acting in order to help clients as much as possible”; (2) a *maxim of equal consideration*; (3) a *maxim of respect for clients’ needs*; (4) a *maxim requiring the search for the other’s autonomy*, namely “helping the clients without being paternalistic”; and (5) the *golden rule* in a positive formulation: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. Table 1 shows that maxims 1 to 3 were largely cited by interviews.

Table 1. Components of the set of maxims

Maxims	Interviewees		Interviewees	
	citing the maxim (N = 28)		from retail banking citing the maxim (N = 18)	
(1) Care	27	96%	18	100%
(2) Equal consideration	20	71%	15	83%
(3) Respect for clients’ needs	27	96%	18	100%
(4) Search for the other’s autonomy	16	57%	15	83%
(5) Golden rule	11	39%	8	44%

It is important to notice that the inventory of maxims was based on the presence, in the same sentence, at most in the same text subdivision, of all the criteria typical of each maxim. These criteria were settled in the course of the content analysis. In the case of the maxim of care, for instance, “perceiving”, “attending” and “acting in order to help clients as much as possible” were the required criteria.

1.2. Description of the set

I now present a brief description of the maxims of action. Each description begins with a prototypical excerpt taken from the interviews.

1. Maxim of care

The following passage can be regarded as a prototype of this maxim. It is stated by an elected director of a bank’s local board:

Being human, this is perhaps above all listening to the other. You know, the first thing to do, if one has no means to do something, is at least to listen to the other; if one can do something, perhaps to help him.

But it is true that from the bank's perspective, client advisors have limits because they clearly have sales objectives. (Interview #15)

Here three aspects of the client advisor's responsibility are exhibited: treating others as human beings, listening to them and making every effort to help them. Co-operative values are placed at the level of human values, i.e., values that can be realized in every context of human life.

The maxim of care emphasizes also the judgment that advisors have to make in order to satisfy their clients' needs. Their deliberation implies the weighing of two requirements: the one related to the advisor-client relationship, which mainly consists in listening genuinely and do everything that is in one's power to help the client without compromising fairness; and the demand to meet the economic objectives of the institution. The resulting balance has to avoid two extremes: a lack of listening to the clients, which would amount to express insensitivity; an "excess of help" which would mean an inappropriate interpretation of the "helping" dimension of the maxim of care.

Thus, this maxim means more than the sole description of a relational quality. A client advisor clearly suggests that it plays the role of a critical test of the institutional commitment to co-operative values:

If the bank is unable to help a person, in good as in bad moments, then it is not a co-operative bank. (#28)

2. Maxim of equal consideration

The requirement for equal consideration constitutes a major principle in most political and moral systems and theories. This client advisor proposes a prototype:

I don't discriminate between wealthy and modest people. I see to it that I am remaining equally available to each person. Of course, I have greater expectations for some categories of clients. That's quite normal. But I try not to discriminate. Therefore what I can do for one person, I will also do it for anyone. (#17)

Equal consideration means that every client has a value by virtue of his being a person. His value, *qua* person, has priority over his financial situation whatever the circumstances. Following excerpts from interviews with an advisor and a client illustrate this requirement:

It is not when everything goes well that the value of our bank should be assessed. Bankers who deal only with rich clients are well known. It is when clients do have a problem that they can assess whether their advisor is able to help them or not. (#19)

I earned the legal minimum wage during almost a year. But I enjoyed the same respect as before, nothing had changed. (#16)

The maxim of equal consideration has been applied in some rare cases where rich clients had put forward claims which were judged excessive with regard to co-operative values. As a consequence, they were invited to close their account. That sort of example suggests that this maxim not only refers to a general principle, but is also a central condition to maintain the cohesion of the membership.

3. Maxim of respect for client's needs

Respect of client's needs corresponds to a norm of conduct which is strongly asserted by the credit union. An advisor gives a prototypical instance:

It will always be the willingness to be able to give precedence to the client over what we are willing to propose to him, and it is above all to really meet his concerns. (#21)

Many interviewees emphasize the connection between the satisfaction of the clients' genuine needs and the moderate pressure to which advisors are subject regarding the achievement of sales objectives. Such a reasonable pressure is narrowly linked with the bonus program, which is not personalized but depends on each branch's global performance. Thus, sales objectives are rather regarded as guidelines which guarantee advisors a certain freedom to act in conformity with co-operative values.

4. Maxim requiring the search for the other's autonomy

This maxim refers to the ultimate end of Co-operatives, namely to allow their members to govern their life in an autonomous way, which in the case at hand supposes a minimal degree of financial independence. One advisor insists on this requirement:

I helped two persons, two households, and these two households could then be in a position to go on working and earning their living by themselves. (#28)

Two points have been added by interviewees. First, genuine caring for the autonomy of others implies that advisors avoid any form of paternalism. Second, the maxim requiring the search for the other's autonomy is in connection with the idea that preservation of the membership is a crucial end. Thus, every client should have the opportunity to remain a member of the credit union.

5. Golden rule

The golden rule in its positive formulation ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"), which is less often quoted, is expressed as follows by a client advisor:

I make it the principle in my work that I will do to my clients what I would do to myself. (#3)

Reference to the golden rule denotes a certain conception of the context in which the advisor-client relationship takes place. It is the context of a community with friendly or even family ties. A branch manager and a client state this point:

We are, all of us, a family, this is the one and the other, employees and clients. When we receive a client, we reason essentially as we would reason for ourselves. (#11)

It was really like an advice from a friend--a friend! It became... sometimes it was like that. And I found it was very nice. I was surprised. (#22)

Even if it may raise a problem of impartiality at an institutional level, the appeal that some interviewees make to the golden rule can be justified, at an individual level, by the asymmetry which is typical of a relationship between an informed and competent practitioner and a client. Thus, some client advisors mention a moral duty which aims at compensating for the harm caused to a client for which they would feel responsible.

2. THEORIZING THE SET OF MAXIMS

2.1. General observations

This part is devoted to the search for the theoretical framework which is more likely to make the set of maxims intelligible and, beyond, to account for the client advisors' behavior. The more straightforward way of understanding the moral conceptions which lie behind the set of maxims consists in calling to a conceptual framework issued from normative moral philosophy.

This attempt to theorize, which stems from the experience of professionals, should meet two requirements: encompassing the entire set of maxims; and accounting adequately for caring, which interviewees regarded as expressing the spirit of co-operative values. With respect to the former, theory should, as Bernard Williams says, retain as much ethical ideas as possible rather than resting on "the assumption that we probably have too many ethical ideas" (1985, p. 117). But this requirement of theorization apparently comes up against a limit which corresponds to what Alan Gewirth calls the "irreconcilable contradictions" of the "domain of morality"--contradictions between "precepts that require impartial treatment of all persons and directives that permit or even require a privileged status for some persons as against others" (1988, p. 284). The debate between universalist and particularist conceptions of normative ethics will contribute to highlight this point. It will be dealt with in the third part.

Care ethics seems to meet ideally the second requirement. But appealing to it in a professional context raises specific questions, which relate particularly to the fact that the practice of caring seems more likely to flourish in the context of personal relationships. The following section is concerned with this point.

2.2. Theorizing the set of maxims through care ethics

Care ethics has been invoked for different purposes in the context of business, e.g., its relevance to business ethics (Freeman et al., 1992; Derry, 1999); the ability to interpret, through a feminine framework, the stakeholder approach (Wicks et al., 1994; Burton and Dunn, 1996) and, beyond, the nature of the firm (Dobson and White, 1995; Derry, 1996; Dobson, 1996); or the relevance and applicability of care ethics to business settings (Wicks, 1996; Liedtka, 1996; Solomon, 1998). But for the matter at hand, the approach is different for it is fundamentally inductive, based on factual data.

Indeed, the results of the field study previously exposed put a number of crucial considerations forward, which could be related to care ethics. First, the sincerity or authenticity of the caring attitude exhibited by client advisors towards their clients--a feature which they regard as central for the credit union vis-à-vis competing banks held by shareholders. Second, the attention paid to clients' needs and the effort made to satisfy them as much as possible, under the reciprocity condition that the client have good will. Third, the concern for clients' welfare which, in the context of advisors-clients relationships, means that advisors should make sure that their clients are able to manage their own budget. Fourth, the family quality of advisor-client relationships, which is derived from membership of the co-operative community and establishes a connection with the realm of personal relationships.

Care ethics seems *prima facie* to include those considerations as it emphasizes sincere attention to others, concern for the other's needs and welfare, effective activity in order to respond to the other's needs, and effort to develop and maintain social relations. Thus, Carol Gilligan, a famous advocate of such an ethical perspective, insists that "moral problems are problems of human relations" (1982, p. xix). Moreover, she proposes an account of the concept of responsibility, crucial to care ethics, which narrowly evokes the maxim of care: it corresponds to "the need for response that arises from the recognition that others are counting on you and that you are in a position to help" (1982, p. 54).

To examine the plausibility of theorizing the set of maxims through the general framework of care ethics, three points should be checked: first, the relevant concepts which constitute the content of the set of maxims should unambiguously pertain to care ethics; second, some concepts or theoretical considerations which are central to care ethics should not be ignored by the set of maxims; and finally, the set of maxims should not include elements that are irrelevant to care ethics. In what follows, I attempt to show that these conditions are not satisfied, strictly speaking. But the occurrence, in empirical data, of concepts referring to an ethic of care has a meaning which is worth consideration in order to understand the normative background of client advisors' practices.

The first point has been noted at the beginning of this part. It concerns the question whether the meaning of care, as it is expressed by the interviewees and exemplified by the "maxim of care", is the same as the care which lies at the heart of the theories of care. Nel Noddings (1984), for example, distinguishes between two meanings of care: care-for and care-about. She remarks that "we cannot care-for everyone", that "genuine caring" is impossible at a universal level (p. xv). In the context of distant relationships, like client relationships, we can only "care about", i.e., "maintain an internal state of readiness to try to care for whoever crosses our path" (p. xv). In sum, "caring-for is the direct face-to-face attempt to respond the needs of a cared-for"; by contrast, "caring-about is characterized by some distance", even though it rests on a motivational foundation (p. xv, xvi).

But applied to the rules composing the set of maxims, this distinction is rather puzzling. Thus, in virtue of the maxims of equal consideration, respect for clients' needs and search for the other's autonomy, client advisors should rather care about their clients; but in virtue of the maxim of care and the golden rule, they should rather care for their clients. Another difficulty comes from the maxim of equal consideration. According to this maxim, the caring-for advocated by the maxim of care should be generalized to every client relationship, whatever the client's situation. Moreover, the distance implied by caring-about offers a sort of security as it hinders partiality or paternalism on the part of client advisors. By the way, caring-about seems to be in the interest of the credit union.

Therefore, the type of caring which is referred to by client advisors is not exactly in accordance with the strong meaning of care--the Noddings' caring-for. Indeed, two meanings of care should be considered in the case at hand, each being intimately linked to a certain mode of behavior vis-à-vis clients. The first meaning corresponds to the caring typical of ethics of care. Client advisors refer to it when they evoke real experiences in which they "took time" to help a client in need--i.e., to escape a logic of efficiency and consider that improving the client's welfare is the unique reason for acting⁵. The second meaning applies to ordinary relationships with clients. Caring then takes the form of a certain quality of listening, a way of being which does not blur the distance between the professional and his client but supposes that the professional does not simulate "overattentive caring, good mood, sincerity, sympathy, etc." (Gorz, 1988, p. 237).

The second point aims at ensuring that the set of maxims meets all the fundamental criteria of an ethic of care. Although Noddings doubts that it is possible to "formulate an action criterion for caring", it seems possible to single out the psychological attitudes which are implied by the activity of care (1984, p. 11)⁶. Thus, Lynn Beck (1992) identifies several characteristics of care in the context of her reflection on education. She views caring as "a critical component of human interaction" and adds that it can "be understood as a process that involves certain general, but definite and identifiable, activities" (p. 455, 462). The set of maxims seems to fit the goals of caring she identifies: first, "promoting human development"; second, "responding to needs" (p. 456-459).

Furthermore, the set of maxims could be regarded as embodying the four dimensions of the activities of caring she singles out, drawing from Noddings' considerations. The first consists in "receiving the other's perspective", which "involves openness and a willingness to accept another's reality uncritically", i.e., "an attitude of openness and receptivity" (Beck, 1992, p. 462, 464). The second dimension means "responding", i.e., be willing to act "on behalf of the one cared for", "to assume responsibility for another" (p. 464). The third dimension is "remaining", i.e., a form of perseverance in the attentiveness to the other: "Caring does, however, involve commitment, a commitment that is stronger than the desire to run" (p. 467). Always referring to Noddings, Beck argues that the sort of devotion implied by caring "means not constant attention but constant willingness to give attention if the

⁵ Or, as André Gorz puts it, an "unconditional desire to help the other" (1988, p. 231). A client advisor expresses that straight out: "Quite apart from the banking activity, I will put my knowledge at the client's disposal, in a purely gratuitous way" (#3).

⁶ Tronto remarks that the ethic of care "is best expressed not as a set of principles but as an activity, the 'activity of care'" (1987, p. 648).

situation of the cared for demands it” (p. 467). Moreover, defining caring implies that some relational features have been identified. Interdependence is one of them, along with the conceptual link between community and caring--which is in line with the context of the set of maxims, as it is the normative outcome of the functioning of the co-operative community. Finally this relates at last to reciprocity, another condition to caring⁷.

In considering the interviewees’ comments, it seems that these conditions--receptivity, effective responding, perseverance, sense of membership and reciprocity--are satisfied by the set of maxims. But their comments offer no guarantee that they genuinely adopt those attitudes in the context of client relationships--which refers us back to the first point.

The third point regarding the theorization of the set of maxims through care ethics consists in ensuring that all the relevant features of this set can be placed under the banner of this normative framework. Two problems arise here. First, the set of maxims seems incompatible with an ethic of care because such an ethic might not be expressed in terms of rules, as Noddings says: “If I behave consistently and automatically by rule, I cannot be said to care” (1984, p. 51). One possible reply is that the interviewees’ descriptions of their relations with clients within an institution implied the use of a normative language which did not mean their formal submission to a system of rules. Second, some maxims, typically the maxim of equal consideration, refer to an ethic based on rules, and the entire set might well be conceptualized in Kantian deontology--the maxim of care being then possibly highlighted by the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties.

2.3. The case for a pluralist approach

It thus seems appropriate to suggest that the set of maxims may be interpreted by a plurality of ethical theories, for example an ethic of care, as discussed previously; a deontological ethics, centered on rules and having a universalist dimension; a form of virtue ethics, which would insist on the development of those virtues necessary to the practice of care; a contractarian ethics, based on the idea that the set of maxims would be this set of principles to which the membership, the institution and its employees would agree--as it promotes the idea of contract, this interpretation would fit the spirit of co-operation; or a version of utilitarianism, which could interpret the set of maxims in terms of overall consequences and benevolence.

How to decide among these different theoretical frameworks? A quite plausible answer consists in referring to moral pluralism. What is in question here is not a kind of minimal pluralism, which would appeal for example to a mixture of care ethics and deontological ethics, as these normative theories correspond to two ways of assessing and dealing with moral situations⁸, but a pluralism based on the argument that the set of maxims exhibits

⁷ Noddings defines caring as a relation between a one-caring (the one who cares for) and a cared-for (the recipient of caring). She proposes a “logical analysis of the caring relation” in which appears the “necessary” contribution of the cared-for to the relation: “(W, X) is a caring relation if and only if i) W cares for X ... and ii) X recognizes that W cares for X” (1984, p. 69).

⁸ Cheshire Calhoun (1988, p. 451) refers to the “gestalt shift” stressed by Gilligan (1987), who considered that both moral orientations were incompatible: “She claims that the ethics of justice and the ethics of care are two different moral orientations. Whereas individuals may use both orientations, the shift from one to the other requires a Gestalt shift, since ‘the terms of one perspective do not contain the terms of the other’ (ibid., p. 30)”. In the case at hand, the maxim of care supposes not only

different “distinct morally relevant factors”, as Shelly Kagan (1992) says (p. 224). She remarks that one typical activity of normative ethics consists in selecting the relevant types of elements or “factors” which allow to determine the rightness or wrongness of an act. Thus, any normative theory, stemming from an “evaluative focal point” (e.g., a rule, an act, or a virtue), has the task to select one type of moral factors which are genuinely relevant in this respect.

In the case at hand, it is possible to appeal to her argument. This simply results from the content of the maxims and the lack of a definite hierarchy between them. Moreover, each maxim could be assigned to one of the four classes of factors she proposes: overall goodness of results; general constraints, i.e., general rules such as “Do not harm”; special obligations, as those which arise within the family; and “agent-relative permissions”, which correspond to the case where an act is permitted but not required as it supposes that the agent sacrifices one’s own good. Even though she discusses the relations between this factoral level and a more foundational level, it is possible to link each maxim, considered as a “morally relevant factor”, with at least a class of moral theories⁹. This leaves us with a plurality of moral theories which raises epistemological questions concerning, as Kagan states, the fact that “the task of articulation of the normatively relevant factors is an astonishingly complex one” (p. 224). But the practical question of the intelligibility of the set of maxims supposes to account for its coherence as a whole, with an unifying purpose--which makes moral pluralism rather unproductive.

I will suggest another and more fruitful way to take up the problem relative to the theorization of the set of maxims. It is based on the distinction between two different conceptions of practical reason: particularism and generalism.

3. INSIGHTS FROM THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN PARTICULARISM AND GENERALISM

Particularists reject the idea that rules should be necessarily universalizable to have a moral character. According to them, the meaning of moral concepts, and of the action itself, is narrowly dependent on one’s perception of situation. By contrast, generalists consider that the link between general principles or rules and one’s action is rather direct. Indeed, both perspectives can be viewed as referring to two ways of thinking about the determinants of action. As Joseph Raz (1999) puts it, “we tend towards a generalist view when we feel that at least sometimes we are guided by general precepts and are inclined to believe that it is always possible to be so guided”, but sometimes we do some action because we “know (or believe [we] know) that that is what should be done in the circumstances” (p. 218).

a caring attitude, but also a detached attitude, and this is parallel to the Noddings’ remark that caring “may gradually or abruptly be transformed into an abstract problem solving” (1984, p. 25). Indeed, the issue raised by the present research concerns the ability of the client advisors to combine an “abstract” relationship (with respect to co-operative values) and a personal relationship (with respect to clients).

⁹ For example, the maxim of care could be the relevant factor according to an ethics of care or to the needs-centered ethical theory proposed by Gillian Brock and Soran Reader (2002). These authors emphasize a moral obligation based on needs, which refers to the “general constraint” type, and describe the “relevant moral factor” which yield an “obligation to help a person in need” (2002, p. 433).

Even though she criticizes the particularist view, Onora O'Neill (1996) gives an account which fits with the theoretical questions raised by the set of maxims. She insists that it is necessary to describe any action using thick, contextual, non abstract concepts. Now the set of maxims seems to possess such particularist features. This is especially the case of the maxim of care. It is an indeterminate rule of action, the function of which being to both listen to clients and trigger a deliberation on the best way to meet their needs. In fact, the whole set of maxims is centered on particulars (*this* client's genuine needs, good will, capacity of autonomy, sense of membership). Its role is coherent with what Jeffrey Blustein notes about that sort of rule: "It is because a rule is uncodified and relatively indeterminate that people who seek to adhere to it are forced to reflect on its basic purpose and to better understand its underlying rationale" (p. 479-480). The maxim of care also emphasizes the importance of the advisor's perception--what Blum (1991) calls a "detailed understanding" of the situation (p. 721). But on the other hand, the maxims *are* general rules, and terms used by interviewees to describe their content have the general (even universal, regarding for example the maxim of equal consideration) dimension which corresponds *prima facie* to the generalist view.

Another comment of O'Neill illustrates the dual aspect which is typical of the set of maxims. It concerns the distinction between two sorts of judgments: appreciative and productive. The appreciative judgment, which stems from perception, is not sufficient to produce practical effects, except in cases where it falls under a description which unambiguously indicates what should be done in the situation. It must be supplemented by a deliberative process in which particulars are confronted with general elements such as principles and rules. The following comment of a client advisor relative to clients having excessive debt illustrates this dual dimension:

We enjoy having been able to help them to solve their problem and not to...
Because in such cases, it's easy, you know: We might well say "No !", and it would be settled... (Other bankers) wouldn't even make an appointment with them: "Overindebted clients who attempt to make an appointment for a loan, it doesn't make sense"--whereas *we* do assume that each person is different, and *we* adapt ourselves to the situation. (#19)

This excerpt includes an implicit negative requirement, "Do not be insensitive", which refers to an attitude that is deeply context-sensitive, but the last sentence lays emphasis on the importance of perception of particulars as a *principle* in client relationships. This tends to support the idea that the set of maxims is both intelligible within a generalist and a particularist perspective.

Another support to such a mixed interpretation of the set lies in the fact that maxims do have an "invariant reason-giving force", as Margaret Little (2001) says--which means that their normative force is not likely to change significantly from one context to another (p. 34). According to her version of particularism, she proposes that general statements should be understood as generalizations "for the most part", in the sense that they can admit of exceptions and that they can explain action (p. 36-37). But if the present set of maxims is likely to explain the actions of client advisors, it is rather *without exception*: every client advisor *should* apply the maxims. Thus it is not fully particularist in the Little's sense.

Here I propose another argument which speaks in favor of a slightly different interpretation of the set of maxims. It is related to the generalist-particularist distinction, although it does not exactly correspond to it. Indeed, a striking duality regarding the set is both its openness and its individual appropriation by employees in the context of stereotyped relationships. This is reflected in the interviewees' appeal to two sublanguages when describing their practices. The first is the sublanguage of the institutional sphere, in which interviewed employees represent themselves as, e.g., "client advisor" or "branch manager". It can be viewed as representing, in a rather specific way, the generalist side. The maxims of equal consideration and respect for client's needs fit particularly with this category of language.

The second sublanguage refers to the familial sphere. It somewhat corresponds to the particularist side. Maxims of care, search for the client's autonomy and the golden rule can be subsumed under this category. But how do interviewed employees conceive of themselves in this peculiar sphere? On one hand, they may regard themselves as some kinds of exemplars, i.e., representatives of a certain tradition, committed to defending the cause of the co-operative community. But this raises the question of the type of role they play within the familial sphere. For here, being an exemplar looks like playing the role of the *father*, and this role must precisely not be played simply because it would lead to paternalism. Logically, the phrase "No insensitivity, no paternalism"--which is, so to speak, the negative counterpart of the set of maxims and can be interpreted, using the particularist-generalist distinction, as "Not too general, not too particular"--is not a contradictory injunction, but with respect to roles it is rather disorienting. Does it mean for instance that client advisors are like *brothers* within the co-operative community? This is not what the corpus reveals, for it contains no occurrence of this word, neither of "fraternity". Anyway it is doubtful that advisors and clients, who are strangers, may have brotherly relations.

On my view, the central question raised by interviewees concerns the possibility to make their professional and family roles congruent. A branch manager says: "We are employed by the Crédit Mutuel in order to fulfil a commercial function, we are not here to proselytize... No confusion of roles! Everyone must keep in one's proper place" (#1). But what is exactly this "proper place"? It supposes the search for a balance which appears to be rather subtle. Sometimes, interviewed advisors stress their role within a family, recalling the former bank's motto as "the bank of the family", acting in some cases as friends, guardians or quasi-fathers, favorably comparing themselves with non-co-operative banks' advisors, strongly rejecting any description of their role as mere salespersons. Sometimes, they dismiss paternalism, stressing the stimulating dimension of sales promotion, arguing that "we can do business while perpetuating what we are" (branch manager #11). In the context of client relationships, these oppositions correspond arguably to mental oscillations between two attitudes, which are meaningfully suggested by the occurrence of numerous concessive statements within the corpus, such as: "A bank is a commercial enterprise, but apart from that, we nevertheless try to keep the values of mutual aid" (#2)¹⁰. The advisors' "proper place" is both the object and the result of these oscillations, and it is not possible to examine the complex relationship between the particular and the general without referring to them.

¹⁰ The corpus contains 311 sentences of this form, i.e., comprising only the French adverbial phrase "quand même" (i.e., nevertheless, still). They were stated by 27 interviewees out of 28.

CONCLUSION

I shall conclude with two remarks implied by the last developments. They correspond to what are, on my view, the important questions raised by the results of the field study, namely the institutional intentional vagueness relative to realization of values and the family dimension of client relationships. These questions could guide future empirical work.

The first remark concerns the vagueness in the promotion of co-operative values within the institution. It should be observed that oscillations between the two poles, which have been evoked previously, can occur only if advisors are free enough to find out a solution to their clients' needs. This is where the institution comes into play. Indeed, if the integration of professional and family roles has really a central place in the context of client relationships, then it provides the credit union's management a means to shape advisors' practices. Conclusions of the field study suggest that the credit union's management voluntarily and purposefully maintains an ambiguity, a "vagueness" with respect to the way family roles can be fulfilled in practice. This is a paradox, as this vagueness amounts to a disengagement from the figure of the father, while at the same time the institution does play the role of the father as it requires the pursuit of economic objectives.

The second conclusive remark suggests a reference to the American pragmatism with respect to the theorization of the set of maxims. Indeed, in the case at hand, a moral normative framework should solve the following puzzle, which is related to the previous remark: (i) as members of a "family", advisors are narrowly concerned with their clients' particularities and welfare; (ii) in order to preserve their clients' autonomy, they cannot act as "fathers"; (iii) but they cannot dismiss the figure of the father, as it is associated with both the co-operative tradition and their own institution. It is difficult to draw a clear conclusion from this puzzle. Perhaps, when referring to the family spirit that inspires their practices, do advisors regret the old times when the credit union really functioned as a quasi-family, or react defensively against the allegedly aggressive spirit of some of their competitors, or even aspire to be like brothers within a true community. But it seems difficult to avoid the paradoxical conclusion that the advisors' family role is both central and indeterminate, that advisors may have to set this family role again in every context.

In the field of business ethics, Buchholz and Rosenthal (1996, 2005) defend the thesis that American pragmatism could provide a foundation to moral reasoning and action which would be both coherent and pluralistic. On their view, this theoretical perspective replaces, so to speak, the appeal to a plurality of moral approaches because it "is itself inherently pluralistic" and proposes "an intertwined understanding of self, community and values in a way which brings out the inextricably dynamic interrelation of these components" (1996, p. 266). Later, they argue that although feminist theory--which is strongly related to care ethics--is relational and contextual, "it has not systematically developed conceptual framework for undergirding its own insights" (2005, p. 142). At least theoretically, their arguments could then support the claim that a pragmatic view would account for the set of maxims--in this respect, this view would overcome the failure of care ethics emphasized in the second part.

However, their view lacks the intriguing reference to family roles which has been revealed by the field study. But for the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1989), this dimension belongs to the roots of American pragmatism. He thus relates this philosophical perspective

to the figures of the father and the brother. He evokes the rejection of the former and the promotion of the latter, through a “community of brothers” which should represent, according to pragmatism, the whole human society. This community should replace the hierarchical structure dominated by the almighty paternalistic father’s image. Moreover, Deleuze insists that pragmatism fights both against individual particularities, which lead to people’s divisions and conflicts, and against the universal, which corresponds to the father’s picture. On my view, these observations are only suggestive, because empirical evidence gathered through the present field study is not sufficient and precise enough to be confronted with the American pragmatist framework. However, future empirical research on norms of conduct in co-operative banking could draw on these considerations in order to confirm the set of maxims, assess the importance of the family dimension in advisor-client relationships, and understand its connection with the institutional intentional vagueness in the realization of co-operative values.

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