

Security as Ethics

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Ethics is back in vogue.

Today we talk about corporate ethics, legal ethics, medical ethics, ecological ethics, bio-ethics and ethics in science. We have ethics in business, in health care, in religion, and in technological development, to name just a few examples. Ethics is everywhere, and the expectation that 'ethics' has our back whenever we do something – publicly or privately – is profound. We can even talk about the ethics of ethics: it has become ethically necessary to consider ethics!

But, the troublesome question is: If ethics is back, when did it leave? And where did it go? Where did 'ethics' hide during this time? When did 'ethics' appear in the beginning? What forced it to retreat, and what is it that has liberated it now? What has forced it back into the limelight?

The Rise of Insecurity

In the last 20 years, conceptions and expressions of security have exploded and the apparent need for multitudinous articulations of security has increased. We have financial security, IT security, food security, airport security, human security, societal security, energy security, health security, legal security and home security, along with the traditional understanding of security – national security. What is really the cause for this tremendous variation? To answer this question, we first turn to the multifaceted character of the concept of security as it is construed today.

(1) *The Industrialization of Security.* Security has become a product that can be bought and sold, ordered and delivered. Security guards replace the police; security consultants give all kinds of advice in the field; mercenaries replace national armies in

certain contexts. The world can be divided into security users and security suppliers. And, in many situations, the supplier of security also behaves as another's. Security-as-product operates across borders, communities, states, organizations, loyalties and interests.

But, most importantly, increasingly sophisticated technological solutions are being applied to the new faces of security. This has several consequences that we will get to later, but the economic aspect should perhaps be highlighted here: technology and technical solutions to security issues are portable, transportable. They have no necessary, organic or implicit relationship to the problems they solve. They are moveable and expendable.

Security has become a purely technical challenge, not a human challenge. People are increasingly moving *out* of the picture. Scientific research tools are utilized to develop better, more precise, more comprehensive and increasingly invisible solutions to manage the security problem. The human, ironically, is often seen as secondary to the objective and implication of security.

(2) *The Product Differentiation of Security.* We can simultaneously observe that the natural result of this kind of industrialization is product differentiation. This follows from the logic of capitalism. Just take a Norwegian child to the cereal aisle of an American supermarket and you will experience the power of this process. Demand does not increase in accordance with needs, but in accordance with supply. The more security becomes an object of the market economy – a product – the more naturally differentiated it becomes, the more divided, adapted to the consumer or user, individualized, commoditised, etc.

(3) *The Globalization of Security*. Furthermore, security has become globalized. Security, which has traditionally been tied to geopolitical boundaries, will eventually disengage from territory and the planet itself. Security and insecurity have become extra-terrestrial phenomena, detached from concrete things and concrete threats. Threat will become increasingly diffuse, ambiguous and unclear. This development also marks the emergence of *risk* as a central factor in the evaluation of the security concept.

(4) *The Production of Insecurity*. The different elements shaping the development of security lead to a strange and uncomfortable effect: the production of insecurity. In other words, insecurity grows proportionately with the accelerated consideration of, and response to, security. Fighting various forms of threat most often leads to solutions that remove people and the individual from the picture. We build walls, construct fences, design detection systems, etc. These types of measures have many functions, and they prevent danger to some degree. But, they also have the effect of diminishing trust – trust in others, trust in society, trust in oneself. Less trust generates less security, or more insecurity, something that defeats the purpose of the desired effect.

Security and Ethics

Security and ethics have both re-emerged, more intensified, in the last few years. Upon further reflection, though, ethics and security also share other unlikely similarities.

First, they are both uncontroversial. Who takes a stance *against* ethics? Who wants to write a book about being unethical, or hire an expert to ensure *unethical* attitudes and actions at work? By the same token, who does not want security, or does not want security for others? Who wants to live with insecurity? It is, in short, difficult to argue against ethics and security.

Second, both ethics and security are quite particular considerations in terms of what it means to be a human being. For instance, can we simply wrap ourselves in an ethical mantle? We may be able to discuss whether we make good or bad ethical decisions. But, can we really avoid these questions? Can we wish away insecurity because we don't want to deal with it?

No. Both ethics and security (and insecurity) belong, to some degree, to the most human aspect of the individual. A tentative conclusion is that both ethics and security are inherently human features.

One could even say that they form the basis of humanity. We would in some sense not be human without ethics and without a sense of insecurity.

To understand this better, let us take a closer look at the unique historical background of the security concept.

National Security

It feels like security has always been around, but, in fact, security as a concept is relatively young. More specifically, security has carried very different connotations until recently. And, in the course of the last century, the concept began to transform dramatically. What is the reason for this?

First, some comments on the historical background. While today's security conception is inherited from the field of international relations, as part of the broader political science discipline, security as such was, oddly enough, never used in connection with international relations issues, or at all in the political realm, before the 20th century. As late as 1940, the interest in (and concern for) security was practically non-existent compared with the dominating role security has later received. The turning point in this development was the end of World War II and the Cold War, and the elevated status of security with *national security*.

The Evolution of Security

But, if we attempt to track the development of the security concept even further back in time, we will discover quite an unexpected narrative. In the old days, the conception of security was primarily bound to the spirit and spirituality. In fact, it was a theological concept. Security was perceived as a disposition, a worldview, and a spiritual state in both psychological and moral respects. The Greek word *ataraxie* – peace of mind – was used to describe the state of security.

Interestingly, this expression had a negative connotation. *Security* signified a lack of emotional or spiritual problems, interpreted as lack of concern. If we differentiate between subjective security and objective security, the subjective interpretation clearly predominates. This stands in stark contrast to today's understanding, in which objective security – security from objective, factual, real and observed threats – is prioritized. In addition, the social dimension, which makes it possible to talk about collective security, was excluded from the security issue. Security was a personal issue, one that had nothing to do with the state, society or any other groups.

When the time came for the transition from Ancient Greek to Latin, *antaraxie* was translated as *securitas*. The connotation shifted closer to the way we understand safety today – stability, strength, sturdiness, etc. In other words, the Roman version of security had more of an objective character. The concern for and consideration of security could now be shared by many individuals, thereby creating the foundation for a collective understanding, collective approach and collective action. Still, the conception of security remained to a large extent morally and psychologically based, and thus subjective. If one is secure, one is without concern or reflection, and thus without self-awareness and likely in harm's way – especially with respect to celestial powers. In this regard, the red thread of morality has remained until today – something to which we will return below.

This historical foundation brings us to quite a bizarre union of *morality* and *safety*, something quite different from what we will get to in a moment. So, if one finds oneself in a *secure* state, according to this interpretation, then one is without concerns, without grief, without reflection. In other words, without care, without self-awareness, vigilance, respect for oneself and for others.

To be in *securitas* means to be without doubt, without thought, first and foremost convinced of God's existence – a kind of arrogant attitude toward others and toward life. Faith is not questioned by those who have *securitas*. Thus, all the ethical dimensions we often associate with Christianity disappear. Everything that is associated with doubt or frustration vanishes. Everything is interpreted as safe, clear, predictable and easily understood. This implies that one is automatically protected from anything that could possibly be a threat.

In this historical account, we have not quite reached the point at which security and politics meet. And we are far from the point where *securitas* actually becomes the name of a large Norwegian security company.

How do we find a way out of this conceptual interpretation of security both as protection and as representation of absolute certainty? Well, during the Middle Ages these two interpretations went their separate ways. The idea of *certitudo* (certitude) facilitated the conceptual separation of a more knowledge-oriented branch of security thought from the notion of *securitas*. The Latin term *certitudo* means security in knowledge, in thought, in persuasion. *Securitas* remained an idea of security as

an individual. This junction made it possible for the modern conception of security to develop.

More important for us is the idea that security became liberated from the subjective aspect of threat, danger and risk, from the moral dimension of security, the relationship to God, to the cosmos, to other individuals. Security became objectified. When persuasion based on knowledge (*certitudo*) left security (*securitas*) to become its own moral category, security was left to the material world. At this point, it no longer becomes necessary to resort to individual interpretations in order to evaluate threats to security. Security is merely an objective thought, a thought about the dangers out there – not in here.

The consequence of the next historical period – the feudal period – was that this interpretation could easily be translated into an economic system of goods and services. Security could now be bought and sold. The function of the feudal prince was, in some ways, to offer security to those who could pay for it. Thus, the first state-centric conceptualization of an economic system was constructed as a system of defence. On this basis, can we then say that Norway has returned to the feudal period, with private security guards (with company names like 'Securitas') offering a multitude of security services? There is a convincing argument within the history of political thought that the state developed its dominant status precisely because of its efficiency at organizing security services.

The Cold War

The Cold War transformed the security concept overnight. From the 1940s and through the 1970s, the term 'security' was understood in very narrow terms. First of all, the nuclear threat gave the term primarily nuclear content. All other imaginable threats were overshadowed by the nuclear threat that formed the basis of the delicate geopolitical balance. Second, it was made clear that security was *national* in its scale and scope, and that minor (and also major) security questions did not carry the same weight as those directed toward the two superpowers. Before World War II, the term 'national security' was virtually unknown.

When US President Harry S. Truman signed the USA's National Security Act in 1947, this suddenly changed. As a result of the powerful influence of Cold War ideology, the security concept was overtaken by the notion of *national security*. And, this interpretation was forced upon the entire world for 40 years. The recognition of a real or imaginary threat against the nation-state during the Cold War

contributed to the renaissance of the security concept. Security as a condition without threat, general protection against potential danger, stood in opposition to the notion of *defence*, which represented a strategy with the objective of potential attack.

Objective and Subjective Danger

Thus, ethics is not a model of correct behaviour. On the contrary, ethics is about self-reflection. Ethics is the label for the recognition that we have choices, that we have opportunities. It is the insight that there are different ways of behaving. The acknowledgement that there is not just one path, but many, not one choice, but several, that all actions and decisions are haunted by the recognition that things could have been done differently – with the incredible responsibility this brings – that other consequences are possible, and that this diversity of outcome is a necessity, an unavoidable reality – *this* has a name. Its name is *insecurity*.

This may be better explained by mentioning a peculiar linguistic phenomenon: the prominent rise of the concept 'security', which I tentatively translate as 'safety' in order to differentiate it from the term 'security' and to make a point. What is the difference between safety and security? This difference exists in several European languages – as in the distinction between *securitas* and *certitudo* – highlighting the emphasis on the theological (*certitudo*), on the one hand, and the secular or scientific (*securitas*) on the other.

'Safety' has become the key word for describing threats of the most objective kind: at home, on the street, at work. It is our daily routines that are exposed to danger. Safe food, a safe working environment, safety in traffic, etc. 'Safety' implies the existence of an objective danger. Safety is protection against dangers that already exist, against known dangers, dangers that are observable, identifiable and comprehensible, but that have not yet hit us. Security, on the other hand, appeals to the individual experience, and partly to the *pathos* that underlies our relationship with the unknown. Security refers to a world of many possibilities. It is a reference to our general vulnerability and to the humanity that underlies this vulnerability. Insecurity does

not refer to a precise, defined threat. It does not refer to a certain danger out there, but to the fact that we *are exposed* to danger, that we know it, and that we only know approximately what kind of danger it is, not *when* it will hit and *how*.

In this respect, insecurity is more about *us* than about the uncertain danger out there. It is less about insecurity with the dangerous unknown than with ourselves and our exposure to an unknown dangerous object. Security is, in this sense, reflexive. It is a kind of relationship that one has with oneself. Philosophers would say that it is through insecurity that the individual is constituted. Insecurity is humanity itself – passion, emotion, sensitivity.

Thus, the answer to danger is control and predictability, law enforcement and regulation. What is the answer to insecurity? Ethics.

Conclusion: Individuals and Security

Security and insecurity are implicitly connected to the individual and to human values. Security is an expression of a certain philosophy of life. It expresses a certain perspective on life, of individual and collective anxieties and aspirations, of expectations about what to sacrifice and what is worth preserving. Security is also a reflection of what we are willing to sacrifice, of what we are willing to fight or even die for. In other words, security is a social, cultural and, finally, ethical concept.

Security is often associated with the material aspects of life because, in our time, these have a tendency to incorporate, if not replace, human values. But, such technical and material values should not be confused with life itself. Security does not involve only *things*. It involves people who value things and who need certain things as a means to survive.

Solid, thorough and effective security measures must therefore take into account the social and cultural forces that shape our understanding of what security and insecurity mean, what threatens the things we value most, and what should determine our response to crisis or catastrophe.

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