IDENTITY, OTHERNESS AND THEIR POSTMODERN ETHICAL DISCOURSE[†]

Silvia Mineva[∗]

University of Sofia 'St. Kliment Ohridski', Faculty of Philosophy, 15 Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd., 1504 Sofia, Bulgaria

Abstract

The paper covers the provoking topic of 'Identity and Otherness', providing some original insight to the interesting modern aspect on Ethical problems. The denial of typical modern approaches to framing moral problems is only one part or aspect of postmodern ethical research. Another, similar, aspect is the demand for them to be considered and discussed in a new way. The 'new way' means outlining new focal points, such as the proposal that the ethical debate on human society, science, progress and new technologies should be compatible with variety, multidimensional characteristics, temporal and local circumstances. The conclusion is that it is less important to produce arguments in favour of the right of everyone to equal respect and highlight the fact that everybody, no matter what particular differences they display, has one, several or a complex of qualities which are universally recognized as valuable, than it is to focus on the fact that most of the visible differences between human beings are conventional, rather than natural, in nature.

1. Introduction

In the dynamic contemporary world of globalization, deregulation and mass communications whose primary dimension is mobility, there are fewer and fewer reasons to stay in a given place, and 'who are we?' and 'where do we come from?' are ever more actual and exigent questions. It is certainly not by chance that these same questions prove meaningful in the context of those modern ethical conceptions, often defined as 'postmodern' because of their aspiration to demonstrate thinking which goes beyond the idea of modernity, which are based on the rejection of a 'uniform' interpretation of the world. There can be no doubt that, given the condition of incessant discussion relating to what 'postmodern' is and who 'postmodernists' are, any discussion of

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[∗] e-mail: silvia_mineva@abv.bg

'postmodern ethical conceptions' will require a preliminary definition of what I myself mean by the term; after all, various definitions for the postmodern now exist which give the impression that postmodernism is related to radical nihilism, total destruction, or the denial of everything created and achieved by modern science and society. Such an impression would imply judgments which condemn 'postmodernity' as a naïve and even untrue notion, since it could signify only an aspiration/pretension to compete with modernity, the coming of the age of the *après devoir* and the death of the ethical at the hands of the aesthetic.

The real target of these judgments, however, seems not to be the term postmodernity, but a type of critical analysis associated with it; a mode of analysis which points the finger at the increasing individualism and hedonism of contemporary liberal societies as the main culprit behind their inability to consistently defend a moral ideal and insistence on categorically rejecting the idea that some ways of life can be superior to others. Critics identify the generalization of tolerance as a direct manifestation of this inability, which is a result of these societies attempting to reduce inequality and recognize the right of the individual to a universal equality of opportunity. Such a 'generalization' also entails the relativization of value: if every life model is equally important, then all are equally worthless.

2. Responsibility and freedom

In a discussion of the mechanisms of this relativization, Charles Taylor defines the modern move away from the moral imperative to develop and consolidate common values through political coexistence and towards the imperative to develop and consolidate a mode of life centred around self, personal truth and integrity in what is a 'slide into subjectivism' or 'subjectivization' [1]. According to Taylor, things are focused on 'the self' as a result, or on the subject that represents or could represent every 'self'; in the past, the 'centre' was an external reality. These very 'things' prove to be identity, once defined mainly in terms of social status but today labelled 'personal', as far as this is intrinsic, original, and recognized as such, which requires interaction. This is rendered highly problematic, since this requires dialogue with others, and attempts at interaction of this sort can fail.

I find Taylor's stance interesting, though not because he acknowledges the presence of something 'controversial and self-destructive' in the culture of tolerance; given the aforementioned categorical rejection of the idea that some forms of life can be superior to others, this is a commonplace. Rather, his position is primarily of interest for the conclusions that can be drawn from it which are of direct relevance to the question of contemporary society and the ethical horizons of culture. His conclusions thus claim that the beginnings of an 'age of responsibilization' are to be found in our modern, subject-centred freedom and autonomy, and that these give rise to an unprecedented expansion in freedom. According to Taylor, this expansion finds expression in people

choosing to degenerate by displaying a preference for more egoistical forms of authenticity such as hedonism, anthropocentrism and social atomism, or to raise their level by electing superior forms of freedom such as social action, political changes and solidarity.

Obviously, this raises the issue of the correlation between responsibility and freedom, which was not formerly present and/or possible because of the specifically modern status of freedom. This status allows freedom to be conceived of today as a question of responsibility as well as an abstract right, independence and the absence of limitations; in short, as the freedom to be responsible. Which means we now have a new, typically postmodern understanding of freedom at our disposal: the understanding that freedom should refer not only to the rights we enjoy as individuals and citizens in a purely legal and political sense, but also to the human sense of responsibility as ability, which is "the most personal and inalienable of human abilities, and the most valuable of human rights", because "it cannot be removed, shared, conceded or deposed in the name of tranquillity" [2].

As a matter of fact, many commentators have put the question of what it means to be responsible. For some, it is merely a question of education; for others, it is a duty or personal interest. In the postmodern ethical discourse, however, responsibility is mainly a synonym for the human attitude in the sense of human, moral interrelation and a reference to the Other: to Otherness. So this discourse leaves the anthropocentric tradition behind, whereby the explanation of responsibility and morality is totally subject to the idea that only the autonomous, cognizant and rational subject is the aim, and everything else is a means to achieving, or obstacle preventing the achievement of, this aim. In contrast, analysts of the ethical situation such as Emmanuel Levinas and Zygmunt Bauman pronounce that care for the Other in his Otherness is the essence of responsibility. In so doing, they also read in the fundamental moral imperative whose neglect equates to self-denial and the self-destruction of morality, and thereby of ethics as a philosophy of dialogue.

As far as thus defined responsibility can be - and is - of real interest and a subject for discussion in a 'postmodern ethical discourse', this discourse cannot be reduced to the afore-mentioned ideas relating to the death of the ethical and its replacement by the aesthetic. Actually, these are perhaps some of the inevitable logical consequences of so-called 'deconstructivist' theories which focus on the 'constructive creative nature of our expressive languages', or on more radical forms of 'opposition to social rules, and even to what we acknowledge as moral'. No matter how symptomatic they may be for the contemporary condition of morality, however, these consequences, and the current hegemony of aesthetic communities described by Z. Bauman, confirm in their turn that the present time, like previous eras, has specific ethical themes and problems of its own. Undoubtedly, these are all provoked by contexts and situations, and emerge as a result of different social, cultural, technical and technological innovations in the modern way of life. The fact that new problems have now been added to the old means only one thing: that our world has

become multidimensional and more difficult to understand, and that our life is now more fragmented and more difficult to control in a typical way. Therefore, in its full sense, the term 'postmodernity' could hardly be regarded as identical with the sense of deconstruction with respect to the deconstructive and nihilistic dispositions towards modernity and modern achievements. Looked at in this way, renouncing destructivism and nihilism is not the same as renouncing postmodernism as a style and mode of defining and discussing ethical questions and moral problems.

3. A new way in the ethical discourse

It would certainly be naïve to expect any existing ethical discourse, the postmodern included, to be capable of rendering the world one-dimensional and hence more easily understandable, and life more monolithic and hence more easily controlled. No ethics can do that, whatever their authors may claim, which does not imply declaring the death of the ethical. The task of Ethics, and of postmodern ethical discourse in particular, is not to make the complicated simple and the inexplicable explicable; it is to investigate whether the complexity of the world and the fragmentation of life makes us more sensitive to humaneness or more insensitive. In this sense, 'postmodern ethical discourse' suggests not only conceptions and concrete ideas, but also a characteristic spiritual and mental motion. Its distinctiveness lies in its orientation towards revealing and imbuing with new meaning - and, sometimes, even reformulating - traditional ethical categories such as responsibility, freedom and moral choice in the context of the perspectives outlining modern social, political and cultural realities. Possible reasons for identifying the beginning of a singular neoclassicism which emerged on the eve of the 21st century in postmodern ethical thought should be sought in much this same direction.

Another issue is how 'modernity will go down in history'; only time will tell if it will be judged 'a decline or a revival in morality'. For now, however, it would be too dogmatic and exaggerated to define the postmodern desubstantialization of Ethics, and postmodernism's critical stance towards modern metaphysics and rationalism, as just an extreme form of nihilism and destructivism instead of 'identifying it as its own metaphysical project of the Postmodern'. Actually, as Bauman points out, the denial of typical modern approaches to framing moral problems is only one part or aspect of postmodern ethical research. Another, similar, aspect is the demand for them to be considered and discussed in a new way.

'In a new way' means outlining new focal points, such as the proposal that the ethical debate on human society, science, progress and new technologies should be compatible with variety, multidimensional characteristics, temporal and local circumstances. A similar debate, as H. Kung proposes, raises the question of the possibility and necessity of a 'world ethos' [3]. This debate lies at the root of the heuristic function of fear under the conditions of a 'world risk society', rediscovered by H. Jonas and studied in its

'world dimensions' by Ulrich Beck, who coined the term 'risk society'. Francis Fukuyama's prognosis that humanity could be on the threshold of 'a post-human future' in which technologies will allow humanity to change gradually over time can relate to this debate. It is no accident - indeed, it is far from strange - that the future of society, nature and the world should have proved such a fascinating subject to these analysts; after all, no other theme is so closely related to the discussion on the 'horizons where things become significant'. But it is their concern for the destiny of the human as humanity - or of that innate compassion which Bergson insists would survive in a person who possessed it, even if there was nobody else alive in the world - that renders the thematization of the future ethical.

E. Levinas' 'linguistics of the ethical' [4] is dedicated to the human as humaneness, and assumes that Otherness is not simply the opposite of the Self or the symmetric of You, but their transcendence, because the Other is the one whom we may not understand, but whom we cannot help meeting. It is about transcendence, which is neither metaphysical nor religious but ontological, because it can manifest itself through the concept of the end and of death, but cannot be objectified, thematized or recognized. The attempt to name and acknowledge this transcendence can be traced in Lyotard's view [5] that postmodern knowledge intensifies our sensibility to differences and increases our ability to sustain the incommensurable. In the quality of such knowledge, the postmodern ethical discourse is situated in that branch of human knowledge where the need - and opportunity - to rethink the modern discussion of the human and blur the variety of real human beings and the uniqueness of their ethical situation is a real problem.

Talking about the variety of human beings actually means asking ourselves about identity and identities. And answering these questions means outlining characteristic modes of constructing and deconstructing personal and collective identities. People defining themselves according to their social positions and the social roles they play is one of the most popular responses. A viewpoint of this sort allows the sources of different identities to be analyzed as constructed, and therefore changeable as far as the roles and positions themselves can be changed in modern times.

On the other hand, the concept of the constructability and changeability of identity is a source of anxiety: as Judith Butler has pointed out, if someone is a woman or a man, this certainly is not everything this individual is, because a range of cultural, social and political intersections are focused in the identity of any particular person [6]. In other words, questions about the domination of one or other dimension of identity actually relate to its relativity and commensurability, and to the possibility of its total relativization.

Here, I mean that relativization which is a consequence of the two most characteristic dimensions of the present time: On one hand, there is the popular viewpoint that nobody should contest others' values, because they are their choice and this has to be respected. Then there is the similar fact presented by technological progress and the opportunity this provides for transforming

human nature to the extent at which we would enter that stage of history described by Fukuyama as 'posthuman' in which people may lose any concept of humanity: if human genes were crossed with those of another species, there would no longer be a clear idea of what a human being is. According to Fukuyama, the core question is how to react to biotechnologies which will come to combine great potential benefits with barely discernible mental or physical menaces [7].

The point is that people may lose the idea of what a human being is through technologies rather than biological transformation, but also because technological progress allows them to behave as utilitarian, self-serviced animals: as the theoretician of democracy, G. Satory, has pointed out, human thought becomes more and more utilitarian and consumer-based from generation to generation, and it is quite possible that mankind will ultimately be nothing more than an economic animal. In this case, the thorny issue of identity cannot be reduced to the rates of technological progress or to the subjectivisation which modern popular conceptions of identity affirm as flexible, self-constructing, etc. The issue may well actually concern both these factors, leading us in a direction different from the 'common humanity' of which Fukuyama talks, and to which the term 'ethos' points. It originates as a definition seeking to outline the framework of human existence and its specifics as a human way of life. One such specific is morality, understood primarily as compassion for the Other, the human and the Other respectively, the nature to their existence, condition and death respectively. And to be compassionate means mostly to be emotionally engaged and involved in that 'being to' that excludes indifference, and to which everything that happens in human life from birth to death, with all its ups and downs, owes to its co-existential character; becomes coexistence. An engagement of this sort - this 'being with' or coexistence, viewing coexistence etymologically - makes it ethically significant and differentiates it from a simple fact: its common availability means that it is not accidental, in contrast to the accidentality of every fact in a world in which, as Wittgenstein believes, things happen as they happen, meaning that the world is accidental [8]. But while this constitutes a limit to the world as a fact, from the point of view of our 'contact with mortals', as in every death someone happens to witness, death cannot be other than coexistence, because it suggests a particular experience, as Levinas puts it, "in which the sense is ethical from the beginning to the end" [4, p. 168]. Furthermore, with this co-existentiality of death, the entire human experience regarding it is exhausted, meaning "it is the most unknown among all the unknown things". It seems to me that the co-existentiality to which Levinas alludes when insisting that ethical behaviour and the human conscience in their entirety refer not only to "moving towards the Other when he is dying, but to responding to the mortality of the living with your presence" [4, p. 170].

Despite the different names that have been assigned to this behaviour – love, altruism, sympathy, compassion, mercy, solidarity – it has always been conceived everywhere as being existentially rooted in human life. This is because no one comes into the world alone; we are all born and live, in Ortega y Gasset's words [9], in a world 'composed of human beings' who are incessantly doing something: acts, but most of all talk. It is therefore much more relevant for an ethical discourse of identity that the moral world we constantly inhabit is the one in which we live and in which the crucial thing is the cognizance - rather than the issue of the internal or external constructability - of our identities. Indeed, Fukuyama suggests the same cognizance: when a hunter gatherer meets an Internet user, although they may resemble different species in many respects, a sparkle of recognition will flare between them every time [7, p. 174]. This recognition is possible, because from the first moment of his life, everyone sees himself and everything around him through the world of those amongst whom he has come into the world and lives, i.e. humanized. That is why a man is self-identifying and is able to be so not by being isolated from others, but by communicating with them; meaning that we are what we are because of our relations/dialogue with others. So human life is a shared life, and every identity is underlain with co-existence and the memory of this common experience. As H. Arent says, no human life, not even a hermit's, is possible without a world which testifies directly or indirectly to the presence of other human beings: everything we do, know or feel has meaning only if we are able to share it. In addition, the possibility of sharing is the key to the metaphor which represents Otherness, a metaphor we find in an old Zen saying which asks and appeals as it reminds us that "The net is to catch the fish; when the fish is caught, the net is forgotten. The words are to grasp the meaning; when the meaning is grasped, the words are forgotten. Where can I find a man who has forgotten the words, so I could talk to him?" In other words, the quest for meaning is pointless if it is not accompanied by my understanding of the Other and with the Other; without its Otherness words, meaning and understanding become useless. This is because Man is neither an understanding nor understandable, which is to say that his (figurative) 'human centre' is outside himself, in the double number of the community between two, which originates in the meeting of Me and You and which is the excluding multitude of 'we two together', and such is the primordial affection of one man for the other, which in Levinas' words is the reason that only few things are an object of such interest as interest in the Other [4, p.177].

No matter how self-identifying a man is or would like to be as an original, unique person, he cannot do so in solitude, without the participation of those with whom he shares the same moral - which is to say, human - world. But the human manner to treat the world, the objects and the Others which people have at their disposal as living among human beings is manifested, in Levinas' terms, as 'personal uniqueness' [4, p. 180]. This 'uniqueness' obviously lies in the unique way in which every particular person thinks, feels and communicates. It relates to the flesh and blood human who is born, suffers

and dies, and whom I can see and hear, not the abstract human who is neither from here, nor from there, who has no sex or native place, and is ultimately an idea: in other words, an unhuman. In this sense our communication with the Other is an interpersonal relationship, a relationship between a man and a man; of one individuality with another; of one person with another person. So the human relation is dual 'by origin'. It is as human, common and shared as it is strictly personal, original and unique. In any case, neither the personal nor the human exist completely independently and isolated from the Other. A further profound interpretation of morality would therefore suggest that more should be recognized in it than the ambition of people as social beings to take part in the social network. The moral is also the sphere in which we meet the Other face to face, in which we cannot look at him as he is an object, but only as a Person, as the unique other who is simultaneously a 'fellow man', thanks to his ability to react as an equal in the sphere of the possible reaction, i.e. to share with us the common human world. As I see it, a major prerequisite of any ethical discourse on identity is that it should contrast with scientific and technological progress; to the extent that we can talk of it, moral progress is more the result of the inclusion of individuals who have been excluded in the past under the old principles than of the discovery or invention of new principles (as in science and technology). This inclusion is noted by analysts, who insist that we can only have a vital idea of human dignity, in the full sense of the notion of 'human rights', when the latter are justified in the real world of politics. Others argue that simple difference itself cannot explain the equivalence of various identities, meaning we should have a number of value standards at our disposal, according to which people would be recognized as equal not because they are different, but because, despite their difference, they possess precious qualities including the ability to think, love and remember. According to others, the challenge we now face as citizens of the world is to build a society which respects and recognizes difference while simultaneously understanding and emphasizing universal features [10].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would say that it is less important that we produce arguments in favour of the right of everyone to equal respect and highlight the fact that everybody, no matter what particular differences they display, has one, several or a complex of qualities which are universally recognized as valuable, than it is to focus on the fact that most of the visible differences between human beings are conventional, rather than natural, in nature. And the most important thing is that every attempt to find the meaning of, including of the identity, always includes that ethical behaviour, which implies that when you meet the Other, you ought to move towards him, to reach out to him, to understand him, although this path is endless. Nonetheless, this endless journey not only makes moral progress possible, it also ensures that it is the only possible outcome whose infinity is guaranteed. The guarantor here is Man's need and ability to be

more humanized than he is, or, as Andre Comte-Sponville puts it: he is "human, but never to the full extent…" [11].

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