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The Social Manipulation of Morality: Moralizing Actors, Adiaphorizing Action

Zygmunt Bauman

I believe that the great honour of the Amalfi European Prize has been given to the book called *Modernity and the Holocaust*, not to its author, and it is in the name of that book, and particularly of the message that book contained, that with gratitude and joy I accept your professional accolade. I am happy for the distinction this book has earned for several reasons.

First — this is a book which grew out of the experience that spans the, until recently, deep and seemingly unbridgeable divide between what we used to call 'Eastern' and 'Western' Europe. The ideas that went into the book and its message gestated as much in my home university of Warsaw as they did in the company of my colleagues in Britain, the country that — in the years of exile — offered me my second home. These ideas knew of no divide; they knew only of our common European experience, of our shared history whose unity may be belied, even temporarily suppressed, but not broken. It is our joint, all-European fate that my book is addressing.

Second — this book would never have come to be if not for my life-long friend and companion, Janina, whose *Winter in the Morning*, a book of reminiscences from the years of human infamy, opened my eyes to what we normally refuse to look upon. The writing of *Modernity and the Holocaust* became an intellectual compulsion and moral duty, once I read Janina's summary of the sad wisdom she acquired in the inner circle of the man-made inferno: 'The cruellest thing about cruelty is that it dehumanizes its victims before it destroys them. And the hardest of struggles is to remain human in inhuman conditions.' It is Janina's bitter wisdom that I tried to enclose in the message of my book.

Third — the message itself, one about the hidden and unseemly face of our confident, affluent, brave world, and of the dangerous game this world plays with human moral impulse, seems to be

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resonant with ever more widely shared concerns. This, I presume, is the meaning of awarding the coveted Amalfi Prize to the book that contains that message. But also of the fact that the prestigious Amalfi Conference has been dedicated in full to the issue of morality and utility, whose divorce, as the message implies, lies at the foundation of our civilization's most spectacular successes and most terrifying crimes, and whose reunification is the one chance our world may have to come to terms with its own awesome powers. My lecture that follows is therefore more than a mere restatement of the book's message. It is a voice in a discourse which, one hopes, will stay in the focus of our shared vocation.

Virtutem doctrina paret naturae donet; for the ancient Roman, the dilemma was as acute as it is for us today. Is morality taught, or does it reside in the very modality of human existence? Does it arise out of the process of socialization, or is it 'in place' before all teaching starts? Is morality a social product? Or is it rather, as Max Scheler insisted, the other way round: the fellow-feeling, that substance of all moral behaviour, is a precondition of all social life?

All too often, the question is dismissed as of no more than purely academic interest; sometimes it is cast among idle and superfluous issues born of the indefatigable, but notoriously suspect, meta-physical curiosity. When asked explicitly by sociologists, it is assumed to have been answered conclusively long ago, by Hobbes and by Durkheim, in a manner leaving little to doubt, and since then transformed into a non-question by routine sociological practice. For the sociologists at least, society is the root of everything human and everything human comes into existence through social learning. Hardly ever do we have the occasion to argue the case explicitly. For all we care, the matter had been resolved before it could be discussed: its resolution had founded the language that constitutes our distinctively sociological discourse. In that language, one cannot speak of morality in any other way but in terms of socialization, teaching and learning, systemic prerequisites and societal functions. And, as Wittgenstein reminded us, we can say nothing except what can be said. The form of life sustained by the language of sociology does not contain socially unsanctioned morality. In that language, nothing that is not socially sanctioned can be talked about as moral. And what one cannot speak of is bound to remain silent.

All discourses define their topics, keep their integrity by guarding the distinctiveness of their definitions and reproduce themselves

through reiterating them. We could, as it were, stop at this trivial observation and allow sociology to proceed with its habitual selective speech and selective numbness, were not the stakes of continuing silence too high. Just how high they are, has been brought up, gradually yet relentlessly, by Auschwitz, Hiroshima and the Gulag. Or, rather, by the problems the victorious perpetrators of the Gulag and Hiroshima faced when bringing to trial, condemning and convicting the vanquished perpetrators of Auschwitz. It was Hannah Arendt, at her perceptive and irreverent best, who spelled out what these problems truly entailed:

What we have demanded in these trials, where the defendants had committed 'legal' crimes, is that human beings be capable of telling right from wrong when all they have to guide them is their judgment, which, however, happens to be completely at odds with what they must regard as the unanimous opinion of all these around them. And this question is all the more serious as we know that the few who were 'arrogant' enough to trust only their own judgment were by no means identical with those persons who continued to abide by old values, or who were guided by a religious belief . . . These few who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgments, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed.

And thus the question had to be asked: Would any one of those now brought to trial have suffered from a guilty conscience if they had won? The most horrifying discovery that followed was that the answer must have been emphatically 'no', and that we lack arguments to show why it should be otherwise. Having decreed out of existence or out of court such distinctions between good and evil as do not bear the sanctioning stamp of society, we cannot seriously demand from individuals to take moral initiative. Neither can we burden them with responsibility for their moral choices unless the responsibility had been de facto pre-empted by the choices being prescribed by society. And we would not normally wish to do so (that is, to demand that individuals make their moral decision on their own responsibility). Doing so would mean, after all, allowing for a moral responsibility that undermines the legislative power of society; and what society would resign such power of its own will, unless disabled by an overwhelming military force? Indeed, sitting in judgement on the perpetrators of Auschwitz was not an easy task for those who guarded the secrets of the Gulag and those who were secretly preparing for Hiroshima.

It is perhaps because of this difficulty that, as Harry Redner observed,

much of life and thought as it is still carried on now is based on the assumption that Auschwitz and Hiroshima never happened, or, if they did, then only as mere events, far away, and long ago, that need not concern us now.

The legal quandaries arising from the Nuremberg trials were resolved there and then, having been treated as local issues, specific to one extraordinary and pathological case, that were never allowed to spill over the boundaries of their carefully circumscribed parochiality, and hastily wound up as soon as they threatened to get out of hand. No fundamental revision of our self-consciousness occurred or was contemplated. For many decades — to this very day, one may say — Arendt's remained a voice in the wilderness. Much of the fury with which Arendt's analysis was met at the time stemmed from the attempt to keep that self-consciousness watertight. Only such explanations of the Nazi crimes have been accepted as are conspicuously irrelevant to us, to our world, to our form of life. Such explanations commit the double feat of condemning the defendant while exonerating the world of its victors.

It is vain to quarrel whether the resulting marginalization of the crime committed — in the full glare of social acclaim or with tacit popular approval — by people who 'were neither perverted nor sadistic', who 'were, and still are, terrifyingly normal' (Arendt), was deliberate or inadvertent — accomplished by design or by default. The fact is that the quarantine set half a century ago has never ended; if anything, the rows of barbed wire grew thicker over the years. Auschwitz went down in history as a 'Jewish' or 'German' problem and Jewish or German private property. Looming large in the centre of 'Jewish studies', it has been confined to footnotes or cursory paragraphs by the mainstream European historiography. Books on the Holocaust are reviewed under the heading of 'Jewish themes'. The impact of such habits is reinforced by the vehement opposition of the Jewish establishment to any, however tentative, attempt to 'expropriate' the injustice that the Jews and the Jews alone have suffered. Of this injustice, the Jewish state would keenly wish to be the sole guardian and, indeed, the only legitimate beneficiary. This unholy alliance effectively prevents the experience it narrates as 'uniquely Jewish' from turning into a universal problem of the modern human condition and thus into public

property. Alternatively, Auschwitz is cast as an event explicable only in terms of the extraordinary convolutions of German history, of inner conflicts of German culture, blunders of German philosophy or the bafflingly authoritarian national character of the Germans — with much the same parochializing, marginalizing effect. Finally, and perhaps most perversely, the strategy that results in the two-pronged effect of marginalizing the crime and exonerating modernity is one of exempting the Holocaust from a class of comparable phenomena, and interpreting it instead as an eruption of pre-modern (barbaric, irrational) forces, presumably long ago suppressed in 'normal' civilized societies, but insufficiently tamed or ineffectively controlled by the allegedly weak or faulty German modernization. One would expect this strategy to be a favourite form of self-defence: after all, it obliquely reaffirms and reinforces the etiological myth of modern civilization as a triumph of reason over passion, and an auxiliary belief in this triumph as an unambiguously progressive step in the historical development of morality.

The combined effect of all three strategies — whether deliberately or subconsciously followed — is the proverbial puzzlement of historians who repeatedly complain that, however hard they try, they cannot understand the most spectacular episode of the present century whose story they have written so expertly and continue to write in ever growing detail. Saul Friedländer bewails the 'historian's paralysis', which in his (and widely shared) view 'arises from the simultaneity and the interaction of entirely heterogeneous phenomena: messianic fanaticism and bureaucratic structures, pathological impulses and administrative decrees, archaic attitudes within an advanced industrial society'. Entangled in the net of marginalizing narratives we all help to weave, we fail to see what we stare at; the only thing we are able to note is the confusing heterogeneity of the picture, coexistence of things our language does not allow to coexist, the complicity of factors that — as our narratives tell us — belong to different epochs or different times. Their heterogeneity is not a finding, but an assumption. It is this assumption that gives birth to astonishment where comprehension could appear and is called for.

In 1940, in the heart of darkness, Walter Benjamin jotted down a message which, judging by the historians' continuing paralysis and the sociologists' unperturbed equanimity, has yet to be properly heard: 'Such an astonishment cannot be a starting point for genuine

historical understanding — *unless it is the understanding that the concept of history in which it originates is untenable*'. What is untenable is the concept of our — European — history as the rise of humanity over the animal in man, as the triumph of rational organization over the cruelty of life that is nasty, brutish and short. What is also untenable is the concept of modern society as an unambiguously moralizing force, of its institutions as civilizing powers, of its coercive controls as a dam defending brittle humanity against the torrents of animal passions. It is to the exposition of this latter untenability that this paper — in line with the book on which it comments — has been dedicated.

But let us repeat first: the difficulty of proving untenable what by all standards are the commonsensical assumptions of sociological discourse derives in no small part from the intrinsic quality of the language of sociological narrative; as all languages, it construes its objects while pretending to describe them. The moral authority of society is self-provable to the point of tautology in as far as all conduct non-conforming to the societally sanctioned rulings is by definition immoral; socially sanctioned behaviour remains good as long as all action societally condemned is defined as evil. There is no easy exit from the vicious circle, as any suggestion of pre-social origin of moral impulse has been a priori condemned as violating the rules of linguistic rationality — the only rationality language allows. The deployment of sociological language is a decision that entails the acceptance of the world-picture this language generates, and a tacit consent to conduct the ensuing discourse in such a way that all reference to reality is directed to the world so generated. The sociologically generated world-picture replicates the accomplishment of societal legislating powers. But it does more than that: it silences the possibility of articulating alternative visions in whose suppression the accomplishment of such powers consists. Thus the defining power of language supplements the differentiating, separating, segregating and suppressing powers lodged in the structure of social domination. It also derives its legitimacy and persuasion from that structure.

Ontologically, structure means relative repetitiousness, monotony of events; epistemologically, it means for this reason predictability. We speak of structure whenever we confront a space inside which probabilities are not randomly distributed: some events are more likely to happen than others. It is in this sense that human habitat is 'structured': an island of regularity in the sea of random-

ness. This precarious regularity has been an achievement, and the decisive defining feature, of social organization. All social organization, whether *purposeful* or *totalizing* (i.e., such as cut out fields of relative homogeneity through suppressing or degrading — making irrelevant or otherwise down-playing — all other, differentiating and thus potentially divisive, features), consists in subjecting the conduct of its units to either *instrumental* or *procedural* criteria of evaluation. More importantly still, it consists in delegitimizing all other criteria, and first and foremost such standards as may render behaviour of units resilient to uniformizing pressures and thus *autonomous* vis-à-vis the collective purpose of the organization (which, from the organizational point of view, makes them unpredictable and potentially destabilizing).

Among the standards marked for suppression the pride of place is kept by the moral drive — the source of a most conspicuously autonomous (and hence, from the vantage point of the organization, *unpredictable*) behaviour. The autonomy of moral behaviour is final and irreducible: it escapes all codification, as it does not serve any purpose outside itself and does not enter a relationship with anything outside itself; that is, no relationship that could be monitored, standardized, codified. Moral behaviour, as the greatest moral philosopher of the twentieth century, Emmanuel Levinas, tells us, is triggered off by the mere presence of the Other as a *face*: that is, as an authority without force. The Other demands without threatening to punish or promising reward; his demand is without sanction. The Other cannot do anything; it is precisely his weakness that exposes my strength, my ability to act, as responsibility. Moral action is whatever follows that responsibility. Unlike the action triggered off by fear of sanction or promise of reward, it does not bring success or help survival. As purposeless, it escapes all possibility of heteronomous legislation or rational argument; it remains deaf to *conatus essendi* — and hence elides the judgement of 'rational interest' and the advice of calculated self-preservation, those twin bridges to the world of 'there is', of dependence and heteronomy. The face of the Other, so Levinas insists, is a limit imposed on the effort to exist. It offers therefore the ultimate freedom: freedom against the source of all heteronomy, against all dependence: against nature's persistence in being. Morality is a 'moment of generosity'. 'Someone plays without winning Something that one does gratuitously, that is grace The idea of the face is the idea of gratuitous love, the conduct of a gratuitous

act.' It is because of its implacable gratuity that moral acts cannot be lured, seduced, bought off, routinized. From the societal perspective, Kant's *practical* reason is so hopelessly *impractical* From the organization's point of view, morally inspired conduct is utterly useless, nay subversive: it cannot be harnessed to any purpose and it sets limits to the hope of monotony. Since it cannot be rationalized, morality must be suppressed, or manipulated into irrelevance.

The organization's answer to the autonomy of moral behaviour is the heteronomy of instrumental and procedural rationalities. Law and interest displace and replace gratuity and the sanctionlessness of moral drive: actors are challenged to justify their conduct by reason as defined either by the goal or by the rules of behaviour. Only actions thought of and argued in such a way, or fit to be narrated in such a way, are admitted into the class of genuinely *social* action, that is *rational* action, that is an action that serves as the defining property of actors as *social actors*. By the same token, actions that fail to meet the criteria of goal-pursuit or procedural discipline are declared non-social, irrational — and *private*. The organization's way of socializing action includes, as its indispensable corollary, the privatization of morality.

All social organization consists therefore in neutralizing the disruptive and deregulating impact of moral behaviour. This effect is achieved through a number of complementary arrangements: (1) stretching the distance between action and its consequences beyond the reach of moral impulse; (2) exempting some 'others' from the class of potential objects of moral conduct, of potential 'faces'; (3) dissembling other human objects of action into aggregates of functionally specific traits, held separate so that the occasion for reassembling the face does not arise, and the task set for each action can be free from moral evaluation. Through these arrangements, organization does not promote immoral behaviour; it does not sponsor evil, as some detractors would hasten to charge, yet it does not promote good either, despite its own self-promotion. It simply renders social action *adiaphoric* (originally, *adiaphoron* meant a thing declared indifferent by the Church) — neither good nor evil, measurable against technical (purpose-oriented or procedural), but not moral values. By the same token, it renders moral responsibility for the Other ineffective in its original role of the limit imposed on 'the effort to exist'. (It is tempting to surmise that the social philosophers who at the threshold of the modern age first

perceived social organization as a matter of design and rational improvement theorized precisely this quality of organization as the immortality of Man that transcends, and privatizes into social irrelevance, the mortality of individual men and women.) Let us go one by one through these arrangements that, simultaneously, constitute social organization and adiaphorize social action.

To start with the removal of the effects of action beyond the reach of moral limits — that major achievement of the articulation of action into the hierarchy of command and execution: once placed in the 'agentic state' and separated from both the intention-conscious sources and the ultimate effects of action by a chain of mediators, the actors seldom face the moment of choice and gaze at the consequences of their deeds; more importantly, they hardly ever apprehend what they gaze at as the consequences of their deeds. As each action is both *mediated* and 'merely' *mediating*, the suspicion of a causal link is convincingly dismissed through theorizing the evidence as an 'unanticipated consequence', or at any rate the 'unintended result' of, by itself, a morally neutral act — as a fault of reason rather than ethical failure. Social organization may be therefore described as a machine that keeps moral responsibility afloat; it belongs to no one in particular, as everybody's contribution to the final effect is too minute or partial to be sensibly ascribed a causal function. Dissection of responsibility and dispersion of what is left results on the structural plane in what Hannah Arendt poignantly described as 'rule by Nobody'; on the individual plane it leaves the actor, as a moral subject, speechless and defenceless when faced with the twin powers of the task and the procedural rules.

The second arrangement could be best described as the 'effacing of the face'. It consists in casting the objects of action in a position from which they cannot challenge the actor in their capacity as a source of moral demands; that is, in evicting them from the class of beings that may potentially confront the actor as a 'face'. The range of means applied to this effect is truly enormous. It stretches from the explicit exemption of the declared enemy from moral protection, through the classifying of selected groups among the resources of action which can be evaluated solely in terms of their technical, instrumental value, all the way to the removal of the stranger from routine human encounter in which his face might become visible and glare as a moral demand. In each case the limiting impact of moral responsibility for the Other is suspended and rendered ineffective.

The third arrangement destroys the object of action as a self. The object has been dissembled into traits; the totality of the moral subject has been reduced to the collection of parts or attributes of which no one can conceivably be ascribed moral subjectivity. Actions are then targeted on specific units of the set, by-passing or avoiding altogether the moment of encounter with morally significant effects. (It had been this reality of social organization, one can guess, that was articulated in the postulate of philosophical reductionism promoted by logical positivism: to demonstrate that entity P can be reduced to entities x, y and z entails the deduction that X is 'nothing but' the assembly of x, y and z. No wonder morality was one of the first victims of logical-positivist reductionist zest.) As it were, the impact of narrowly targeted action on the totality of its human object is left out of vision, and is exempt from moral evaluation for not being a part of the intention.

Our survey of the adiaphorizing impact of social organization has been conducted thus far in self-consciously non-historical and exterritorial terms. Indeed, the adiaphorization of human action seems to be a necessary constitutive act of any supra-individual, social totality; of all social organization, for that matter. If this indeed is the case, however, our attempt to challenge and to refute the orthodox belief in the social authorship of morality does not by itself offer an answer to the ethical concern that prompted the inquiry in the first place. It is true that society conceived of as an adiaphorizing mechanism offers a much better explanation of the ubiquitous cruelty endemic in human history than does the orthodox theory of the social origin of morality; it explains in particular why at a time of war or crusades or colonization or communal strife normal human collectivities are capable of performing acts which, if committed singly, are readily ascribed to the psychopathia of the perpetrator. And yet it stops short of accounting for such strikingly novel phenomena of our time, like the Gulag, Auschwitz or Hiroshima. One feels these central events of our century are indeed novel; and one is inclined (and justified) to suspect that they signify the appearance of certain new, typically modern, characteristics that are not a universal feature of human society as such and were not possessed by societies of the past. Why?

One, most evident and banal novelty is the sheer scale of the destructive potential of technology that may be put today at the service of the thoroughly adiaphorized action. These new awesome

powers are today aided and abetted in addition by the growing scientifically based effectiveness of managerial processes. Apparently, the technology developed in modern times only pushed further the tendencies already apparent in all socially regulated, organized action; its present scale conveys solely a quantitative change. Yet there is a point where quantitative extension augurs a new quality – and such a point seems to have been passed in an era we call modernity. It is true that the realm of *techne* – the realm of dealings with the non-human world or the human world cast as non-human, was at all times treated as morally neutral thanks to the expedient of adiaphorization. But, as Hans Jonas indicates, in societies unarmed by modern technology ‘the good and evil about which action had to care lay close to the act, either in the praxis itself or in its immediate reach The effective range of action was small’ – and so were its possible consequences, whether planned or unthought of. Today, however, ‘the city of men, once an enclave in the non-human world, spreads over the whole of nature and usurps its place’. The effects of action reach far and wide in space and time alike. They have become, as Jonas suggests, *cumulative*, that is, they transcend all spatial or temporal locality and – as many fear – may eventually transcend the nature’s self-healing capacity and end up in what Ricoeur calls *annihilation* which, unlike ordinary destruction that may yet prove to be a site-clearing operation in a creative process of change, leaves no room for a new beginning. Made possible by and arising from the eternal social technique of adiaphorization, this new development, let us observe, multiplied its scope and effectivity to the point where actions can be put in service of morally odious aims over a large territory and protracted period of time. Their consequences may be therefore pushed to the point where they become truly irreversible or irreparable – without rousing moral doubts or mere vigilance in the process.

Two – together with the new unheard-of potency of man-made technology came the impotence of self-limitations men imposed through the millennia upon their own mastery over nature and over each other: the notorious *disenchantment of the world* – or, as Nietzsche put it, ‘*death of God*’. God meant, first and foremost, a limit to human potential: a constraint, imposed by what man *may do* over what man *could do* and dare do. The assumed omnipotence of God drew a borderline over what man was allowed to do and to dare. Commandments limited the freedom of humans

as individuals; but they also set limits to what humans together, as a society, could legislate; they presented the human capacity to legislate and manipulate the world's principles as being inherently limited. Modern science that displaced and replaced God removed that obstacle. It also created a vacancy: the office of the supreme legislator cum manager, of the designer and administrator of the world order, was now horrifyingly empty. It had to be filled, or else God was dethroned, but the throne was still in one piece. The emptiness of the throne was throughout the modern era a standing, and tempting, invitation to visionaries and adventurers. The dream of an all-embracing order and harmony remained as vivid as ever, and it seemed now closer than ever, more than ever within human reach. It was now up to the mortal earthlings to bring it about and to secure its ascendancy. The world turned into Man's garden that only the vigilance of the gardener may prevent from descending into the chaos of wilderness. It was now up to Man and to Man alone to see to it that rivers flow in the right direction and that rain forests do not occupy the field where groundnuts should grow. It was now up to Man and Man alone to make sure that the strangers do not obscure the transparency of legislated order, that social harmony is not spoiled by obstreperous classes, that the togetherness of folk is not tainted by alien races. The classless society, the race-pure society, the Great Society were now the tasks of Man. And an urgent task, a life-and-death matter, a duty. The clarity of the world and human vocation, once guaranteed by God and now lost, had to be fast restored, this time by human acumen and on human responsibility (or is it irresponsibility?) alone.

It was the combination of growing potency of means and the unconstrained determination to use it in service of an artificial, designed order, that gave human cruelty its distinctively *modern* touch and made the Gulag, Auschwitz and Hiroshima possible; perhaps even unavoidable. The signs abound that this particular combination is now over. The passing of this combination is theorized by some as that of modernity coming of age; sometimes it is talked about as an unanticipated consequence of modernity; sometimes as the advent of the post-modern age; in each case, however, the analysts would agree with the laconic verdict of Peter Drucker: 'no more salvation by society'. There are many tasks human rulers may and should perform. Devising the perfect world order is not, however, one of them. The great world-garden has split

into innumerable little plots with their own little orders. In a world densely populated with knowledgeable and intensely mobile gardeners, no room seems to be left for the Gardener Supreme, the Gardener of gardeners.

We cannot go here into the inventory of events that led to the collapse of the Great Garden; whatever the reason, however, the collapse is, I would suggest, good news in a great number of respects. Does it, however, promise a new start for the morality of human coexistence? In what way does it affect the topicality of our previous reasoning about the adiaphorization of social action —and, particularly, about the potentially disastrous dimensions given to it by the rise of modern technology?

There are few, if any, gains without losses. The departure of the Great Gardener and the dissipation of the Great Gardening Vision made the world a *safer* place, as the threat of salvation-inspired and salvation-seeking genocide had faded. By itself, however, this was not enough to make it a *safe* place. New fears replace the old ones; or, rather, some of the older fears come into their own as they emerge from the shadow of some other, recently evicted or receding. One is inclined to share Hans Jonas's premonition: to an ever growing degree, our main fears will now relate to the apocalypse threatened by the nature of the unintended dynamics of technical civilization as such, rather than to custom-made concentration camps and atomic explosions, both of which require that grand purposes are spelled out and, above all, purpose-conscious decisions are taken. And this is so because our present world has been freed from the White Man's, Proletariat's or Aryan Race's missions only because it has been freed from all other ends and meanings, and thus turned into the universe of means that serve no purpose but their own reproduction and aggrandizement. As Jacques Ellul observed, technology today develops *because it develops*: technological means are used because they are there, and one crime still deemed unforgivable in an otherwise value-promiscuous world is not to use the means that technology has made already, or is about to make available. If we can do it, why on earth should we not? Today, technology does not serve the solution of problems; it is, rather, the accessibility of a given technology that redefines successive parts of human reality as *problems* clamouring for *resolution*. In the words of Wiener and Kahn, technological developments produce means beyond the demands, and seek the demands in order to satisfy technological capacities

The unconstrained rule of technology means that causal determination is substituted for purpose and choice. Indeed, no intellectual or moral reference point seems to be conceivable from which to assess, evaluate and criticize the directions technology may take except for the sober evaluation of possibilities technology itself has created. The Reason of means is at its most triumphant when ends finally peter out in the quicksand of problem-solving. The road to technical omnipotence has been cleared by the removal of the last residues of meaning. One would wish to repeat the prophetic warning of Valéry written down at the dawn of our century: 'On peut dire que tout ce que nous savons, c'est-à-dire tout ce que nous pouvons, a fini par s'opposer à ce que nous sommes.' We have been told, and have come to believe it, that emancipation and liberty mean the right to reduce the Other, alongside the rest of the world, to the object whose usefulness begins and ends with its capacity of giving satisfaction. More thoroughly than any other known form of social organization, the society that surrenders to the no more challenged or constrained rule of technology has effaced the human face of the Other and thus pushed the adiaphorization of human sociability to a yet to be fathomed depth.

This, however, is but one side of the emerging reality, its 'life-world' side, one that towers above the daily experience of the individual. There is, as we have briefly noted before, another side as well: the fickle, haphazard and erratic development of technological potential and its applications — which, given the rising potency of tools may easily, without anyone noticing, lead to the 'critical mass' situation in which a world is technologically created but can be no more technologically controlled. Much like modern painting or music or philosophy before it, modern technology will then finally reach its logical end: establish its own impossibility. To prevent such an outcome, Joseph Weizenbaum insisted, no less is needed than the appearance of a new ethics, an ethics of distance and distant consequences, an ethics commensurable with the uncannily extended spatial and temporal range of the effects of technological action. An ethics that would be unlike any other morality we know: one that would reach over the socially erected obstacles of mediated action and the functional reduction of human self.

Such an ethics is in all probability the logical necessity of our time; that is, if the world that has turned means into ends is to escape the likely consequences of its own accomplishment. Whether

such an ethics is a practical prospect, is an altogether different matter. Who more than we, sociologists, students of social and political realities, should be prone to doubt the mundane feasibility of the truths that philosophers, rightly, prove to be logically overwhelming and apodeictically necessary. And yet who more than we, sociologists, are fit to alert our fellow humans to the gap between the necessary and the real, between the survival significance of moral limits and the world determined to live — and to live happily, and perhaps even ever after — without them.

Editor's Note

This paper was the acceptance speech which Zygmunt Bauman presented at the conference held in Amalfi in May 1990, at which he was awarded the third Amalfi European Prize for Sociology and Social Science for his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Polity Press). The previous winners of the prize were Norbert Elias and Serge Moscovici.

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