

What Prospects of Morality in Times of Uncertainty?

Zygmunt Bauman

ALEKSANDER WAT, a Polish writer, once noted about music, poetry and painting that – whatever had been said about them – the most important things remain unsaid. I suppose that the same observation applies to morality, for instance, the question of the origin – or the cause or reason for being moral. Why do acts and thoughts and feelings *appear* to us as either good or evil? Why do we *bother* about acts and thoughts being good or evil? Why do we feel that we *should* bother? Why do we feel *worried*, when it happens that we fail to bother, even if we do our best to convince ourselves that there is nothing to be worried about?

All mystery, and most of all an insoluble mystery, goes against the grain of human reason; such mystery is a challenge which human curiosity cannot resist. No wonder that the most powerful among human minds spared no time nor effort to crack it; if they did not quite succeed, it was neither for their lack of skills nor for the lack of trying. Countless explanations have been offered of either the ‘why?’ or the ‘what for?’ type, and some have been repeated so often and with such monotony that all critical faculties dozed off and nothing seemed to clamour for explanation anymore. And yet, all their ardour and ingenuity notwithstanding, hardly any explanation was much more than another ‘etiological myth’ – a fable about the origins hidden in such depth of time or the human soul that no human eye was able to witness it.

First Digression: On the Meaning of ‘Etiological Myth’

Ostensibly, etiological myths are stories about the ‘origins of it all’, about the one-off event from which something started; on the face of it, they are attempts to explain a presence by invoking its genesis. And yet – as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes convincingly argue – etiological myths are something more than stories of a single event which took place once, and in obscure

-
- *Theory, Culture & Society* 1998 (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 15(1): 11–22
[0263-2764(199802)15:1;11–22;002362]

antiquity. The story is located in a 'present imperfect' and doomed to stay imperfect forever. In an allegorical transposition, etiological myths tell the story of how the object of 'explanation' occurs ever again and anew; they also spell out the conditions that must be met in order to ensure that the phenomenon in question does happen over and over again – that its happening *was not* a one-off event.

What is more, advancing 'new and improved' explanations did not push understanding forward: all explanations, however complex at first sight and in whatever new and 'updated' language they had been expressed, were but variants of the two primordial etiological myths – the stories told in the Bible and turned into the frame for all future thinking (at least inside our, Judeo-Christian civilization).

The subject of the first story is the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Evicted from Paradise, Adam was told to 'win his food with labour' and to 'gain his bread by the sweat of his brow'. He was not given any other instruction, no detailed advice on how to live, what line to follow, what to choose. The sole command he got was that from now on he had to, so to speak, take matters in his own hands: struggle to live, to decide and choose (since he had already tasted the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, he knew that the choices he was about to make could be more or less preferable, better or worse: *good or bad*). And, as if to bar his return for more instructions, God stationed to the east of the garden of Eden the 'cherubim and a sword whirling and flashing . . . '.

Before their eviction, Adam and Eve did not know that things or acts could be good or evil. The words 'good' and 'not good' appeared only in the mind of God, when He spoke to Himself casting a critical eye on His own creation. Now those words were to become also a part of Adam and Eve's vocabulary. Once they tasted fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve became 'like gods'; that knowledge they now acquired was divine. They lacked, though, divine omnipotence and omniscience (they did not eat from the Tree of Life!). Unlike God, they could fail to rise to the task – they could err, make mistakes, take wrong decisions, mistake evil for good. Unlike God, they were doomed to make choices between doing good and doing evil. This is, we may gather from the story, how they became *moral* persons – persons to whom things appear as either good or bad and who can pick up either of them. Things did not appear to them like that when they were still in Paradise, and they had no power or opportunity to choose between them – inside the Garden of Eden, which knew of no ambivalence, crossroads, freedom.

The second story is that of the law-giving act on Mount Sinai. 'There were peals of thunder and flashes of lightning, dense cloud on the mountain and a loud trumpet blast; the people in the camp were all terrified.' 'When all the people saw how it thundered and the lightning flashed, when they heard the trumpet sound and saw the mountain smoking, they trembled and stood at a distance.' They trembled, since they feared that 'if God speaks to

us we shall die'. To Moses's admonitions to follow the Law the Lord announced through him, they answered with a blank cheque: 'Whatever the Lord has said we will do.' And the Lord went on, spelling it out in profuse detail what they should do and what they should refrain from doing. He told them what to do when one hits an eye of a slave or slave-girl and destroys it; what to do if an ox, lent to one's neighbour, dies; what to do if the father refuses to accept the bride-price for a seduced virgin – and so on and so on. Having spelled out everything that from then on would become the Law, God commanded his people:

... to obey the Lord your God by keeping his commandments and statutes, as they are written in this book of law. ... The commandment that I lay on you this day is not too difficult for you, it is not too remote ... [but if] you do not listen and you are led to bow down to other gods ... you will perish.

In doing what God told them to do, people will be good; in doing what the Lord told them not to do, they will be evil. For obedience they will be rewarded, for disobedience – punished. By this rendering – to do good, to be moral, they must follow God's command, the command of a God too powerful to speak directly to His people, too terrifying to be looked in His face.

What these two stories tell us – apart from answering the vexing questions about the 'whither' and 'where from' and 'why' of morality – is what morality is about and what it means to be moral. The first story suggests that to be moral is to face a choice between good and evil, and to know that there is such a choice, and make choices with that knowledge. The second story implies that to be moral is to follow strictly the command – to obey unconditionally and never to deviate from the straight path, in deed or in thought. The first story presents morality as a cruel predicament, eternal uncertainty and perpetual agony. The second story presents morality as obedience to the Law and the recipe for a trouble-free life of conformity.

Let me repeat: all schools of ethics, all theories of morality, whether proclaimed in the name of science, theology, philosophy or sociology, follow the pattern of one or the other of the two biblical stories, though – alas – they did their best to heavily infuse their narratives with the jargon of the trade, while depriving them of the poetic imagination and suggestiveness of the originals. Most theories – virtually all schools of ethical philosophy – followed the pattern of the second story; in this they stayed loyal to the social practice, which assumed that people need to be frightened and *forced* to be moral, that they prefer being forced to a life spent in the agony of interminable uncertainty, and that to make them moral and relieved in one go, one needs first to write down the laws and then to instil discipline toward their spirit and their letter. If, according to the first biblical story morality is the *drama of choice*, the social practice of ethical legislation did everything possible to limit, best of all to *eliminate altogether*, that choice. The practice which followed the pattern of the second story thought of itself as a

remedy for the misery left in the wake of the first story; but it also declared war against the sort of moral predicament which the first story visited upon human life, and the sort of moral person which such life demanded.

Social practice, and the theories which sung its glory, promised clarity – and the comfort of certainty – in exchange for obedience to the Law. They painted the perfection of moral life as an absence of moral conflict, and augured morality without conflict if only the rule of one Law, and one Law only, can be secured. Such monopoly of Law, deemed necessary for moral life, was fought for under the banners of one God and one true faith, or one sovereign state, or one truth-knowing party, or one reason and one true philosophy; in each case, though, the struggle was aimed against whatever questioned the monopoly – against some godless or foreign law and some infidels or foreigners or mentally impotent who obey it. For all practical intents and purposes, the war in the name of a moral life grounded in a one-and-only, universally binding and free-from-competition ethical code, was always, by design or by default, waged in the name of conformity and against dissent.

Indeed, if morality is about unqualified obedience to the Law, then the only conflict which moral persons can conceivably confront, and the only difficulty such persons may experience in their determination to do good, is the co-presence of two or more laws pressing their demands, each one backed by equally powerful and respectable authority, but each demanding a conduct incompatible with that demanded by the other. Sophocles gave us the archetype of such a moral drama in the story of Antigone, torn between two laws, two authorities. Two and a half millennia later, we still think of moral conflicts as an obstacle to *conformity* to rules – that unquestionable guarantee of righteousness – as a predicament caused by the clash of such authorities as are equally entitled to legislate for morality but act at cross-purposes. If only people listened to God's commandment 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me . . .'. If only there were no other gods setting themselves against His commandments. . . . There would be no moral conflicts then, and the pious or righteous person would have no difficulty in setting apart the good from evil – since the Law which is the one and only Law is also a comprehensive law, a law without contradiction and without ambiguity, one that leaves no room for mental torments and moral vacillation.

But surely this is not the kind of moral predicament which the first biblical story of the birth of morality presented to us. That predicament was all agony, all torment, all hesitation. Humans cast in that predicament were moral because they lived through situations without obvious and unambiguously good choice, and because (as we may learn from the Book of Job) the link between the act and its consequences escaped them, and because they could be never sure that their choices were beyond reproach, and because they had to seek goodness by their own – far from foolproof – wit and industry, and because they could not or dared not hope that the goodness of what they had done would ever be proved or approved beyond

reasonable doubt, so that certainty could take over where rampant uncertainty now runs the show.

The uniqueness of Knud Løgstrup's and Emmanuel Levinas's conceptions of morality – that feature which renders them as if 'made to measure' for our troubled, confused, polyvocal and uncertain times – is that in opposition to the majority of philosophical and theological accounts they take inspiration from the first, rather than the second of the biblical stories. . . . Instead of joining forces with the power-holders, sages and legislators who seek final and irrevocable solutions to the difficulty of being human, their conceptions of morality bring us back to where our humanity resides, not able to reside anywhere else: *to the incurable uncertainty and ambivalence of the human condition laid bare by the postmodern transformations* – to that necessity and impossibility of being moral which is rooted already in the original encounter with the Other.

Knud Løgstrup speaks of *unspoken demand*, Levinas of *unconditional responsibility*. In their respective accounts, neither the demand nor the responsibility derive from any socially or supernaturally established laws; more importantly yet, none is sanctioned by promised rewards nor threatened punishment; and most important of all, none is given a logical explanation, a '*ratio*'. True, Løgstrup tries to explain, in an uncharacteristic gesture or in a moment of weakness, why the demand should be there, pointing out that we owe the others our care because we ourselves received our lives as a free and otherwise unrepaid gift. But Levinas would not be bothered with explanations. His unconditional responsibility is a *brute fact*, the ultimate 'given' of human being, brought forth uncompromisingly by the *face* of the other. Yet, in spite of the tendency of most commentators to focus on that aspect of their teachings, the true importance of Løgstrup's and Levinas's treatments of morality does not lie in their dismissing the question of 'logical reason', or in setting moral commands before being and before socially defined customs and norms.

Second Digression: On the Priority of Ethics over Ontology

Numerous commentators, and among them even one as perceptive and sympathetic as Derrida, reproach Levinas for introducing through the back door all the troubles of ethical philosophy evicted through the front door. It has been said repeatedly that the statement 'ethics is prior to ontology' is itself an ontological statement, and thus self-contradictory; that Levinas surreptitiously smuggles in the metaphysics, though a different one from that most commonly practised, and like those of whom he disapproves he seeks (or just deploys) absolute truths and foundations. I do not deny that there is a way of reading Levinas (and a 'most obvious' way, since it is resonant with the inherited ethical philosophy and organized around the questions which that philosophy considers central) which justifies such doubts. But I also think that this is not the sole way of reading Levinas; that it is, moreover, a way which neglects the most original aspect of his approach, constitutive of his unorthodox conception of ethics. I suggest that the thesis 'ethics is prior to ontology' ought to be rather understood in the following way: we know now

beyond reasonable doubt that morality (alongside all other values) cannot be deduced from being; when speaking of choices and acts ruled by the socially established legal rules or norms, we speak of something other than moral behaviour; when we attempt to justify the propriety of certain behaviour pointing out the inherent or attained merits of the actors or the objects of their actions, we speak again of something other than moral responsibility (we speak, for instance, of duties or obligations which could be enforced, or of acts dictated by 'well-understood interests' of the actors). We find ourselves, therefore, in an 'either-or' situation. Either we can speak of morality in a fashion independent of socially composed, implied or enforced norms of conduct and without referring to any information derived from being – or we are bound to remain incapable of grasping the unique essence of morality. I suggest, in other words, that the thesis in question should be interpreted as a Husserlian 'phenomenological gesture', as an exercise in the *transcendental reduction*, this time, however, the operation *εποχ*ε is applied to the 'empirical world' – it is the whole realm of ontology that is 'bracketed away'; not denied or put in question, but 'suspended' for the time we explore the sense of morality.

The genuine, and by far the most seminal novelty lies in the idea of the *unspokeness* of the demand and the *unconditionality* of responsibility. For both Løgstrup and Levinas, the primary scene of morality is sorely under-defined, vague, unclear, opaque, shot through with ambivalence. There is a demand, but one does not know what it demands; one does not know, and will never know for sure, whether the demand has been fulfilled, and whether it asks for no more than has been done. . . . There is responsibility, but it is unconditional; no one knows whether their responsibility applies to the case at hand – no one has the means to find this out, no one could ever know where responsibility begins and where it ends. . . .

What is more, at the very moment one tries to find the way leading to *Eindeutigkeit* – to disperse the fog, to replace uncertainty with certainty, to spell out what has been unspoken and set conditions for responsibility – one quits the territory of morality. Codes and norms are not the *beginning*, but *the end* of moral relationship; and more often than not, also of the moral self. Yes, says Løgstrup – the demand, as long as it remains unspoken, has no authority, and is not truly fulfillable either (how can one be sure that something has been fulfilled, if the nature of that something stays elusive and unclear?); but he warns against 'theorizing away' those contradictions, lest the baby of the moral self should be poured out together with the bathwater of its ambivalent condition. Yes, says Levinas, the Other commands us through her weakness, not her power; but he warns us, that were we willing to seek a tangible and reputable authority to inject solidity into the fluid, formless image of the face, we would again leave the realm of moral obligation.

And so you can only recognize a moral person by his or her constant and unrelenting *dissatisfaction* with what he or she has done; by his or her perpetual sorrow that they were not moral *enough*. As P.F. Strawson put it,

the surest sign of a moral attitude is self-disapprobation and self-indignation. We may suspect that the attempt to spell out the contents of command and the conditions of responsibility derives not from the wish to be more moral, but from the desire to escape that agonizing uncertainty which accompanies the moral person from beginning to end, and so to get rid of the discomfort of self-indignation, that sign and heart of all morality.

The unspoken demand and unconditional responsibility just *are*, and always have been and will be – well, at least since humans have been expelled from the Garden of Eden. . . . We all are, so to speak, cast in a moral situation whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not. If one goes on insisting on asking why it must be so, one may recall that we, the humans, have acquired the mixed blessing of language; and that language, with its curious particle ‘no’, absent from the world of all other living creatures and incomprehensible to them, and with its equally bizarre future tense, forces us to know without wishing it, that things may be different from what they are, that there is an alternative to every step taken or contemplated – and to imagine worlds which we have not experienced, and imagine them before we had the chance of experiencing them. Because we cannot think or speak of the world without allowing, at least tacitly, for the possibility of it being different, we cannot but be aware that alternative shapes of that world are all of the same quality, that some may be preferable to some others – that things can be good, or better, or worse, or evil. . . . Finding oneself in a moral situation means nothing more than just that awareness. Only we, the humans, are in such a situation; cats and dogs, butterflies and whales, for all we know, live still in the Garden of Eden, that paradise of no alternative and no choice – we have not heard of their expulsion, anyway.

This means, though, that being cast in a moral situation, in the situation of choice between good and evil, does not necessarily mean being good! To be a moral person is one thing – we all, willy-nilly, are; to be good, is another. Being in a moral situation means no more than a *possibility* of being good (or of being evil, for that matter). In the light of Løgstrup’s and Levinas’s description of the moral situation, what would be the first step towards goodness? There is but one answer: to listen to the unspoken demand, to *take responsibility for one’s responsibility*; while the beginning of all evil is to plug one’s ears, a decision all the easier to take for the unspokenness, the silence of the demand – and to renounce one’s responsibility, all the easier for the unconditionality of the latter – for the non-specificity of its address and its requirements. The evil starts from Cain’s question ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ – from the question ‘Why me?’, one that asks for a legal, logical or any other proof that it is me of all people who is bound to assume the keeper’s role. The goodness starts from saying: I will no longer put my conscience to sleep by hiding in the cosy shelter of loudly proclaimed convention, by consoling myself that I have done what ‘the average person’ would have done, or abstained from doing what the ‘average person’ is in no habit of doing; I will make instead the silent demand audible, I will make the responsibility mine. I will act as if the demand was spoken to me only, and as if the

responsibility lay on my shoulders alone, whatever others may do or desist from doing.

Let there be no mistake: we are speaking here about *first steps* and about *beginnings*. Giving voice to the voiceless demand, taking responsibility for responsibility is the necessary, but not the sufficient, condition of being good, let alone its foolproof guarantee. If anything, the calvary of the moral person starts only at this point, once the effort is undertaken to make the demand audible and once responsibility has been assumed. From now on, there is but sailing between the reefs which punctuate the risky voyage of the moral self.

On one side, as Løgstrup warned us, lies the Scylla of indifference and of washing one's hands, masked as unqualified respect for the Other's freedom: I'll do nothing but what s/he explicitly wants me to do – and let her or him be as they want to be. On the other side there waits for the unwary moral sailor the Charybdis of oppression: I know what is good for her, she would not admit it, she is too thick or misguided to understand her best interest – so it is up to me to cajole her, lure her or force her into the mould which I have cast for her while having her best interest in mind. . . . Without that Scylla and that Charybdis, there is no moral voyage. Without coming dangerously close to either of them, there is no way of making the demand audible or taking genuine responsibility for my responsibility. And whenever we try our best to steer clear of one of the dangers, we risk coming too close to the other. Navigating between the two extremes, between the threat of neglect and callousness and the temptation to oppress, becomes the fate of the moral person whenever he or she wants to choose good over evil. And to add moral agony to fear or navigational error, the waters we sail are poorly charted and one never knows how far the ship is from foundering; the luxury of moral certainty arrives only after the ship has already sunk.

This is, at the end of the day, what taking up responsibility for responsibility, or inserting words in the silent lips of the demand, amounts to: it amounts to eternal hesitation, to perpetual anxiety about my actions that stubbornly fall short of my responsibility and fail to match up to the demand.

This kind of anxiety makes all the difference between *moral responsibility* and *contractual obligation*. The latter is well defined, or at least strives to be well defined, convinced that the task of being precisely defined is *feasible*, while the state of being so defined is an *ideal* state to be in. Contractual obligation tells me exactly what to do, when to start and when to finish doing it, and what I need not bother doing. It also tells me on what conditions everything needs to be done. Among those conditions, the actions of the Other, who is now a side in the contract, are by far the most prominent. I fulfil my obligations on condition that my counterpart fulfils his; only when meeting his obligations towards me he will acquire the right to demand that I fulfil mine toward him. My obligation is his right, his obligation is my right; there is a relationship of equitable exchange between us, our respective obligations can be compared, measured one against the other – which is, after all, the condition or *sine qua non* of clarity and *Eindeutigkeit* and a

safeguard against ambiguity. How different all this is from the *moral* obligation, where my duty neither stems from his right nor becomes his right for the fact that I have assumed it, and where the size and the character of my duty has no relation whatsoever to what the Other has done, will do, or intends to do. In neither of the two conceivable senses are our relations symmetrical or reciprocal; no certainty can be gained therefore from measuring up the Other's actions or qualities. The question which renders the contractual obligations so pleasingly clear and unambiguous – the question 'Who is he, and what he has done to have the right to my services?' – here, in the realm of morality, makes no sense.

'Being for the Other' – the kind of being that emerges out of the acceptance of my unconditional responsibility – has nothing to do with the Other's ability to extract services from me, with her ability to impose obligations and to force the need to act – let alone with her *legal* right to do so. This being the nature of the 'being for', moral responsibility behaves in a manner exactly opposite to that of the contractual obligation. To put this in a nutshell, we may say that *moral responsibility tends to grow in such situations in which contractual obligation tends to shrink, and vice versa. . . .* Moral responsibility is all the greater the weaker and more helpless the Other. Obligations, on the contrary, grow and become more overwhelming (one is tempted to say: 'more obligatory') the more powerful is the Other: then, the greater are the services he may render in exchange, and the more severe and painful is the punishment he can administer to me for my sloth or the neglect of my duty. *It is the weakness of the Other which makes me responsible. It is the strength of the Other that makes me obliged.* One is obliged towards the strong. One is responsible for the weak.

To put it in yet another way: moral responsibility soars up in the face of an Other, who due to her powerlessness is incapable of supporting her welfare by soliciting on her own the obligatory and enforceable duties from other people; and reaches yet greater heights if the Other is too weak to render her needs visible and demands audible. *The weakness of the Other makes me powerful:* everything depends then on *my* taking up the responsibility and giving voice to the unspoken demand. I am, literally, responsible for the life and death of such Other; the difference between my assuming the responsibility and rejecting it is that between life and death.

Levinas speaks a lot about commandments, but in all his writings he mentions by name one commandment only: 'Thou shalt not kill'. By this omission which looks more like a commission, Levinas conveys a message: here is a commandment which makes sense of all other commandments, a take-off commandment, a meta-commandment, without which there is no responsibility and from which all responsibility starts. Indeed, securing the life of the Other is the prime and crucial condition of all moral relationship: in admitting the Other's right to live, I give her the chance of confronting me as a Face, I obliquely promote her to the rank of the Face, of another subject, endowed with needs and the ability to command. I award her the right to resist me by her opposition, her difference, her separatedness as another

subject. I then engage in conversation; we talk *with each other* (even – or perhaps particularly – if she stays silent or mute; in that case, responsibility for the continuation of the dialogue, for our imaginary and imagined conversation, lies fairly and squarely on my shoulders), we come to respect each other; what is more, I come to know what it is that I need to respect in her and how that respect may be made flesh. Once the conversation takes off, strength has been injected into the weak body of the Other; and it is I, he who made her life my responsibility, who injected it. And the Other remains strong enough to be the source of demand as long as I agree to make that injection and am prepared to repeat it if necessary.

The children, bodily too weak to resist physical force and mentally too inarticulate to oppose, or even ask for, an argument and a proof; the animals, devoid of language in which the demand could be phrased and of the skills to solicit rights by bargaining or coercion; the yet unborn single beings or generations of beings, unable to address us, to reciprocate or retaliate, even to appear to us as Faces, as bearers of needs and givers of commands; the poor and indolent, the deprived and the dispossessed, denied human rights by the Law, convention or custom, or too feeble to execute such rights as have been formally awarded to them. . . . These are the cases of moral responsibility reaching its peak. But these are, simultaneously, the cases in which the demand is at its ‘most unspoken’ and the conditions of responsibility are the least clear and certain.

And so we come to the greatest paradox of the strategy of moral life, as it has been sketched in the teachings of Løgstrup and Levinas: *the greater the moral responsibility, the dimmer is the hope of its normative regulation*. The more we need to act, the less we know what we ought to be doing. The more pressing the demand, the deeper the silence about what it demands us to do. The larger the responsibility to be taken, the less we are sure of what taking up that responsibility would need to consist of. It is easy to spell out the guidelines, even the norms, for small and insignificant, trite and inconsequential responsibilities. It is much more difficult, nay impossible, to do the same for a responsibility truly immense, consummate and seminal. The more it counts what we do, the less certain it is what is it that we ought to be doing.

Third Digression: On the Reach of the Levinas/Løgstrup Strategy of Moral Life
Whenever I sketch out the strategy of moral life inspired by readings of Levinas and Løgstrup, there is always a reader or a listener who asks of what use is that strategy in truly ‘big issues’ which trouble us nowadays – like preservation of life on our planet, mitigating or arresting the unstoppably rising violence, tribal conflicts and genocide, preventing the saturation of the globe with murderous weapons, stopping or reversing the growing polarization of the world and of every single society? Indeed, how far can we reach while taking the impetus from the ‘primal scene of morality’, as described by the joint efforts of Levinas and Løgstrup? Is it not the case, that the strategy which can take roots and shape up on that scene applies solely to the ‘party of two’, to the face-to-face encounter? Can one build a bridge linking the

'moral party of two' and common, societal, anonymous coexistence, and can one build such a bridge using solely the building material available on the 'primal moral scene', without recourse to the tools and stuffs which are both unnecessary to and absent from that scene? Do we not need two different and only loosely connected 'moralities' – one for restricted, interpersonal use, another for the wide world out there – a 'micro' and a 'macro' ethics?

There is little doubt that outside the realm of the 'moral party of two', on the territory populated with types and categories rather than Faces, it is difficult to move while having responsibility for the Other for a sole guide. The land we enter with the appearance of the Third is mapped and administered through comparisons, coalitions of interests, negotiations and compromises, for which little, if any, guidance can be derived from the habitual experience and know-how of the moral self. The 'moral party of two' is the territory of interpersonal relations; outside its boundaries impersonal rules govern. If the 'party of two' can settle all its problems with the help of moral impulses, that other, wider collectivity requires the rules of *justice* – and justice is first and foremost the matter of *politics*, not morality (in the endemic eccentricity of moral impulse one cannot ground social justice, which needs principles that are universally and regularly observed). And if we all are 'thrown' into the moral situation, it would be wrong to assume that we are also 'thrown' into justice. . . . Unlike the moral impulse, the sense of justice is not born of our existential condition; it is not the beginning, but the *outcome* of our being with others. The vision of justice is the product of the work of reason. We are moral beings whether we want it or not; we may or may not become just persons by commission or by omission. What is more, it is not immediately obvious what sort of connection, if any, there is between the rule of justice inside a collectivity of humans and the sense of justice of its individual members. Outside the realm of the 'moral party of two', the totality is indeed greater than the sum of its parts. . . . What, therefore, if anything, has the 'primal scene of morality' to offer to the life of society?

The doubts as to the 'carrying power' of moral impulse are therefore not trivial, nor easily dashed or chased away. It would not do to argue them away using arguments of the 'here and there alike' kind ('What applies to a single human being, may be applied as well to human groups', or 'What applies to the Face, applies as well to the category') – ridiculed, as it were, long ago by Wittgenstein, debunking the absurdity of the apparently sensible phrase 'five o'clock p.m. on the Sun'. It is tempting to conclude that in the public realm one would not get far riding the vehicle put together in the workshop of the 'moral party of two' – and that public life demands that one construct principles from the beginning, starting from elsewhere; that it demands something like a 'macro' or 'mega' ethics, free from the virtues of moral attitude, which in public life may prove to be the opposite of an asset – more an obstacle or a liability.

In the absence of logical argument or empirical proof, the best one can do to respond to such criticisms is to resort to an allegory. As a human being, I have legs which serve me to walk, I am, therefore, a mobile creature – I can move from one place to another. From this potential, fulfilled in my daily practice, the general idea of *mobility* has been coined – which allows me to treat all distance as something relative and only a temporary obstacle – something I can, in principle, 'conquer'. Thanks to that idea of mobility, I can, living in

Leeds, think of going, say, to Tampere. My 'natural equipment' – my legs – won't be much help in seeing this project through; I won't go that far just walking on my legs. But I can use the train, the boat, the plane. . . . Indeed, there are trains and boats and planes – but none of them would have been invented by an immobile species – without the already well entrenched idea of mobility, and so also the view of the world as a space to be gone-through and overcome. Having an ability makes it possible, and likely, to posit (and sometimes to fulfil) tasks located beyond the reach of that ability when left to its own, 'natural', resources. When the poet calls 'reach where your eyes can reach not' – but without eyes the idea of reaching what you cannot see would not be conceived in the wildest poetic imagination. . . .

Well, the strategy of moral life gestated inside the 'moral party of two' would not reach far – no further than the Other. But once it has been formed, it would not rest; it would not be satisfied with reaching only as far as it is able to reach unassisted by tools and implements.

To conclude: there is little hope that the plight of the moral self will ever be cured of its intrinsic ambivalence. Reason and logic offer a cure which is ineffective if harmless, and poisonous if effective. More can be said: far from being an external impediment to morality, or a case of the disease, ambivalence is its natural habitat and signals a state of health. Ambivalence is the only soil in which morality can grow and the only territory in which the moral self can act on its responsibility or hear the voice of the unspoken demand. In its unstoppable search for the meaning of unspoken demand and unconditional responsibility, the moral self will never reach the certainty it aims at; yet only while seeking such certainty can the self become and stay moral.

Zygmunt Bauman is Emiritus Professor of Sociology at Leeds University. His latest books (forthcoming) are *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Polity Press), and *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Open University Press).