



Ethics of Individuals

Zygmunt Bauman

Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers canadiens de sociologie, Vol. 25, No. 1. (Winter, 2000), pp. 83-96.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0318-6431%28200024%2925%3A1%3C83%3AE0I%3E2.0.CO%3B2-I>

Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers canadiens de sociologie is currently published by Canadian Journal of Sociology.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/cjs.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Note on Society/Note de société

Ethics of Individuals

Zygmunt Bauman

“Private language,” as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1995) insisted, is an oxymoron — or, if one prefers Latin to Greek, a *contradictio in adiecto*. Language assumes a talking community, a collectivity-in-communication; language is a “form of life,” but of a life *shared*, life *lived together*. Most obviously, a similar claim can be made about ethics. Were it not for a network of interdependencies between individuals, the idea of ethics would make no sense. A single being, whose life is unaffected by other beings nor is affecting their lives, would be a non-ethical being — neither good nor bad, neither moral nor immoral, since ethicality has nothing to do with what a single being does to itself, but everything to do with what human beings do to each other. But then a “single being” could not be a *human* being either. As already Aristotle pointed out, only a beast or an Angel are capable of solitary existence.

A *Sein* which is not (as Martin Heidegger (1993) put it) *ursprünglich Mitsein*, is an incongruity. Since it is *Mitsein* that constitutes *Sein*, and since there is no *Sein* which is not already *Mitsein*, we may say that all is potentially ethical: the necessary condition of the ethicality of human-being-in-the-world had been — is — met before (and whether or not) the concepts of good and evil were coined and a moral code written down. *Mitsein* is indeed the *necessary condition of morality* — *but not its sufficient condition*. *Mitsein*, as Emmanuel Levinas quipped, may well mean no more than *Zusammenmarschieren*. The fact that “we are all in the same boat,” share space and time, meet face to face and hear about each other does not by itself make us *moral beings*.

Ethics, Levinas insisted, is before ontology; this priority does not apply, though, to *moral selves*. We may say that unlike the “ethical casting” (ethicality as an existential condition or, more precisely, as the condition of existence) which is “always already there” because it needs no more than the company of others, moral selves are not “given”; they need yet to be made. We share the world, and so we willy-nilly affect each other’s lives; what we do or abstain from doing is not indifferent to the life of others. That circumstance has already made us responsible for each other and by the same token it has already made us ethical beings. But we may or may not *take up* responsibility for that responsibility which is ours whether we know it or not and whether we wish it to be ours or not. Only when taking that responsibility the self turns moral; only then the moral self is coming to life; precarious life, to be sure. The moral self is born when *Mitsein* is lifted to the level of *Fürsein* (“pour-être,” “being-for”).

Taking up responsibility for the Other (thereby embracing the already-existing, existential responsibility) is the birth-act of morality. It is not, though, a one-of event. The birth is re-enacted repeatedly (or failing to be re-enacted, as the case may be) in the life of the moral self. Morality, which has the actions of moral persons for its sole substance, has to be reborn ever anew in the course of successive human encounters — as their accomplishment. Once born, its survival is never assured. But the chances of continuous rebirth, the sole form which the survival of morality may take, vary. The likelihood of encounters and the shape they take depend on the nature of *Mitsein*; since that nature depends in turn on the character of the society in which humans live (we distinguish one type of society from another by its characteristic form of *Mitsein*) — we may say that the chances of the continuous re-birth of morality and moral selves vary depending on the way society is structured and the way it fashions individual lives. Any society is the togetherness of potentially moral beings. But a society may be a greenhouse of morality, or a barren soil in which only few uniquely strong moral selves can take root.

Modern-capitalist society has been long suspected of being inhospitable to morality. Two reasons for being suspicious (two varieties of *Wahlverwandschaften* between capitalism and immorality) were most often quoted by worried ethical thinkers. One and most frequently quoted was the ideology of personal enrichment and the happiness to be attained through acquisition and possession of goods, related to the *capitalist*, or “bourgeois” character of modern society. And another: the instrumental-rational mentality, related to the *modern* character of the capitalist version of bourgeois society. The ideology was charged with promoting preoccupation with self-interest and cast the other selves as, primarily, so many threats to that interest and potential competitors in the pursuit of happiness; having linked happiness to the share in the finite volume of goods, that ideology cast the pursuit of happiness as a zero-sum

game. The mentality, on the other hand, stood accused for having no room nor time for disinterested self-sacrifice, that corner-stone of *Fürsein*, nor for the spontaneous and non-calculated moral acts. Because of its apparent non-instrumentality and unpredictability, morally-guided conduct seemed to be at odds with the prerequisites of rational action.

It was for these two reasons that few ethical philosophers trusted modern society to generate morality by itself and matter-of-factly, without active and deliberate intervention of superior and ethically conscious (and conscientious) powers. Their mistrust was daily corroborated at the time when the routine, subliminal regulation of human cohabitation fell apart together with “ancien régime” and “social order” from the unproblematic state of affairs turned into a task that had to be consciously undertaken and seen through. By a curious reversal of perspective, this lack of trust in the moral potential of modern bourgeois society was however projected on “human nature,” which most ethical philosophers came to detest or view with suspicion — as at best a-moral, at worst im-moral: humans were not naturally predisposed to take moral attitudes and act morally. Unless something was done to induce or force them to behave morally, they would be at each other throats and rejoice in each other’s misfortunes. Immorality came to the humans naturally; morality could come only at the other end of long and strenuous battle and would not be made secure without continuous coercion. Sympathy, pity and care were according to that story contrived and acquired qualities, which had to be “inserted from outside” — taught or imposed first so that they could guide human interactions later.

From Hobbes on, the assumption of inborn selfishness of human individuals served as the legitimation of state prerogatives to demand obedience and discipline. Claiming its origins in the social contract craved and sought, as a safe haven, by the lonely and frightened individuals despaired of “nasty, brutish and short” life — society and its strong arm, the state with its coercive apparatus, were looked at as the only defences capable to protect its members and subjects from the dire consequences of their own a-social or anti-social instincts or predilections. What the “natural” human condition failed to do, would need to be compensated for by deliberate actions of the legislators, advised by ethical philosophers and helped by preachers and teachers: by sanctions which would make immoral behaviour too costly to be seriously contemplated and/or by convincing demonstration that being moral does pay and so is worth the try. Paradoxically, the appeal was to be made in both cases to the same self-interest which had been blamed for the immoral predispositions of the raw, unrefined and uncultivated, “state of nature” individuals. It came to be believed that the lack of natural moral predispositions needs to be repaired by ethical code designed and legislated into a set of obligatory prescriptions and proscriptions, and then policed through the co-

operation of law-and-order forces and moral educators. In the absence of inborn moral impulse, it was the conformity to the rule, reinforced by sanctions penalising the nonconformists, that had to take care of the moral standards of human togetherness.

This was, essentially, the “ethical problematics” of modern society in the first two centuries of its history. The task of raising moral standards in human interaction was articulated as the question of proper societal control over individual conduct, while departure from moral standards was blamed on the faults of the ethical code or the laxity of the organs of its promotion and enforcement. In much of the present-day ethical philosophy the moral drawbacks and their therapy continue to be problematised in line with this long established habit, oblivious to the radical transformation meanwhile undergone by modern society. And yet, even if the overlooked and unreflected upon departures did not necessarily create radically new causes of moral inadequacy, what they have done beyond doubt was to lay bare and make salient the causes left out of sight by the orthodox problematics of ethical philosophy.

One of the first twentieth century thinkers who intuited the heretofore neglected dangers was Walter Benjamin. As Susan Buck-Morss (1993: 318–319), a most incisive interpreter of Benjamin’s work, has written in the context of Benjamin’s *querelle* with the surrealists (who struggled to represent the dream-like quality of modern realities as primarily, perhaps exclusively, a matter of subjective, utterly individual, experience), it was not in the dreaming individual, but in the dreaming *collective* that the mystery of atomistic society lied, long waiting to be discovered. The collective was “dreaming” because “it was unconscious of itself, composed of atomised individuals, consumers who imagined their commodity-dreams to be uniquely personal (despite all objective evidence to the contrary), and who experienced their membership in the collectivity only in an isolated, alienating sense, as an anonymous component of the crowd.”

To put this in the nutshell — the collective was “dreaming” because it made the individuals who composed it unaware of the collective origins of their individual qualities and experiences and of the collective nature of their troubles and so also of the conceivable remedies of the troubles. As seen by Benjamin, modern society engendered conformity in people’s lives “but not social solidarity, no new level of collective consciousness concerning their commonality, and thus no way of waking up from the dream in which they were enveloped” (Susan Buck-Morss 1993: 318–319). Society exerted, one may say, a soporific influence; it prevented individuals from awaking to their “mutual dependencies” and so to their mutual responsibilities — and thus to their ethicality. The chances of the awakening (Levinas writes of “sobering up”) to the ethical core of the self are continually undermined by a “*communitas abscondita*,” by a collective which holds its members together by

making itself invisible or of no consequence; the retreat of the individual to concerns and preoccupations with the self is the outcome of that “vanishing act.” It needs to be pointed out, however, that the invisibility of the collective has the effects described by sociologists (after W. I. Thomas) under the name of “self-fulfilling-prophecy”: if individuals behave *as if* their experience and fate had no collective ramifications, that assumption tends to become true in its consequences. First the collectivity disappears from view, and then, as solidarity fades, it vanishes from living reality.

In other words: it is not that the solidary life is in trouble because of the inborn self-interest of “inadequately socialised” individuals. The opposite is the case: individuals tend to be self-centred and self-engrossed (and so morally blind and ethically uninvolved or incompetent) because of the slow yet relentless waning of the collectivities to be solidary with. It is because there is little reason to be solidary, “the others” turn into strangers — and of the strangers, as every mother keeps telling her child, one should beware; and best of all keep one’s distance and not talk to them at all.

This is what Jonathan Raban (1988: 15), the author of *Soft City*, the remarkable study of the ways and means of living among strangers which our contemporaries design and follow, has to say of Bixby Hall, a small residential development at the outskirts of Los Angeles:

There nice people have erected their \$150 000 homes inside a fortified stockade, eight feet high, patrolled by heavily armed security guards, with an electronic communication system installed in every house. In a TV programme about this armour-plated ghetto a shrill housewife, surrounded by hardware and alarm-buttons, said: “We are trying to preserve values and morals here that are decaying on the outside.” And her husband, a comfortable Babbity figure, told the reporter: “When I pass by the guard in the evening, I’m safe, I’m home, it’s just a lovely feeling, it really is.”

Bixby Hall is just one of the “armour-plated ghettos” mushrooming for the last twenty years or so in all American cities and recently constructed on an accelerating pace in countries as distant from each other as South Africa and France. This new medium of living is, like other media, a message — and the particular message which this medium conveys is that “values and morals” are for domestic use only and that the sole way to preserve them and practice is to separate, to disengage, to exclude and to withdraw. The universe of moral commitments is shrinking fast, and the task of people concerned with their well-being is to make it shrink faster still.

Having scrutinised the ethical effects of individualisation in the form it has acquired in contemporary democracies, Joel Roman (1998: 171) suggests that the somber premonitions of Alexis de Tocqueville have come, finally, true: nowadays, the individual turns to be indeed “the citizen’s worst enemy.” “Contemporary individuals tend to recoil from collective engagements, from social and political responsibilities” — from all those attitudes and actions

which define a citizen, member of the polity. Individuals are told to attend to their own business, to face their troubles alone and cope with them using their own wits and industry, and to take pride in their loneliness: the polity promises not to interfere, asking the individuals in exchange not to expect, let alone demand, from public institutions what they have neither wish nor ability to deliver. "Dependency" is fast becoming a term of censure and reprobation, while "needing more space" and "getting "it" (the scruples of guilty conscience, the tangled network of commitments, obligations, attachments) out of one's system" become names of individual self-assertion. But dependency is and will remain forever the other face of moral responsibility, while moral selves may grow and thrive solely in the close proximity of others — not in a closed system suspended in empty space.

"Individualization" as Ulrich Beck (1998: 34) points out, "is collective fate, not an individual one." Individuality is identified as limitlessness of choice, but being cast as individual — working alone and bearing alone the consequences reputedly brought about by one's own work — is not a matter of choice. Individualization descends upon men and women as fate, inscrutable and intractable: like those "conditions not of one's choice" under which, according to Marx, people find themselves while making history. As Beck (1995: 83) puts it:

Enlightenment ends in the fatalism of developed industrial society, which, on the one hand, transforms everything into something that can be done and, on the other hand, sanctifies and blesses its nearly total paralysis of action [...]. Protests, no matter how insistent and desperate, only confirm the fundamental theme of irresistibility and irreversibility.

The essence of "individualization" consists not so much in the setting of individuals free from restrictions and widening the range of their life-choices, as in the decoupling of the field of individual choices and actions from the working of the system as a whole; making the "system," the conditions of action, by and large immune to the decisions taken by the individuals in the course of their daily life. With the systemic setting of individual self-constitution removed at a safe distance from individual choices and put beyond the reach of the individual decisions where it may stay unaffected and unscathed, it falls upon the individuals and to the resources which they individually command and manage to cope (or not, as the case may be) with the consequences of systemic contradictions. They may only try to mitigate the impact of those contradictions upon their individual well-being without being able to weaken their grip on their life-condition, let alone resolve them. Paradoxical results were poignantly summarised by Claus Offe (1996: 12):

"Complex" societies have become rigid to such an extent that the very attempt to reflect normatively upon or to renew their "order," that is, the nature of the co-ordination of the processes which take place in them, is virtually precluded by dint of their practical futility and thus their essential inadequacy.

The new immunity of the systemic conditions to the impact of individual actions is perversely perceived, and all too often theorized, as the rising freedom of the individual; it seems that “nearly all factors of social, economic, and political life are contingent, elective, and gripped by change” — but on the other hand “the institutional and structural premises over which that contingency runs” are “removed from the horizon of political, indeed of intellectual, choice.” It is because of its non-vulnerability to the individual — singly or severally undertaken — actions that the “system” may afford its lofty “tolerance”: indifference, silence, mistaken as absence of restrictions.

Gerhard Schulze (1993), for instance seems to take that ostentatious disinterest of the system for a new autonomy, a radical breakthrough in individual self-asserting powers, and to blame the torments of liberated individuals on the dearth of clear guidelines which ought to be, but are not supplied by institutionalized tradition. In Göran Dahl’s (1999: 180) rendering of Schulze’s view, “individuals have to construct their own biographies without being able to use social norms which could give rise to a self-evident identity. Less and less is “given” or transmitted from social and historical contexts [...]. Individualization does not only mean freedom, but also the burden of living without self-evidence.” By this view, freedom and its pains have two separate causes, and one does not affect the quality of the other: the disengagement of the system may make the liberated individuals under-informed and therefore often lost and confused, but does not detract from their freedom; at the utmost, it makes their ineptitude and blunders more costly. It is different in Offe’s interpretation: the retreat and non-interference of the system, the deregulation in which it manifests itself and the manufactured flexibility and contingency of human condition that follow make individual freedom a sham, since this kind of individual freedom comes together with impotence. What that freedom leaves most decisively out of reach is the chance to negotiate, even more to alter, the systemic framework in which individuals struggle to construct their lives.

Pascal fathomed once the tragic consequences of the “retreat of God,” of living with *Deus absconditus*, “God in hiding.” Beck (1992: 137), we may say, spells out the consequence of living with a “system in hiding,” system *absconditus*: “*how one lives becomes the biographical solution of systemic contradictions*” — “experts dump their contradictions and conflicts at the feet of the individual and leave him or her with the well intentioned invitation to judge all of this critically on the basis of his or her own notions [...]. At the same moment as he or she sinks into insignificance, he or she is elevated to the apparent throne of a world-shaper.”

This is a persistent theme in Beck’s writings: the curious, paradoxical plight of being utterly, unqualifiedly “responsible for yourself” and at the same time “dependent on conditions which completely elude your grasp” — intellectually and, more to the point, pragmatically. Such contradiction-ridden

individualization conjures up a sharply different *Lebenswelt* from that which Enlightenment conceived of and modernity promised to build:

The untrod tracks to be followed here in a loose crowd of fellow individuals lead in exactly the opposite direction to that in which enlightenment has pointed so far. It is no longer the matter of understanding natural laws, developing technologies, building up production, increasing material wealth, altering the economic, social and political circumstances and only after all that finally liberating men and women from their drudgery. Instead the last in the line is brashly pushed to the front; develop your own personality, and this will have a lasting effect on your marriage, family, work colleagues, career, officialdom and the way we all treat our resources and our world. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 43–44)

Let us note that such putting of the cart before the horse is not a recent invention. The “inner development” guided by a “life-project” was a defining attribute of the “modern man” and the hub of modern life strategy since the beginning. The classes which in modern times came to replace the hereditary estates positioned themselves, however counter-factually, as the *telos*, not the cause of life’s itinerary: it was each and every one “pilgrim through life” who was charged with the task of selecting the right turns on each successive road-junction and blamed or praised for the trajectory of the road passed and for its retrospectively construed inner and cumulative logic:

When the ethical culture of modernity, with its codes of personal responsibility and life purpose, is carried into a society without institutional shelters, there appears not pride of self, but a dialectic of failure in the midst of growth. Growth in the new economy depends on gutting corporate size, ending bureaucratic guarantees, profiting from the flux and extensions of economic networks. Such dislocations people come to know as their own lack of direction. (Sennett 1999: 21–22)

“Shrinking of institutional supports” leaves individuals “alone with their sense of responsibility.” That sense does not make them, however, bold and determined, let alone alert to the socially-shaped conditions of their shared lives; it only results in acute self-concern and obsessive self-accusation and self-reprobation.

We are all, by socially carried yet anonymously passed decree, in “Baron Münchhausen” quandary now. But the hair by which we are admonished and expected to pull ourselves out of the quagmire are cropped according to the latest hair-style designs and styled with the help of currently advertised, invariably “new and improved” conditioners. The task of the individual (as we, the individuals, are repeatedly told) is to locate the right shop, find the right shelf, and reach for the right box or tube in the dazzling and confusing display. “It is all up to you” — so we are daily reminded; and yet the things most crucial in shaping our own and other people’s life are evidently not “up to us.” These things are not for sale and one would search the shop-shelves for them in vain. That is, one would — if one knew what to look for.

Elusiveness of the finishing line only makes the runners stretch more and run faster; and, above all, it hardly ever allows them to avert eyes from the dexterity of one's own body and the attention from the fitness of one's sinews and muscles. "The clichés of modern counselling are," as John Carroll (1998: 9) points out, "that you need to believe in yourself, feel good about yourself, not put yourself down." You need to believe in yourself because there is hardly anything else left to believe in, when your search for satisfying life is at stake and when it comes to investing your life pursuits with meaning. It matters little that the same necessity which rendered your "belief in yourself" your last-resort hope would seldom if ever give you the chance to "feel good about yourself." What does matter is that only "you yourself" figure in the counselling formula. The omnipotence of "yourself" boosts the ego — but, to quote Carroll (1998: 95) once more, "a preoccupation with ego is in danger of stifling the soul." "Stifling the soul" gives, to be sure, another boost to the ego: "if we cannot have the food we truly crave, spiritual food, then we shall accumulate the goods of this world on a vast scale." We are locked in a vicious circle from which there is no evident exit.

"Soul" is not a household term in the land of social science; nor is it likely to be heard often in the land of modern philosophy. When spoken about, it is only in the capacity of a term without obvious referent of its own; a trope for paucity and void — for something missing, visible only through its absence defined (to report his successive approaches to the elusive entity, Carroll needs to resort to negative terms: "have not," "do not," "is not there." In that narrative, soul is what the ego is not, what the ego is desperately trying to turn into, but fails — since only soul could make ego as potent as it claims to be and as it needs to be to reach the life-fullness it is after.). In the context of the ethical consequences of individualized existence, the "soul" whose demise or neglect Carroll singles out as the root of contemporary malaise may be taken to signify the absence of engagement with the world; the tendency of the self to recoil from commitments, or its refusal to enter commitments to anything except the self's own well-being. The absence in question is that of *ethicality*. In other words, the stifling on the "soul" stands here for the responsibility neglected, abandoned, or refused to be taken; in brief, for *indifference*.

Polish philosopher Jadwiga Mizinska (1999: 135–146) begins her treatise on indifference from ascertaining the rarely noted fact that the philosophical predicament of "indifference" is itself another case of absence: it is by and large missing in axiological discourse. Philosophy is, so to speak, curiously indifferent to the gruesome powers of indifference. One explanation is that the idea of "indifference" is all too often mistakenly thought to be synonymical with mere inactivity: with taking no sides, refraining from (always potentially

coercive) interference for the sake of civility. This is not, though, what indifference is about. Indifference means a thoroughly active stance: it comes in the wake of *decision* to *exclude* certain areas of life, and above all the beings who populate such areas, from the set of legitimate reasons to be concerned and to take sides. "Indifference" stands for an active rejection of engagement, for *ethical un-concern*. Indifference is the attitude taken towards the objects, also (above all) such as happen to be human subjects, which have been first banished from the *universe of moral obligation*.

Mizinska quotes from *The Revelation of John*: "You are neither hot nor cold. How I wish you were either hot or cold! But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth" (3, 15–17). The wrath and contempt of God, that supreme ethical legislator, is directed against the lukewarm, the "neither hot nor cold" — Mizinska comments. God does not *punish* the lukewarm, like He does the sinners — He "spits them out"; a gesture signifying "disgust, loathing, repugnance." The lukewarm do not err as only the "hot" or the "cold" can — they have opted out from the company of humans in which the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, comes into its own and from which it draws its meaning. By their indifference to those others whom they cast off the limits of engagement they did not commit a moral sin: what they in fact do is to put themselves outside the realm of the ethical. In lay or secular terms: the indifferent are not guilty of errors which only moral persons, once they have taken up their ethical responsibility, may commit. What is wrong with them is their un-ethicality: not taking up responsibility for their responsibility.

What makes indifference "vicious" or "wicked," says Mizinska, is the insensitivity to the bodily, psychic and spiritual suffering of other people which follows it. For that reason, indifference could be justly branded as *soullessness*. Soulless indifference transforms the interpersonal space into *Totensraum*; no room there for either compassion or hostility, for love as much as for struggle, for good or ill will. Where soulless indifference rules, human bonds wilt and fade.

Using the term coined by the Church Councils in the Middle Ages, I called "adiaphorization" the tendency to trim and cut down the category of acts amenable to moral judgement, to obscure or deny the ethical relevance of certain categories of action, and to refigure the ethical prerogatives of certain targets of action. "Adiaphorization" can take the form of an act of overt *exclusion from the universe of moral obligations*, but more often than not it boils down to the tacit, even surreptitious and pre-reflexive rather than sub-conscious "effacing the face": staving off the very possibility of certain category of others appearing as targets of ethically meaningful action. This tendency has been prominent throughout the history of the modern era, though its roots and vehicles have shifted over time.

Having separated (economically and socially as well as spatially) business from household (and so laying an entirely new foundation for setting apart the *ecclesia* from the *oikos*), modernity opened up enormous expanse free from traditional constraints: from limits imposed by *Rechtsgewohnheiten*, by old routines and customary, ethically saturated patterns of human interaction. The new space was “ethically empty”; a virgin land, waiting to be laid out, plotted, mapped, signposted and turned into a carefully and thoughtfully designed garden by the legislators of new rules and the executors of their will. A foremost feature of the design was to wall off the new territory against the continuous threat of penetration by all and sundry “foreign” motives and purposes which could sap the monopoly of administrative will and intention — ethical considerations figuring most prominent among the “undesirables.” Demanding from its officials a consistently *sine ira et studio* approach to the job at hand, undivided loyalty to the statute book and suspension of their personal emotions and commitments for the time spent inside the administrative building or on official errands, modern rational bureaucracy has proved to be the past master of adiaphorization. *Ésprit de corps* was all the ethic which bureaucracy needed — and bureaucracy would not tolerate any other ethics.

Bureaucracy was an epitome of modernity in its first — “heavy,” “solid” and “hardware” stage, obsessed with order-designing and order-building, with making some patterns of interpersonal relations obligatory while prohibiting all the rest. At that stage, the panoptic-style surveillance and linear-vertical management were the principal tools of social control and order-maintenance. Elsewhere (in *Liquid Modernity*, forthcoming) I attempted to trace the accelerated dismantling of the institutions of panoptical control and the replacement of normative regulation with seduction and coercion with precariousness as prime techniques of control and order-maintenance. Bulky, awkward and costly production of artificial necessity is giving way to much less cumbersome game of volatility, flexibility and insecurity and is falling out of fashion.

James Burnham noted in his time the tendency of capital owners to shift the burden of the day-to-day running of things to hired managers; it seems that administrative chores were never coveted by people rich and powerful enough to avoid them. The “managerial revolution,” as Burnham famously dubbed the ceding of “real power” to the professional managers, might or might have not happened half a century ago, but there is little doubt that our own times are marked by the amazing zeal with which the ostensibly triumphant managers shed the fruits of their victory (or at least do their best to limit what they come to see as damage). The managerial tasks are increasingly de-coupled from the prerogative of decision-making and delegated to the silent yet intractable pressures of diffuse forces of market competition. The hub of the new managerial strategy is *disengagement*: letting the subordinates free to shape up their own ways of attending to their interests while washing their

own hands of all responsibility for their fate is becoming the favourite means of pursuing managerial aims and getting all those whose co-operation is needed to fall into line. The new managerial wisdom is to avoid at all cost the need to set and supervise routine of work and to coerce employees into following it blindly stamping out all resistance. Putting services to tender on market terms is coming to replace long-term and mutually binding contracts of employment. The change is praised as the way to liberate the untapped resources of human talents, initiative and ingenuity — but the secret of the growing popularity of the new strategy is the chance to decouple power, the coveted value, from the obligations and responsibilities which used to be seen as its unwanted but unavoidable price; the price which the managers see no more reason to pay, given the new and improved, and above all far less costly methods of achieving their purposes.

The bond of mutual long-term obligations is a setting for never-fully-resolved conflict of interests and continuous struggle; but also for negotiation and compromise, and above all for hotly contested, yet for that reason seriously debated and argued ethical precepts. The consequences of each side's conduct for the predicament of the other side are all too evident, and so are the responsibilities that follow. Fragility of short-term and easily terminated engagements (first and foremost, the facility of opting out from the engagement altogether once it feels too cumbersome) makes the spelling out of obligations and responsibilities redundant. Carlyle's "cash nexus" has been never before so thoroughly, as is today, cleansed of the last vestiges of all but cost-and-effects considerations. "The price is right," "value for money" (with proviso, of course, of "no strings attached") will do nicely as the chalks with which to draw the line dividing proper from improper conduct, all the more so for being the only drawing implements available in shops.

As Pierre Bourdieu observed, there is little chance to embark on future projections if the grip on the present is missing. But when precariousness becomes an endemic trait of human condition and marks every facet of the place currently occupied in the network of social dependencies and commitments, one's hold on the present is most painfully missing — it falls in fact the first casualty. It does not make much sense (there is little inducement) to painstakingly weave complex canvasses of human commitments if every weft and woof is of dubious quality, liable to be torn at the first pull. The spectacular career made recently by the phrase "I need more space" faithfully reflects the dominant mood of our time: escaping consequences of previous actions and recoiling from previously entered obligations is the insurance policy attached to the growing number of human relations.

Disengagement, the recurrent attempts at "new beginning," "starting again," "being born again," are the most popular even if regularly frustrating responses to the discomforts of life. "Individualization de jure" (with which

individualization *de facto* tries to catch up in vain) is a self-reproducing and self-enhancing condition: it gestates responses which only reinforce its effects and beget the need for more responses of the same kind. Once set in motion, the falling (or tearing) apart of social bonds (legitimized by the matter-of-factly voicing of the “I need more space” demand) becomes self-propelling and acquires a momentum entirely of its own.

My “needing more space” is bad news for the Other. It portends his/her eviction from my universe of moral obligations. And there is no obvious reason for which the execution of the verdict should be stayed, let alone the verdict quashed. Not that I am particularly selfish and would not be bothered by the well-being of the Other when my own interests are at stake; it is rather that I and the Other are similarly individuals — we are both self-sustained entities, or at least holding self-sufficiency up as the ideal pattern of life, simultaneously its aim and condition — and so mutual dependency would be degrading and demeaning for the Other as much as it is for me. The need of my care and responsibility for the Other was once argued in ethical philosophy and moralizing homilies by reference to the reciprocity of gains; the need to keep my distance is similarly argued in terms of reciprocity — but of losses. By my help, the Other would be diverted from the paths proper to the individuals, from the need to rely on one’s own resources and wits and them alone; and by making the Other dependent on my assistance I would become dependent in my own turn on the overt or adumbrated demands of another being; my own freedom of choice and self-assertion would be trimmed in the result. Both sides of relationship, so the story goes, would lose. Refusing responsibility for the Other is a wise and noble thing to do; and I should be grateful to all the others who reciprocate in the same manner.

This is the second, specifically late-modern, variant of adiaphorization. This late-modern (or “liquid modern” — see my book under the same title) “adiaphorization mark two” works through *disengagement* and self-distantiation, in sharp distinction from the past, bureaucratic form, which presumed tight engagement as the condition of ubiquitous surveillance, regular monitoring, normative regulation and routine coercion. The results, though, are pretty much similar: growing chunks of human interaction are “ethically defused” — exempt from moral evaluation and emancipated from insidious monitoring and corrective impact of moral conscience. This is often celebrated as another huge leap forward in the progress of freedom. Its cost is, though, another large step towards disintegration of human bonds. If in its original rendition adiaphorization served the tightening of bonds and (though in a perverse way) was meant to promote integration, the “adiaphorization mark two” effects dissipation of interactive networks while simultaneously (or, rather, by the same token) putting the network of dependencies out of reach of human interference. The two processes are intertwined and inseparable; they can only be tackled together.

References

Beck, Ulrich

- 1992 *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- 1995 *Ecological Enlightenment*. New Hampshire: Humanities Press.
- 1998 *Democracy Without Enemies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Beck, Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim

- 1995 *The Normal Chaos of Love*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Buck-Morss, Susan

- 1993 "Dream World of Mass Culture: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Modernity and the Dialectics of Seeing." In David Michael Levin (ed.), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, pp. 318-319. Berkeley: University Press.

Carroll, John

- 1998 *Ego and Soul: The Modern West in Search of Meaning*. Sydney: Harper Collins.

Dahl, Göran

- 1999 "The Anti-reflexivist Revolution: On the Affirmationism of the New Right." In Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (eds.), *Spaces of Culture: City-Nation-World*. London: Sage.

Heidegger, Martin

- 1993 *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.

Mizinska, Jadwiga

- 1999 "Obojętnosc." In Tadeusz Szkolud (ed.), *Wartości i antywartości w kontekście przeobrażenia kultury współczesnej*, pp. 135-146. Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press.

Offe, Claus

- 1996 *Modernity and the State: East, West*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Raban, Jonathan

- 1988 *Soft City*. London: Collins.

Roman, Joel

- 1998 *La démocratie des individus*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.

Schulze, Gerhard

- 1992 *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft*. Frankfurt: Campus.

Sennett, Richard

- 1999 "Growth and Failure: The New Political Economy and its Culture." In Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (eds.), *Spaces of Culture: City-Nation-World*. London: Sage.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig

- 1995 "Philosophische Untersuchungen." In Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Werkausgabe Band 1*, S. 225-618. Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp.