MORAL DIMENSIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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Zygmunt Bauman
University of Leeds

Your Magnificence Rector of St. Kliment Ohridski University, my learned colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I am overwhelmed by your generosity. I accept your distinction with joy and gratitude, proud to be associated with one of the most venerable and distinguished temples of sciences and humanities in Europe – indeed, in the civilized world.

I suppose that the honour has been bestowed not on me but on the issue to which I tried hard to dedicate my thought and work – the chances of morality in our world, a confused world, desperately seeking solutions to its growing troubles and unsure where to find and how to handle them.

For many centuries philosophers tried to resolve the worrisome conflict between the interests of self-preservation and the ethical command to love your neighbour. That conflict, first opened by Cain's angry demand to explain why, if at all, he should be his brother's keeper (the question from which, as Emmanuel Levinas suggests, all immorality began), seemed to have no satisfactory solution: the pursuit of self-interest and taking the responsibility for integrity, dignity, and the welfare of other humans seemed to be at odds, and the very fact that ever new texts of the ultimate peace

treaty between them were being composed by successive generations of philosophers bore an oblique testimony to the hopelessness of the search for their reconciliation.

Indeed, when the precepts of self-interest and of other humans' well-being meet, one or the other must give way. One partner or the other, perhaps both, needs to stop short of what he would otherwise wish to do and to achieve. One must sacrifice at least a part of one's comfort or dreams; or, if reluctant to sacrifice any, must ignore the comfort and dreams of someone else standing in the way of his own satisfaction. And so, if open and possibly gory hostilities are to be avoided, each side requires an explanation for why the sacrifice of his own interests should be seen as a better solution than its alternative – proof that being good to the other, even at one's own expense, pays.

There were, essentially, but two forms in which such eagerly sought explanations were offered.

One was the severe punishment that a superhumanly potent power would visit on those who close their ears to what the great Danish moral philosopher, Knud Løgstrup, called "the ethical demand" – an awesome retribution that would dwarf the discomfort which obedience to the demand may cause, and bountiful rewards that the same power would lavish on those who neglected their own interests for the sake of others. The trouble with that explanation was that a lot of evidence to the contrary sapped its credibility as many blatantly immoral people enjoyed better fortunes than most of their pious and righteous neighbours. It denies such facts their power to refute the explanation; the whole reward-and-punishment issue had to be removed beyond the reach of empirical experience into, say, the never explored nether-world; but then accepting the proposed version required a stretch of imagination of which not all people were capable, of forcing the credulousness which not all would gladly take.

Another type of explanation suggested that being good to others is "good business", since the beneficiaries of goodness would reciprocate the services rendered and repay the ethically upright person with trust and respect, as well as quite tangible material benefits. An apparent loss will prove to be a gain "in the long run". That kind of explanation was somewhat better

adapted to the habits of the modern, rational mind trained to carefully calculate personal gains and losses and to measure the effects of every undertaking against its costs. It was, however, no more trouble-free than the argument it aimed to replace. The stubborn refusal of the "facts of life" to conform was also its weakness. Like in the case of the other explanation, common experience kept refuting the promise. The moment when the all-too-painfully felt liabilities turned finally into welcomed assets, it was already awesomely sluggish in coming. The evidence piled up that it was the selfish and the unscrupulous who seemed to emerge most often on top. In addition, as modernity went on modernising, "the long term" fell out of fashion. Delay of gratification turned from the sign of prudence into folly, and only those rewards which could be consumed instantly and on the spot came to be appreciated. Never before did the old wisecrack "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" come to be followed so avidly.

Philosophical imagination may be limitless, but its ability to argue away the conflict between self-interest and ethical command seemed to have a limit that could not be broken, however hard it tried. One could be excused for suspecting that this no-trespass-allowed limit was the human condition itself. The choice was indeed between being good to oneself or to others, between self-amplification or sharing space and fortune with others. It seemed that life in the company of others was a zero-sum game. It seemed that sacrificing one's wins to save the others from losses was a foolproof recipe for defeat – and, given that few others would be willing to follow suit, for ridicule as well.

All such suspicions might have been felt well-grounded until quite recently – but they don't anymore. What I wish to suggest to you, my friends, is that, for better or worse, we've now entered the times of convergence between the interest in self-preservation and the obedience to ethical command. Today, self-preservation and morality dictate the same policy and strategy. Your loss is no more my gain. Cohabitation on a full planet is not a zero-sum game. In these turbulent times of ours, we are all in the same boat now. We will sail safely together – or together will we sink.

And so self-preservation and ethics have finally met, but only because social realities, through history, have reached a moment that philosophers, through ingenuity of reason, were vainly trying to reach.

Only few wise men predicted that this would happen and that it would happen in the way it did. Immanuel Kant was one of the most outstanding among them. In 1784, more than two centuries ago, when few if any signs and certainly no symptoms visible to the residents of the tranquil town of Königsberg, where he lived and thought, augured the imminent filling up of the human planet, Kant sent to his publishers a little book titled *Ideen zu Einer Allgemeinen Geschichte in Weltbuergerlicher Absicht*. In that book, Kant observed that the planet we inhabit is a sphere and that in the consequence of that admittedly banal fact we all can move only on the surface of that sphere. Since we have nowhere else to go, we are bound to live forever in each other's neighbourhood and company. If you move on a spherical surface, you will find, sooner rather than later, that the distance shrinks as you try to stretch it. All effort to lengthen a distance between you and others and to keep it long can be ultimately self-defeating. And so *die vollkommende buergerliche Vereinigung in der Menschengattung*, Kant concluded, is the destiny Nature has chosen for us – the ultimate horizon of our *allgemeine Geschichte* that, prompted and guided by reason and the instinct of self-preservation, we are bound to pursue, and in the fullness of time reach. This is what Kant found out – but it took the world more than two hundred years of experimenting, blundering, and trial and error to find out how right the Königsberg philosopher was.

Kant's foresight has been, ultimately, vindicated – when it became obvious that the era of space (that is, the times when space was the most coveted of prizes, the prime stake in the power struggle and the cure-it-all medicine for apparent and putative social troubles) has come to its close.

Throughout that era, territory was the most avidly desired of resources, the plum prize in any power struggle, while its acquisition or loss was the mark of distinction between the victors and the defeated. But above all, territory was throughout that era the prime guarantee of security. "Security" was a territorial matter: the era of space was the time of "deep hinterland", *Lebensraum*, "sanitary belts" – and the Englishmen's homes that were their castles. Power itself was territorial and so was the privacy and the freedom from power's interference. Land was shelter and a hideout, a place to which one could escape and from inside lock oneself up, "go underground" and

feel safe. The powers-that-be which one wished to escape and hide from stopped at the borders.

This is all over now and has been over for considerable time, of which there was no dearth of signals – but that it is indeed definitely over has become dazzlingly evident only on the 11th of September. The events of September 11 made it obvious that no one, however resourceful, distant and aloof, can cut oneself off from the rest of the world.

It has also become clear that the annihilation of the protective capacity of space is a double-edged sword: no one can hide from blows, and blows can be plotted and delivered from however enormous a distance. Places no more protect, however strongly they are armed and fortified. Strength and weakness, security and danger have become now, essentially, *extraterritorial* (diffuse) *issues that evade territorial* (and focused) *solutions*. However fortified and armed, *any place and any population can be truly secure only inside a secure world*; a world in which no one has reason or desire to shoot one's way to survival, or to escape from humiliation, or to see the destruction and humiliation of others. We need to repeat the immortal truth of Aristotle: outside a *polis*, only a beast or an angel can live; but in our time we need also add that no human polis can survive for long unless there is a will to re-make the world into a shared *polis*.

Nothing done today in any part of the world (however remote and secluded) can be guaranteed to exert no influence on all the rest of the planet. And nothing can be done on any segment of the globe, however powerful and fortified, without counting the consequences for, and the response of, all the other sectors. For all practical intents and purposes, we are all dependant on each other, and so we bear responsibility for each other's fate whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not. The problem (the life and death problem) is whether we accept that responsibility and make the planet our shared home and the human species, as Kant suggested we should, our joint community.

All communities are imagined: the "global community" is no exception. But imagination turns into an effective, integrating force when aided by socially produced and socially sustained institutions of collective self-identification and self-government. As the imagined global community is concerned, such an institutional network (woven of global agencies of de-

mocratic control, globally binding legal systems, and globally upheld ethical principles) is, however, largely absent – and little has been done to make it reality.

In his recent sober assessment of the current tendency, David Held observed a "strong temptation to simply put up the shutters and defend the position of some nations and countries only". He did not find the post-11 September prospects particularly encouraging. They contain a chance to "strengthen our multilateral institutions and international legal agreements", but there is also a possibility of responses that "could take us away from these fragile gains toward a world of further antagonisms and divisions – a distinctively uncivil society". Held's overall summary is anything but optimistic: "At the time of writing, the signs are not good." Our consolation (the only consolation available, but also – let me add – the only one humankind needs when falling on dark times), is the fact that "history is still with us and can be made".

Yes, indeed, history is anything but finished; the choices can and, inevitably, will be made. As Hannah Arendt told us,

> The world is not humane just because it is made by human beings, and it does not become humane just because the human voice sounds in it, but only when it has become the object of discourse … We humanize what is going on in the world and on ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human … The Greeks called this humanness which is achieved in the discourse of friendship *philanthropia*, 'love of man', since it manifests itself in a readiness to share the world with other men.

The above words of Hannah Arendt could be – should be – read as prolegomena to all future efforts aimed at arresting the reverse drift and bringing history closer to the ideal of "human community". Following Gottlieb Ephraim Lessing, one of her intellectual heroes, Arendt avers that "openness to others" is "the precondition of humanity in every sense of the word … [T]ruly, human dialogue differs from mere talk or even discussion in that it is entirely permeated by pleasure in the other person and what he says."

It was the great merit of Lessing, in Arendt's view, that "he was glad for the sake of the infinite number of opinions that arise when men discuss the affairs of this world". Lessing rejoiced in the very thing that has ever, or

at least since Parmenides and Plato, distressed philosophers: that truth, as soon as it is uttered, is immediately transformed into one opinion among many, is contested, reformulated, reduced to one subject of discourse among others. Lessing's greatness does not merely consist in a theoretical insight that there cannot be one single truth within the human world but in his gladness that it does not exist and that, therefore, the unending discourse among men will never cease as long as there are men at all: "A single absolute truth … would have been the death of all those disputes … [a]nd this would have spelled the end of humanity."

The facts that others disagree with us is not an obstacle on the road to human community. But our conviction that our opinions are the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and above all, the sole truth that there is (and our belief that other people's truths, if different from ours, are "mere opinions") is such an obstacle. In her essay "Humanity in Dark Times", Arendt concludes with a quotation from Lessing: "Let each man say what he deems truth, and let truth itself be commended into God."

The message of Lessing and Arendt is quite straightforward. Let us leave open the question of who is in the right. The truth may emerge only at the far end of conversation – in a genuine conversation no partner is certain to know what that end may be. Speakers, and also such thinkers who think in a "speaking mode" cannot, as Franz Rosenzweig points out, anticipate anything; they "must be able to wait" because they "depend on the word of the others"; "they require time". Someone whom a thinker in the "speaking mode" addresses "has not merely ears, but also a mouth". As William James put it in another context: "Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* truth, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of the verifying itself, its veri-*fication*. Its validity is the process of its validation."

And, as Odo Marquard rightly points out, if some interpreters aver that their version of the story is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, it will surely come to a fight. If they, however, allow the possibility of differing interpretations, they will start negotiating; and he who negotiates does not kill …

Alas, when it comes to disputing truth, chances for such "undistorted communication" as postulated by Jürgen Habermas are slim. The protago-

nists would hardly resist the temptation of resorting to more effective means than the logical elegance and persuasive power of their arguments. They would rather do whatever they can to render the arguments of an adversary inconsequential, better still inaudible, and best of all never voiced in the first place. One argument that will stand the greatest chance of being raised in such stillborn discussion is the ineligibility of the adversary as a partner-in-conversation – due to being inept, deceitful or otherwise unreliable, harbouring ill intentions or altogether inferior and sub-standard.

Were the choice available, refusing conversation or withdrawing from debate would be preferred to arguing the case. Entering argument is, after all, an oblique confirmation of the partner's credentials and a promise to follow the rules and the standards of the (counterfactually) *lege artis* and *bona fide* discourse. It seems safer to declare the adversaries wrong *a priori*, and then deprive them of the right to appeal against the verdict.

Such an expedient of disqualifying the adversary from the truth-debate is a temptation that the stronger side finds hard to withstand. We may say that the ability to ignore the adversaries and to close one's ears to the causes they promote is the index by which the relative volumes and power of resources may be measured. Obversely, not refusing debate and the agreement to negotiate the truth are all too often a sign of weakness – a circumstance that makes the stronger side, or whoever wishes to demonstrate a superior strength, yet more reluctant to abandon its rejectionist stance.

On the side of the stronger, the refusal to talk might pass for the sign of "being in the right", but for the opposite side the denial of the right to defend one's own cause, to be listened to and taken seriously as a bearer of human rights, is the ultimate of snubs and humiliations – offences that cannot be taken placidly without loss of human dignity …

In a private letter objecting to my consideration of the possibility of cutting the "schismogenetic chain" that tends to transform victims into victimisers (in "Categorical Murder"), Antonina Zheljazkova, the intrepid and uniquely perceptive ethnologist and dedicated explorer of the Balkan's apparently bottomless powder-keg of ethnic animosities, wrote:

"I do not accept that people are in a position to fight the urge of being killers after they were victims. You demand too much from the common

people. It is usual for the victim to turn into a butcher. The poor man, as well as the poor in spirit whom you have helped, come to hate you … because they want to forget the past, the humiliation, the pain, and the fact that they had achieved something with someone's help, out of someone's pity but not alone … How to escape from the pain and humiliation? – the natural thing is by killing or humiliating your executioner or benefactor. Or, by finding another, weaker person in order to triumph over him."

Let us beware of dismissing lightly Zheljazkova's warning. The odds against common humanity seem indeed overwhelming. The weapons do not speak, while the sound of humans speaking seems to be an abominably weak response to the whiz of missiles and the deafening racket of explosives.

I willingly, though with sadness, admit. Looking around the world we share, one is tempted to dream of a better place from which to start on the road to planet-wide humanity. In one of those incisive and uncompromising Irish jokes, a passer-by alongside a river is asked how to get from here to Dublin, and he answers: "If I wished to go to Dublin, I wouldn't start from here". Indeed, one can imagine a world better fit to journey towards Kant's "universal unity of mankind". But there is no such alternative world, and so no other site from which to start the journey. And yet not starting it, and starting with no more delay, is – in this case beyond doubt – *not an option*.

The unity of the human species that Kant postulated might be, as he suggested, resonant with Nature's intention – but it certainly does not seem "historically determined". The continuing uncontrollability of the already global network of mutual dependence and "mutually assured vulnerability" most certainly does not increase the chance of such unity. This only means, however, that at no other time has the keen search for common humanity, and the practice that follows such an assumption, been as urgent and imperative as it is now.