

## Akademiniai maršrutai

### ON INDIFFERENCE IN SOCIETY

Professor Zygmunt Bauman interviewed by Julija Tuleikytė

**Julija Tuleikytė:** Dear Professor, I am writing a PhD thesis on the problem of adiaphorization in your works, so I deeply appreciate the possibility to ask a few questions regarding this concept that you usually define as, in short, moral indifference. I presume, the problem of adiaphorization not only performs a very important role in questions of morality, but it is also a great instrument in tackling the problem of relation between ethics, ontology, and epistemology in general, and it can be used in very broad contexts. For instance, would you agree that adiaphorization is not only a moral indifference, but also an epistemic indifference?

**Zygmunt Bauman:** Epistemic indifference? Well, they are connected, aren't they? The whole philosophy has written about relationship between cognition, evaluation, knowledge, and values. If you relate the moral to cognition, like value to knowledge, can you derive – that's the first question – values from the state of affairs which you analyse, which you cognize, which you know, which you record? Very emphatic answer by the pioneers of modern science, of modern philosophy of science: it was impossible. Max Weber famously noted that they are two different universes, ruled by different princi-

ples. And you can't derive value from a state of affairs.

Emmanuel Levinas, my self-elected, so to speak, teacher – he never taught me, unfortunately, I never was at his seminars, lectures, but I read his books – he reversed the order. His essential breakthrough states that ethics counts before ontology. What does it mean 'before ontology'? Before there is anything existing, there is already a moral principle, moral responsibility. Therefore it is not that morality should be evaluated, should be analysed and appreciated, or rejected in reference to reality, but it's the other way round. It is reality, the real society, order of society, the way people live, which is all to legitimise itself, represent itself to moral principles, to find out whether it is right or wrong.

But, as I said, the whole philosophy has written about it. If adiaphorization relates to moral values or, before that, religious values, then obviously it has an impact on *Weltanschauung* as Weber said – world view, the picture, the vision of the world which you have.

They are connected things. But the cutting edge of the idea of adiaphorization is what has been introduced by medieval Church councils – the notion of 'adiaphoric'

(that's the crucial notion). It was related to the analysis of the new ideas which appeared between the councils and which every council had obligation to analyse and to decide whether they are in agreement with the current of Catholic faith. If they are, then the true Catholics should believe them, should accept them; or they are in opposition to the Church standpoint, to the current of faith, therefore whoever believes them is a heretic. But there is a category of ideas which are neither-nor. They are not particularly connected to Catholic faith, but on the other hand they are not in opposition. So whatever you do – whether you believe them or not, it is your personal matter, it doesn't have objective confirmation or rejection. That's adiaphoric.

And if you transplant it from controversial questions on religious beliefs onto the moral standpoints, we have the same story. There are steps which you can take, which are moral by definition – you should pursue them, you should try to take them. There are cultures of behaviour which are obviously immoral – if you do that you are morally condemned. But there is a large, large, large area of behaviour which is neither – you can do it, you cannot do it – in neither case you are morally condemned, nor you should feel sinful, guilty...

**JT:** In many of your texts on liquid modernity you mention 'illusion'. Could it be said that indifference to the boundary between reality and illusion is profoundly connected to adiaphorization, a certain kind of indifference towards the boundary between "moral" and "immoral"?

**ZB:** I would actually reserve the idea of adiaphorization to the question of evaluation. Because that's where it is really important. All boundaries between illusion and reality

(you probably read Baudrillard, he's talking about simulacrum) – they are experiences which are like psychosomatic diseases. Doctor comes, objectively investigates the case and comes to the conclusion: there is no disease, no bodily, no fleshy disease, no organic disease. But what is the point in that: if the person involved really feels all the pains, all the suffering – which are normal – this is psychosomatic. You can't decide whether it's a lie or a truth, because on the one hand it is clearly untrue that he or she is ill, on the other hand it is absolutely true that he is suffering as a diseased person would. So it's this kind of boundary.

But boundaries in contemporary society are all getting blurred, vanishing, evaporating. For example, the boundary between the private and the public. What is private, what is public? What experiences are, should be confined to the area of private and not be shared with anybody else, not invaded, not stolen by, say, investigative journalism, who disclose the private intimate details of life and states which are fit to be broached in public?

We are living in confessional society, as you know. The confessional was the symbol, the epitome of the most private intimate experience – a kind of experience which you could confide only to God. The confessional spoke to God. There is a mediation of the priest, but the priest acted only as sent there, on *de bail*, so to speak, because he couldn't betray to other body what you had – the secret of confession. But in our confession of today we have installed microphones, and loudspeakers are installed on the public squares, every Facebook member confides in all and most intimate private experiences in public, just throwing it to everybody who wants to push the button and read.

**JT:** As for indifference towards the boundary between, let's say, subject and object – when subjects are treated as objects, monologically – isn't it both moral and epistemic indifference?

**ZB:** The division was in the very beginning slightly improper and confusing. You know it comes from Descartes. Descartes distinguished between thinking beings – like humans – and all the rest of the world. The idea was the activity concentrated entirely in the subject, object being just the passive recipient of the subject's operations. So you are actually creating, you are bestowing – you as a thinking person or subject – you are bestowing all the meaning which can be possessed by the object. By itself object is meaningless, it is nothing. Only the activity of the subject elevates it to the dignity of 'evaluatable', so to speak, thing.

Why was it forged – this straight, this very severe, very strict distinction? Because it well applied to, say, relationship between humans and stones, perhaps even worms or some other animals. It's already doubtful as it applies also to the more complicated animals, like pet dog, for example, or humanoid apes which are very close cousins of ours. But clearly it does not apply to our conversation – conversation between two humans. Who is the object here, who is the subject here?

Where the consumer market whispers, suggests, implies, intimates that you should treat the world as a huge container full of prospective objects of consumption, then there is a catastrophe. Then human relationships are taking form of a relationship between a client and a commodity. When you buy a commodity, say, iPad, iPhone 5 or 4, when you buy that gadget, you don't swear

loyalty to that gadget. You carry no obligation towards the gadget. All the obligations are obligations that the gadget has to you. And if you are dissatisfied, you can throw it away, there's no moral duty in it, it's a commodity, a thing. Say, you had iPhone 4, but iPhone 5 was introduced, so you take iPhone 4 which served you very faithfully and very loyally for two or three years – you throw it away. Now if you transplant that for human relations, then there is a moral catastrophe.

In my books I introduced adiaphorization in a relation to the work of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy was the factory of adiaphorization. It implied that it doesn't matter what your private loyalty, private connections are. Here in the office, here inside your job you do what you are told to – it is neither good nor bad, it is just duty. Your only moral obligation is moral obligation to your boss – that you will faithfully and to best of your knowledge perform his command.

But today the major source of adiaphorization is no longer bureaucracy, but consumer market. Because it implies that you retain connection, relationship, bond, obligation, commitment as long as the pleasure you get. When the pleasure stops, you can just dispose of it and replace it with something else. There's nothing wrong about it, that's rational behaviour, so it escapes moral condemnation. That's it. I think it's the basic, essential, massive source of adiaphorization in our time. Bureaucracy is not as powerful as it was. You can actually sue your bureaucracy now in court, which was unthinkable one hundred years ago. But instead you are fed daily by all the pressures of consumerist market that you bear no obligation to the world, but the world bears a lot of obligation to you. It should be user-friendly, it should

be pleasure-giving, and if it doesn't, then, well, to the devil.

**JT:** As for morality and society, what is the difference between pre-social morality and in a way social morality, i. e., one that finds itself together with cognition, within society, with the sociologist, with your books?

**ZB:** That's a very controversial point you are asking about. When I was of your age I was told that sociology of morality, which represented morality simply as laws established by society in which you live, is nothing more behind that; society in which you live is the ultimate authority deciding what is good, what is evil. And what about morality? It's a social product.

Again, Emmanuel Levinas reversed the whole issue, saying that ethics is before ontology, that there would be no society if there was not already a moral armament, moral equipment, moral instrumentality in humans. He calls it awakening, or sobering up out of intoxication of daily life and all the hubbub pursuits, preoccupations. You just feel like you are opening your eyes, you're sobering out and that is triggered not by articulated demand of society, but by the presence of the Other. That releases, so to speak, the inner feeling of responsibility. You see that something wrong is happening to this person, and you just rush to help. That is the birth of morality – not enforcement by society but, so to speak, moral instinct, which is inner.

**JT:** But when “the moral party of two” encounters “the third”, what happens to morality?

**ZB:** When the Third is coming, then you have already been in society. Two is not society yet, because you can't replace anybody in Two. One dies or goes away and the whole

moral party is destroyed. But when the Third is coming, all sorts of alliances are possible – two against one, any replacement is possible. When the Third comes, very difficult situation emerges immediately, to which this elementary moral party of Two has no answers. Because if you are connected with two persons, not one, then you have – whether you like it or not – you have to compare one with the other and decide that your obligation to Mr. A is higher, bigger and more demanding than to Mr. B. And, for example, when you can't offer to them as much of your time, as much of your attention, as much of your resources which you want to share, you have to decide which one should get more of your goods and the other less. And that's already a situation with which this obligation for the other as unconditional commitment doesn't work. Because equally important considerations contradictibly come into conflict. You have to take decisions which are not fully moral but are second-best, so to speak, compromises. That's difficult... Emmanuel Levinas had this difficulty, and I have of course even more of this difficulty, because I'm not a genius. He was a genius, but he still had difficulties.

He was in the same way as his teacher Husserl. Husserl held this idea of phenomenological reduction. In order to get down to the essence of things he wanted to just strip out and throw away all the information about things which were coming from the changing fashions of time, differences between cultures and so on. And he wanted to arrive to what he called pure transpersonality, so to speak. Okay, he did it very well in analysing specific ideas – beauty, goodness, and so on. He wanted to throw away from consideration, to suspend for the duration of the

reasoning, of the consideration of the issue, to suspect everything which was temporary, accidental, not indispensable for the concept and so on, and to come to the real essence. Well, he did it very well – I repeat – but there he wanted to draw from that conclusion for the analysis of human society, of human life. And here was really a feeling of complete defeat. He spent last years of his life trying to return from this pure, sanitized, so to speak, purity of things to real objects, real relations, and so on. And there was no return – he couldn't find it. I think the same applied to Levi-Strauss, his disciple.

Levinas arrived at the pure morality, in a sense. Pure moral relationships are contaminated. But then there was a question of real life, of real human relations, and how that could influence, or enlighten, or resolve the problems of the Other – that was the big question. He spent last years of his life trying to cut through it. And he had the feeling that he didn't succeed. I cannot pretend that, you know, I succeeded. It is really a question.

But what conclusion can you draw from Levinas' approach that is very starkly different from the common, dominating view in social sciences? The idea that society is (as you can learn from Sigmund Freud, it goes back to Emile Durkheim, and it is shared by all virtual – not all, but great majority of sociologists; it is that society is what?) a construction which enabled people to live together. Why? Because you and me, and everybody else – if not this enforcement by society of law and order – we will cut each other's throats. *Bellum omnium contra omnes*. It actually goes back to Hobbes. Then, fortunately, we have society which allows us to liberate from our own morbid instincts. We suppress our instincts and thanks to that we

can bring each other gifts instead of knife to cut their throats, and so on.

However, if you start from pure morality which is Levinas', then you come to different conclusions. What is the conclusion? Well, according to Levinas, our obligation to the Other, responsibility for the Other is unlimited. Whatever you have done, you could always do more. Well, you stretched yourself, you went out of your way, but still if you try harder you could do more, so you are never actually fully satisfied. Levinas' morality is not a recipe for happiness, it is a recipe for very hard work and constant dissatisfaction.

But out of people who are constantly despaired that they are not moral enough you can't build a society. Some people are saints. They are masochists, they like actually being harrowed by feeling that they didn't perform the duty perfectly. But most people are not. Most people just want to live, to have to beat their life obligations, to take care for their near and dear – I don't know – for their wife, for their children, for their neighbours – they can't... Pure morality of Levinas – that's absolutely clear – is a suggestion for the saints. But you can't imagine a society consisting of saints. Because they will spend all the time praying. You know, orthodox monks put themselves on a pillar somewhere in a desert or something like that. They wouldn't be able to establish patterns of relations between people, which already involve choices, comparisons, privileges, deprivations and so on. They won't be able to do that.

And therefore society is indispensable, but not to suppress your evil instinct, but to limit your responsibilities. Society introduces law instead of morality. Court of law is interested whether your behaviour, step you have taken, transgressed some written letter

of law, or whether there is no such paragraph which makes you guilty. And if there is no such paragraph, you may feel personally tremendously guilty, but you will be declared innocent by the court of law. But your conscience won't declare you innocent – that's the difference. Court of conscience is far more demanding than these artificial introductions which were introduced by society. But these introductions of society, this artificial apparatus of things which are permitted and which are forbidden, make it possible for you and for me to live with our feeling – inner feeling of absolute responsibility. And this responsibility is above your abilities, you can't bear it.

**JT:** One question, just to make sure... When such epistemic categories as, according to you, "Similarity", "Many", "Justice" and others come together with society, morality is limited. What kind of morality does remain functioning then? Could one say that all in all two types of morality exist – the pre-social morality and some kind of a weaker one?

**ZB:** The question is what is first, what is second. Whether morality comes from society or whether society is above confining morality to liveable, endurable volume, relieve you from part of your moral responsibility. Adiaphorization to some extent has a medical impact, so to speak. Very controversial situation was very nicely described a moment ago for which there's no absolutely good solution. Whatever you do, it is a partial solution. Whatever you do, it's an imperfect solution. Even having done that, you may have one quiet night after that, but second night you have nightmares again that you've done something wrong. Because really there is no way in which you can say ultimately,

you know, that there is an ultimate verdict for which there will be no doubt. It's true. And therefore society declaring certain areas of action, of duties which you feel are yours, as adiaphoric – which have no relevance for your conscience, or whatever, for morality – is a medical help. It saves you from being schizophrenic or falling into some other psychological disease.

To some extent it is inevitable, indispensable. You cannot imagine a situation in which all moral obligations, all moral responsibilities are observed. That would destroy the whole possibility of life. So we have to limit it. And then there is an authority of written law, authority of public opinion, authority of so called common sense, which, well, do not save you from pain, but alleviate the pain, make it somehow liveable. And if you ask me about fully satisfactory solution to this quandary, my answer is, quite honestly, that I don't know. I think that is our destiny – we are bound to live with this controversy.

**JT:** And when we talk about cognitive sphere, can we differ between rational cognition and moral epistemics?

**ZB:** Moral epistemics? Rationality and irrationality, for example, are not separate worlds – they are aspects of the same action. When you relate to another human being, there is aspect of rationality and aspect of moral instinct, moral impulse, moral necessity – all these things which are summed up normally in engineering idea of conscience. Conscience is neither rational, nor irrational, it is just conscience. It doesn't listen to reason. Sometimes it resorts to reason but mostly in order to justify its own transgression in unfulfilment, imperfection. Reason tells me that it is impossible – full stop. But your conscience still whispers – if you try it

really hard, if you are prepared to sacrifice your own interest more than you did, then it will be possible. Reason is not prophylactic – normally it is after-the-fact, apologising argument. ‘I couldn’t do it’. ‘I couldn’t do it, it’s impossible’. Or very common in all sorts of excusometrics is the question ‘What is there for me, if I am moral?’ The idea is that if you are good to others, others are good to you. So introduction of the rational argument just compares what benefits you got from him and repay in the same manner or at the same level. That intervention clearly tries to replace the moral impulses.

But nevertheless in every real relationship – between husband and wife, between children and parents, and parents and children – there are two aspects – rational and emotional. There is cognitive and moral evaluation. They are always present together. However, the practical, pragmatic relations in every case differ. For example, I am asserting today that if you take our global situation – humanity as a whole – for the first time in human history, because of this emergence of planetary interrelationship we are all dependent on each other today. Because of that, the rational argument and moral argument in order to come together, accept our differences, try to find jointly satisfactory solution. Rational arguments and moral arguments point into the same direction – morality says ‘we are all brothers and sisters, we are all dependent on each other, we are all responsible for each other, the whole humanity is our home’, and rationality tells us – ‘we are all sitting in the same boat; if we are not good to each other, if we don’t work together, then we will all sink’. Our survival could be only global survival. Rationality and morality point in the same direction.

But it was not always the case. On the contrary. One hundred, a few hundred years ago it was ‘we’ and ‘them’. We – our nation, our community, our state in these boundaries, against them, who are enemies, who are competitors, and so on, and so on. That you can’t sustain longer because survival of every human community is dependent today on survival of the rest of the planet. You can’t separate them.

**JT:** If it is all right to come back to the problem of the boundary between reality and illusion in consumer society, I would like to ask one more question. If a person trusts illusion too much and he or she doesn’t epistemically recognize the difference between reality and illusion, can it be considered immoral?

**ZB:** Well, here epistemic and moral also come together, because it’s also stupid – if you don’t distinguish between, as you said, illusion and reality. If you just take seriously advertisements, commercials, something like that... I don’t know, it’s even more stupid than it is immoral. Because very often you do it not to other people’s damage, but to your own damage. So morality does not apply here – if you want to do harm to yourself, you are free to do so. There is no moral objection to that. When you actually believe that the benefits which were promised to you in commercials are real and the pretensions are realities, then you are doing harm mostly to yourself because you lose orientation.

**JT:** But if I treat the Other as a commodity, the reason which helps or allows me to treat him or her this way is that he or she is partly an illusion to me – an illusion of a commodity, of an object, of something that doesn’t look into my eyes. In such situation I don’t hear the cry of the Other.

**ZB:** Yes, but I wouldn't use the concept of illusion in this context. It's not the problem here which you are absolutely right to describe. It's not a question of illusion – what you hold illusion.

Take situation like that: you love your partner very much, therefore you want to be good for him or for her. Give him or her something they dream of, satisfy their needs, defend their time and preferences. But among other things, what beloved person demands from you is to spend a lot of time with him or her and listen very very attentively to what pains them. They would like to confide you the unpleasant things which they met in their job. For example, they return in the evening from their office, and they're very depressed, and they want some consolation, they want a domestic confessional in a sense, in which they can share their own troubles with another person.

But you are also working, and therefore you have very little time to dedicate to the other person whom you love. You always have to steal it from your career, from your prospects, from your job. Because if you are dedicating too much time to your private problems, private affairs, then your boss won't like it. He wants you to be constantly at

his disposal. Recent inventions were mobile telephones, so that you are never away from your job. You don't have to sit in your office in order to be exposed, to be demanded by your superiors – they can phone you. If they want they can phone you even at midnight or when you are going for a walk – you always carry mobile telephone, you are always at beck and call, as they say. So there is a clash. You love the person, you want to give best to him or to her, but you can't offer what he really needs. He needs your company, but he gets it very sparingly because you're also busy. So what do you do?

And here the market comes as a solution, a saviour. And the more you love a person, the more costly are your gifts. And the more costly they are, the longer time you have to spend promoting your career, to get more salary, more money.

So is it an illusion? Or is it just a real contradiction? It's not a question of illusion, it's reality. It is actually what happens to enormous amount of people really – daily.

Is it illusion? Is it reality? Does it matter? It is psychosomatic. If it is psychosomatic, then it does not matter if it is real or not. What does matter, is that you accept it, you live through it, that you actually experience that.

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