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What a lecturer of ethics can lecture about? On the margins of Zygmunt Bauman's reading

There does not exist an objective confirmation of the sort: yes, child, you behaved well, I'm full of praise for such proper conduct – there isn't such a thing! There isn't an authorised guide to stroke our head saying: yes, you did well, carry on like that... and follow this rule [11].
Zygmunt Bauman

The role of a lecturer is most commonly associated with passing on knowledge. The teacher expounds while the students absorb. The *raison d'être* of such a situation is the existence of something the teacher is equipped with and what the listeners do not possess. If the lecturer had nothing to convey, he would have no right to rid his students of something that none of us has in excess, i.e. time. If this really is the case, a question arises as to what a teacher of ethics can have to offer. Zygmunt Bauman seems to be an appropriate addressee of a question so formulated for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is so because the author of *Liquid Modernity* has devoted most of his immense research work to a diagnosis of the specificity of contemporary western society. Secondly, because of the einterdisciplinary nature of his works. Thirdly, because ethics is the core interest around which his deliberations concentrate. Education itself – let it be the fourth reason – has been the subject of numerous comments made by the philosopher. Thus, we can expect from Bauman the most relevant, impartial and competent hints.

An attempt at answering the question posed – on the basis of the achievements of the author of *Postmodern Ethics* – will comprise two parts. The first part will reconstruct his findings on the specificity of contemporary social realities. On this ground, in the second part – referring to Bauman's concept of ethics – we will try to find an answer to the title question.

The main feature of the present time which is immensely significant for today's education is what Bauman calls liquidity. Bewildering speed and omnipresence of occurring changes in areas such as: social norms, technology, economic reality, knowledge, required competences, axiological norms and standards, put education in an unprecedented situation. The fact that things change is constant, and yet, because of the large scale and the revolutionary pace it is a new and immensely embarrassing circumstance. *How to prepare oneself for a job for life, a job being a lifetime vocation, when all the laboriously acquired qualifications change from assets into liabilities from one day to the next, when instead of an advantage they become a disadvantage and when today's professions, occupations and workplaces evaporate without a trace and today's expert opinion awaits sad doom of old wife's tale tomorrow* [7, p. 141]. The eternal concept of education postulating that there are fixed rules according to which and into which a disciple is to be led is in very deep water [11, p. 24]. A teacher taking the chair today has very little knowledge about what the world will look like tomorrow, the world in which his listeners will utilize what they have learnt during his lectures.

Another educationally very important aspect of our times – strictly related to the previous one – is fragmentation of the reality. The impossible to grasp amount of information, perspectives, narratives, blinking conceptions of the humanities and momentarily ageing technological achievements – all these make an impression of a chaos hard to grasp where *the celebration of meanings ends up in meaninglessness* [2, p. 19]. If we add to this

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a rapid growth in the number of opinion-forming factors [7, p. 230 ff] competitive to the traditional educational institutions (school, family, friends, church perhaps), it is easy to spot the amount and incoherency of stimuli one is exposed to. The multiplication of cognitively and axiologically relieving structures thwarts the comfortable final effect. When advised by one voice, the matter is simple, similarly in the case of five advisers, but when we hear hundreds of mutually exclusive pieces of advice – *a cacophony of contradictory and ephemeral ideals and teachings* – we are left to our own devices again.

Fragmentation of reality involves not only the multitudinous information and viewpoints, but also resignation from a comprehensive perspective. The orderly holisms are being replaced by narrow specialist knowledge and detailed information, while generalised problems are chopped into innumerable trivia [7, pp. 299–300]. Moving away from universal principles manifests itself in effortless goal finding with an accompanying feeling of exhilaration coming from the amount and availability of means to accomplish it. A good but defying all logic illustration of the trend to alienate the means from the goals is the tendency of bureaucracy to grow constantly far beyond real needs or, better still, complete social acceptance of such practices.

The third phenomenon, important from the point of view of the question posed in the title, is a widespread escape from responsibility. Bauman inverts Sigmund Freud's classic thought (expressed in his work *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* [13, p. 182]) by saying, that it is not the loss of freedom we pay for the feeling of security – as was the case during the times of the founder of psychoanalysis – but it is the loss of security with which we pay for culturally propagated expansion of personal freedom [7, pp. 5–10, 220]. Disorientation of an individual resulting from the factors mentioned in the previous points, together with an increasing scope of decisions to be made plus sudden escalation of causative forces and interdependence among members of a society make responsibility without guidance an unbearable situation. Being a negative reaction to such circumstances, escape from responsibility takes a visible shape in the form of an overblown market of advisory services [10, pp. 133–134] or a sudden increase in demand for professional codes and regulations.

Another factor weakening the feeling of responsibility is today's predominant organisation of work in which far-reaching specialisation and fragmentation cause the people involved in a task to lose from sight the overall objective [3, pp. 168–173]. As it affects such delicate spheres of life as administration, law or medicine, this approach is very dangerous for morality because it creates a state of fragmentation and discontinuity where responsibility disappears. The effect of abandoned responsibility is paradoxically enhanced by introducing a surrogate in the form of rule-guided responsibility connected only with the performance and means necessary to accomplish a given task [5, pp. 212–220]. The process of immunization against genuine moral impulses in bureaucratically organised structures is further reinforced by dehumanised, technically-oriented jargon [5, pp. 220–224].

The fourth aspect of the modern western society is its consumerist tendency. According to Bauman, the logic of the market – centered on economic calculation and consumer-commodity relations – has almost completely colonised all social life [4, p. 17]. It is visible from a general perspective (for example in the form of criminalization of poverty, reduction of employee benefits, dependence of social position on the amount of consumed goods), but is also reflected in the human condition of a single individual (here Bauman points out to a sudden decrease of social and job security [2, p. 15] and, partially resulting from this, a more common tendency to treat people as commodities [4, p. 12]). The expansion of economic thought has a consequence in what is termed by Bauman as *adiaforisation*. The term, referring to the terminology of medieval councils, means a process which exempts various areas of life (their number constantly growing) from moral evaluation. What used to be a matter of conscience now starts to appear as a technical issue to be dealt with instrumental rationality and economic calculation.

Closely related to the consumerist character of the western societies is the next quality, which we will note down as the fifth one, concerning a specific character of interpersonal relations. Bauman, following another modern sociologist Anthony Giddens, describes it as 'pure relationships'. Briefly speaking, what characterizes 'pure relationships' is utmost superficiality, completely deprived of a more subtle axiological aspect. An example of this is university life with its relationships. On the one hand, the ethos of a Master Teacher devoting much time (also his private) and attention to his students is more and more frequently replaced by an image of a forever hard-pressed for time lecturer. On the other hand, a student seeking true knowledge and his own way through life is also becoming a rarity as his place is being taken by a certificate-hungry youngster concentrated only on the fight for full membership in the consumerist society.

As the sixth and the last distinctive feature, which is actually a synthesis of the previous ones, let us mention the change of lifestyle. In the past, Bauman observes, life was linked to the metaphor of a pilgrim [2, pp. 10–14]. An individual tried to advance towards a chosen goal and direction making his journey in stages. Certain decisions concerning e.g. education, job, location of the workplace or marriage had a definitive and unique character. The predominating life strategy consisted in implementation of a coherent and consistent plan. Yet, due to the processes mentioned previously, which constitute the process of liquefying modernity, the pilgrim metaphor with its approach to life has become a task almost impossible to accomplish. The solid and predictable ground providing relative security in carrying out life goals has disappeared [2, pp. 14–21]. Bauman characterised the specificity of the new lifestyle by comparing the modern man to a thrill seeking travelling tourist avoiding at all cost any long-lasting bonds, a vagrant wandering the strange and inhospitable earth, a stroller or a gambler left to unpredictable fortune's whims [2, pp. 21–36]. Changeability, risk, unpredictability, chaos, randomness, lack of attachment – these are, according to Bauman, the qualities characterizing life of contemporary western societies.

We have outlined the picture of the world in which today's lecturer of ethics takes the chair. The world changing on a daily basis, bombarding us with countless information and opinions, all the time demanding answers to innumerable questions and at the same time offering a temptation to avoid doing so; the world governed by tough market rules, inhabited by more and more atomized individuals. What, then, can a teacher of ethics have to offer?

There appears a temptation to expect from an ethicist providing norms resolving doubts as to how to move around the difficult and dim reality. Nothing, however, seems further from what we learn from Bauman's work, than living up to such expectations. Ethics as a canon, legislative code or a set of rules does not fit in with today's world. It does not mean that we don't need ethical norms, but they are not based on ethics, or, to use Bauman's language, they do not reflect what morality is. Ethics 'founded on law' [3, p. 41] deserves to be turned down for a number of reasons. Firstly, it creates ideal conditions for avoiding responsibility and hiding behind the set rules. Especially the latter is detrimental and dangerous, since, when treated in isolation from axiological background, the rules can easily be turned against the values they were to protect. Secondly, syllogistic application of norms – lawyers learnt this a long time ago – is a myth hardly describing the process in which prescriptive rules are introduced. In their application always a certain sense of taste is present. Thirdly, a question arises as to the creators of moral standards. There are not any renowned and competent experts in the field of 'how to live'. There is no expertise allowing settling this question objectively and ultimately, nor is there a foundation of existence capable of deducing objective axiology. Fourthly, a moral code free from the aporetic moments seems impossible. Fifthly and finally, when faced by the dynamics of changes and high complexity and fuzziness of social reality, a set of rules applicable to all sorts of situations seems unlikely.

According to Bauman, the moral self should be the basis of postmodern ethics [3, pp. 85–110]. Morality is aporetic (unquestionably good choices are an exception rather than a rule), non-systemic, not overbearing (it does not provide certainty as to whether we go in the right direction or whether we have gone far enough) and it does not yield to rational argumentation [3, pp. 19–21]¹.

So, if not a set moral principles, what is it then that a moral philosopher can offer? He does not have anything to say, but he has a lot to do instead. His task is to stimulate

moral imagination, to show the presence of moral values in areas where an individual is ready to recognize them and to sensitize to the vastness of axiologically non-insignificant effects of their presence. An ethicist is not a legislator with a casting vote but only an interpreter revealing multitudes of possible interpretations and entanglements. His role is not lessening doubts but increasing them, not helping overcome moral dilemmas, but making it more difficult to get rid of them. The desired state is not peace and ease of mind. Quite the contrary – the mind should remain constantly alert and attentive. *Uncertainty is a familiar ground for a moral person and the only soil on which morality can sprout and bloom* [9, p. 53]. In the post-modern perspective as proposed by Bauman, it is not important that everything is relative, but the fact that the road to recognise one's own actions is hard and full of traps, which cannot be avoided by means of a set of rules. The author of *Postmodern Ethics* expresses it in the following words: *What I propagate is cognitive relativism rather than ontological one, but surely it is not ethical relativism* [1, p. 26].

But is it really true that a teacher of ethics should only offer question marks? Is doubt the only measure of morality or perhaps certain things which are obvious after all should also be counted in? Looking for an answer, we will be referring to a well-known philosopher seeing him as rather undecided in speech but very resolute in action. Taking the risk, from the point of view of Bauman's works, of being accused of an intention to sustain a contradiction between the so called first level teaching (mastering the lectured content) and the second level teaching (*secondary learning, in most cases happens unnoticed by the participants and it is irrelevant how much is taught or learnt* [7, p. 226]) let us say that the positive outcome depends on consistent and humanistic application of methods of building teacher-student relationships.

To sum up let us ask one more question: is the solution to the title problem here proposed satisfactory from the point of view of today's needs? Is it not too minimalistic, too ungraspable and too difficult for easy application? It seems that, according to the spirit of Bauman's works, the answer could be as follows: post-modernity is not the time of huge projects. Nor is it the right time to put trust in maximalist educational programmes reflecting the engineering attitude towards society. The recipes seeking a solution to the problem of teaching ethics in large-scale and far-reaching projects of '*agricultural vision of culture*' [5, p. 175] at present do not seem possible nor desirable.

Translated by B. Setkowicz

¹ [3, p. 8], see also [12, pp. 23–24].

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Co może mieć do przekazania nauczyciel etyki? Na marginesie lektury Zygmunta Baumana

Artykuł koncentruje się wokół zagadnienia współczesnego nauczania etyki, który to problem jest rozpatrywany z punktu widzenia prac Zygmunta Baumana. Rzecz składa się z dwóch części.

W pierwszej z nich dochodzi do rozjaśnienia tytułowego pytania poprzez rekonstrukcję baumanowskiej diagnozy specyfiki dzisiejszego społeczeństwa Zachodu. Mowa tu o takich zjawiskach, jak: szybkość i nieprzewidywalność następujących zmian, rozkawałkowanie obrazu rzeczywistości, powszechność uciekania od odpowiedzialności, ekspansja racjonalności ekonomicznej,

aksjologiczna atrofia relacji międzyludzkich, zmiana dominującego sposobu życia. Wszystkie te elementy wyznaczają kontekst i związaną z nim kłopotliwość stawianego w tytule pytania.

W części drugiej zarysowana zostaje zapośredniczona o wypracowaną przez Baumana koncepcję etyki perspektywa nauczania tego przedmiotu. Podstawowa teza głosi, że nauczyciel etyki nic nie ma do przekazania, lecz za to bardzo wiele do zrobienia. Jego zadanie polega mianowicie na rozbudzaniu wyobraźni moralnej.

Key words: Bauman, ethics, morality, post-modernity, teaching ethics, responsibility

Słowa kluczowe: Bauman, etyka, moralność, ponowoczesność, uczenie etyki, odpowiedzialność