Liquid Sociology: Zygmunt Bauman on Postmodern Morality

Abstract
7th Annual Fall Conference: Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture
Modernity: Yearning for the Infinite

"The subject who says 'Here I am!' *testifies* to the Infinite. It is through this testimony...that the revelation of the Infinite occurs."

Emmanuel Levinas (*Ethics and Infinity*, 1985)

One of the most brilliant and prolific writers on modern culture is the expatriate Polish sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman. Although he is well known in Europe, his work has received little attention to date from American theorists, despite his having published about fifteen books in English in the past two decades. This neglect is unfortunate since Bauman is a sharp diagnostician of culture, as good as better known postmodern thinkers like Lyotard and Jameson, with the additional virtue of being able to write lucid, economical prose. One of Bauman's favorite metaphors is that of *liquidity,* which he uses to capture the shift within modernity from fixed centers of power like the nation state to the contemporary emphasis on mobility, lightness, and the free circulation of technology and capital in a global market.[1] Liquidity is also a quality of a postmodern intellectual like Bauman whose thinking dissolves disciplinary borders between the social sciences and philosophy, flowing into a variety of profound questions not typically examined by academic sociologists, such as death, immortality, freedom, and the meaning of the Holocaust.

In this paper I focus on one highly significant strain in Bauman's thought, that of the prospects for morality in late modernity.[2] I provide a critical analysis of his understanding of morality which challenges his views on the human relation to transcendence. According to Bauman, the *modern project* of ethics seeks to ground moral choices in universal, rationally accessible principles and by so doing to relieve the individual of the ambiguity or, as Bauman prefers, the 'ambivalence' of freedom. The program of modern science, politics, and philosophy, hostile to ambivalence and contingency, seeks progressive relief from uncertainty and insecurity

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[1] Among Bauman's recent books are *Liquid Modernity* (2000), *Liquid Love* (2003), and *Liquid Life* (2005), all published by Polity Press.
[2] Bauman's major works on morality are *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cornell, 1989), *Postmodern Ethics* (Blackwell, 1993), and *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Blackwell, 1995).

in the human condition. In contrast, *postmodern culture* resists a universal rational order and is skeptical about the possibilities for secure metaphysical groundings of moral choices. While acknowledging the risks of a postmodern condition that provides no guideposts for behavior outside the relative values of local communities, Bauman also believes that collapse of the modern project of ethics *emancipates a morality of personal responsibility.* Opposed to modernity's legislative, authoritative domination of personal choice, Bauman, like Emmanuel Levinas, champions the freedom, responsibility and ambivalence of face to face moral relationships.

While I express approval for Bauman's willingness to place moral responsibility for the 'Other' at the existential core of the human condition, I criticize Bauman's neglect of the transcendent aspects of the ethical relation. As Cardinal William Keeler has noted, those righteous few who resisted the Nazi exterminators not only had a sense of moral responsibility in the very fiber of their being, but also "had a deep sense that there was an ultimate meaning to life beyond the present" and were "open to a transcendent dimension."[3] Without this openness to the transcendent and without the recognition of what Levinas has called the infinite in the other, it is not clear how the postmodern individual can resist the amoral and self-indulgent obsession with consumption that Bauman himself has so splendidly described as the chief feature of a liquid, "postmodern" modernity.

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[3] "Lessons To Learn From Catholic Rescuers," in *Catholics Remember the Holocaust* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), p. 29.