Review of “Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?”

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Recommended Citation

Essays in Philosophy is a biannual journal published by Pacific University Library | ISSN 1526-0569 | http://commons.pacific.edu/eip/

As I was getting ready to leave the house for the university one morning, my three-year-old daughter nonchalantly and unassumingly approached me holding a catalog for toys and said: “Papi I want everything in this catalog for Christmas. Do you think Santa will bring me all these toys?” When I suggested that perhaps it was a good idea to ask Santa only for one toy given the fact that there are children who have very few toys, she quickly retorted. “Ok I’ll ask for two.” Her instinct, some might argue, is to believe that more is always better. And, while I appreciate my daughter’s inability to draw a distinction between qualitative and quantitative differences at such an early age, one cannot help but wonder how this “more is better” mentality gets ingrained so early.

The effect consumer culture has on the way we frame both our desires and our needs calls for some attention. In this spirit, Zygmunt Bauman’s self-proclaimed “report from a battlefield” Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers? does just that. Challenging readers to reflect upon “the possibility [that] populating the world with more caring people and inducing more people to care does not figure in the panoramas painted in the consumerist utopia,” Bauman’s analysis makes known the non-coincidental dispositions that emerge when one is subjected to a media montage that unequivocally tells people that the sum of their worth is equal to the sum of their pocketbooks. (54)

In an age of consumerism no one seems immune to the onslaught of messages asking us to “go out and buy, buy, buy.” In fact, marketing specialists seem to be getting more sophisticated in hitting their target audiences be they older folk in “need” of supplemental health insurance, parents who desperately “require” more educational toys for their tots, or children who are learning at an early age to adopt the motto “the person who dies with the most toys wins”—a slogan Reebok exploited unapologetically.

Bauman’s argument, unlike the argument in some of his other work, is relatively easy to follow and he avoids using much of the jargon that was evident in his more explicitly Marxian days. He identifies the issue, namely, we have created a society that is perpetuating selfishness to a degree so severe that there might not be a turning back point, and offers up a way to re-imagine or, at a minimum, begin to think about the current global landscape. Perceiving the gravity of the situation seems warranted yet the call to develop new conceptual tools that enable us to “attempt the impossible” is what allows us to believe that Bauman’s appeal to Havel and the idea that hope, courage and stubbornness are weapons that, although used too seldom in the past, need to be employed. Appealing to the usual suspects, namely, Freud, Nietzsche, Scheler and Levinas, Bauman’s characterization of our current predicament urges us to consider our own complacency.
Consequently, Bauman’s message is relevant for academics, public intellectuals and, eventually, even my three-year-old daughter.

In both academic circles and the popular media, the idea that we are now irrevocably global, a sentiment popularized by Thomas Friedman’s highly acclaimed, *The World is Flat*, is compelling ethicist, sociologist, political theorists and humanist generally to understand acutely the importance of situating contemporary discussions in a global context. Whether popularizing cosmopolitanism, analyzing global forces, examining the effects of the ‘global order’ or calling into question the possibility of deciding what it means to be human, scholars and public intellectuals are wrestling with the problems arising in a 21st century global context. Those problems, the very ones Anglo-European scholars are dissecting, are ironically the result of Anglo-European encroachment. “To put it in a nutshell, Europe invented a *global* solution to its *locally* produced problems—and by doing so, forced all other humans to seek, desperately and in vain, *local* solutions to *globally* produced problems.” (229)

One of the fundamental problems, as Bauman insightfully proclaims, is that while we might, in fact, share a common fate, we neither feel an obligation to help “our neighbors” nor do we believe we are obliged to act differently to ensure “our neighbors” have the opportunity to live lives worthy of being called human. Ethic’s task, Bauman reminds us, is to “disturb the complacency of being.” (63) One might ask, however, whether there is, as Bauman’s title makes plain, room for ethics. Keep in mind, we, e.g., those of us in the industrialized world, seem unbelievable resistant to the idea that we bear some responsibility for the state of the world. For example, why isn’t it morally disturbing to most of us that among approximately 6 billion human beings about 800 million are undernourished, 900 million lack access to medical care, 1 billion lack access to safe drinking water, 1 billion lack adequate shelter, 2 billion have no electricity, 2.5 billion lack basic sanitation and almost 1 billion adults are illiterate? While some would argue that we cannot be convinced that we are responsible, the problem appears to be that we do not feel responsible. Yet we think ourselves profound when we ask ourselves, “why should I be moral?” not recognizing all the while that asking “why should I be moral?” is not “the starting point of moral conduct but a signal of its imminent demise.” (62)

Our emotional response, then, is being conditioned in such a way that we are willfully insulating ourselves thereby perpetuating our selfishness, parochialism and provinciality. When someone tells me that nearly 11 million children die each year from preventable diseases, should I be disturbed? What does it have to do with me? I am not responsible for ‘causing’ the conditions that lead to those types of deprivation; I do not have the power to eradicate poverty worldwide. Because I recognize, perhaps wrongly, that I do not play a significant role in designing, implementing and imposing either the global order or the national schemes of so-called developing countries, I am not responsible and therefore, I continue to sleep well at night. Keep in mind, “*Responsibility* means now, first and last, *responsibility to oneself* (“You owe it to yourself,” as the outspoken traders in relief from responsibility indefatigably repeat.), while “*responsible choices*” are, first and last, such moves as serve the interests and satisfy the desires of the actor and stave off the need for compromise.” (53)

Importantly, the epistemological foundation employed by most has been reduced to a naïve relativism so profound that one wonders if people can reflect upon the life choices available to
them. It is to suggest that “without bracing oneself for the possibility of wrong choices, little can be done toward persevering in the search for the right choice. Far from being a major threat to morality (and so an abomination to ethical philosophers), uncertainty is the home ground of the moral person and the only soil in which morality can sprout and flourish.” (63) This has been misinterpreted however. In a society inclined to creative destruction, willful obsolescent and transient experiences never before witnessed, people not coincidentally have thrown off the chains understood by Freud as the “reality principle.” It is our everyday whims and caprices that must be satisfied. There are no limits to what we should be expected to attempt to do or to experience. The perpetuation of selfishness and the need to feel satiated, albeit temporarily, leaves no room for reflection and certainly no occasion to imagine the world from a perspective other than our own. It is illustrated beautifully in our “postmodern” classrooms when students inform professors of ethics that “morality is simply a matter of opinion.” What they mean, as is probably obvious, is that no one has the right to call into question the way the ‘choose’ to live their lives. Oblivious to the fact that their lives and choices are predictable, they carry on content to perpetuate their mindlessness. As Bauman argues in chapter three “Freedom in the Liquid-Modern Era,” happiness once equaled freedom of experimentation: liberty to take right and wrong steps, freedom to succeed and fail, to invent, try and test ever new varieties of pleasurable and gratifying experience, to choose and to take the risk of erring.” (116) Now, however, as we adopt the Foucauldian call to become works of art, while having an anemic understanding of what constitutes a “work of art,” we are witnessing ‘artistic creations’ that celebrate the banal, the trivial and the ordinary, filling our minds and the minds of our fellows with nothing but platitudes and clichés. (123-124)

What Bauman calls for is a movement that appreciates the potential role the arts can play in society. The artist allows us to imagine a world different from what it would likely become if left to its own devices. Is it possible to ‘create’ a world that enables cultural creativity to flourish without having to be subordinated to the consumer markets? Where are our heroes? Where are the voices that can enable us to imagine the world anew? We are caught up in the idea that the liberal democratic global order is the panacea we have been looking for as we conveniently turn a blind eye to the misery, oppression and suffering being experienced by our fellow human beings across the globe. The irony of Bauman’s call, however, captured in his final chapter “Making the Planet Hospitable to Europe” betrays the Eurocentric mindset and attitude that got us into this mess in the first place. I do recognize the irony in Bauman’s approach; yet the idea that what we face is “The choice… between allowing our cities to turn into places of terror, “where strangers are to be feared and distrusted,” and the “solidarity of strangers” a solidarity strengthened by the ever harder tests to which it subjected and which it survives,” overlooks the “European” ideal that assimilation to European values remains the elixir. (256) That (Western) European ‘exclusivism’ has a long and cherished history should not be overlooked as we grasp for the theoretical insights that have not yet been made manifest. I guess the hope is that Europe has learned from its mistakes; the courage is illustrated by a willingness to lead the charge once more; and the stubbornness is the refusal to admit that you aren’t a (moral) leader.

Concluding Remarks. Bauman’s analysis regarding the estrangement of the ‘knowledge class’ from society generally, provides occasion to reflect on the hallowed halls of the academy. The heralding calls of global citizenship and the desire to embrace a model of education that promotes civic engagement and an informed citizenry is ushering in a new era of competition in higher education.
In our continuously advancing global world, however, success is often defined by the size of one’s home, the make of one’s vehicle, or the extent of one’s economic power. Even in institutions of higher education, in an age of the multiversity and university, inc., success is related to the students’ increased earning potential. In this context, it is not surprising that educational (moral) outcomes are easily misconstrued as an incidental part of a higher education, while earning potential appears as a fundamental goal.

However, the idea that education serves a public good, and more strongly the notion that higher education should do so, is one of the central experiments in the history of democracy in the United States. Nonetheless, in our present context, the importance of having access to higher education appears to have little to do with the common good and the importance of an engaged and learned citizenry and more with the interest in prioritizing competitive advantage, earning potential, and prestige. The trend toward privatization and corporate sponsorship of university research, a trend that perpetuates existing power relations and promotes the acquisition of wealth and the ability to buy your way into particular social networks seriously undermines the critical force of higher education, specifically civic education. If the university community is understood as a community committed to ethical pedagogy and true-knowledge seeking, then critiques and approaches meant to expose and to alleviate the plight of the world’s “poor” need to include a critical analysis of the academy.

There is little doubt that Bauman has provided a text that is worth reading and thoughtfully considering. There remains some doubt, given his analysis, that we are apt to be able to make the changes he suggests. Keep in mind, the emergence of modernity with its emphasis on rationality, the emergence of capitalist culture with its emphasis on technical rationality and the need to dominate nature for the sake of human beings, is leading human beings farther and farther away from self-fulfillment. In the name of reason, technical efficiency and the domination of nature have reached new heights and as a consequence, the domination of human beings by other human beings approaches the dark abyss that relegates human beings to objects controlled by the cultural forces that have prevailed. This one-sided development of reason masked as technical or purposive rationality has reared its ugly head and society is proceeding in a deadly direction. The search for human self-fulfillment and the social conditions necessary for human self-fulfillment are escaping. The specialization of mass culture and industry is creating automons; human beings are beginning to lose their capacity to reflect not only about themselves but also about society and social concerns generally. And who is going to use the weapons of hope, courage and stubbornness Bauman advocates?

The academy, one might argue, should set the standard by ushering in an era that challenges all inhabitants to aspire to become human beings who value friendship and community and who strive to live humbly, caringly, compassionately, and generously. But, we seem to be content to continue asking “why should I be moral?”

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