Modern Subjectivity and its History

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Abstract: The intention of this paper is to deliver some valuable insights upon the modern problems of practical philosophy and its correlation with modernity as such. Namely, we are interested in undeniable connection between the real social circumstances and actual moral and/or political theories. Although this connection – or these connections – truly is undeniable, its specific dimensions and relations aren't out of the question. In order to show characteristics of modern ethical life, it is necessary to compare it with earlier understandings of man's position in world. We will see that relations between moral and political purposes are prone to change during history of philosophy, although both are always understood as essential expressions of human will.
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The concept of modernity is not self-evident. Of course, high-reaching concepts usually aren't. Its meaning largely depends on whether we are talking about modernity as such, or about more specific area, such as modern history, literature, science, philosophy etc. Yet, we can't actually analyze modern philosophy without analyzing modernity "as such" and all of the circumstances that moulded modern times. The truth is that modern philosophy is inseparable from *modernity*, and not just in the sense of Hegel's thesis that philosophy is a child of its time, but also in accordance with Adorno's attempt to "make the methodological point that we must try to overcome the sterile dichotomy between history and

its philosophical interpretation."[1] It is hard to decide whether revolution in thinking comes before the social revolution or after it. Was it necessary for different mode of self-understanding to arise in order to change real historical circumstances? Or the power of revolutionary changes all over the Europe indicated that old philosophies are not suitable for new circumstances? In both cases, the self-reflection of man and his redefining of basic social relations remained positively interconnected.

Ethics begins with Socrates. This is a usual way of interpreting history of ethics in the curriculums all around the world. Socrates role is of such a huge significance in history of morals, but also a history of mankind, that he is often being compared to Christ. And yet, if the stage wasn't already set for ethics to be born, maybe Socrates would be only known as unusual philosophical figure who had sort of a graphophobia (and was a remarkably ugly man).[2] Also, if Socrates is a father of ethics – maybe it's better to call him a mother, considering his maieutical method – the sophists were at least its uncles or aunts. It was necessary to determine that man is the measure of all things[3] before his true competences in measuring were to being investigated. Likewise, for a question of measure to be raised, it was absolutely necessary for social circumstances not only to allow that kind of question, but to encourage it. I assume that no one is that naive to believe that the sophists are really the first people ever who asked what is right and justice. I'm positively sure that in old Egypt, for example, many people asked if there is some kind of principle independent of pharaoh. Still, we do

[1] T. Adorno, *History and Freedom,* trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 40.

[2] Rawls says that "this is an aspect of history that Hegel emphasizes – that great men who had enormous effects on major events of history usually never understood the real significance of what they had done." J. Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 348.

[3] According to Protagoras' famous statement (DK 80B1): "Of all things the measure is Man, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not."

not speak of old Egyptians as fathers of ethics. Why? Because historical circumstances haven't allowed them to raise their personal opinions into the moving force which will establish the new *Weltanschauung*.

Thus, the time must be prepared and mature enough for certain idea to flourish and ideas must "seize the day" and find their way into the mainstream discourse: "As for the individual, everyone is a son of his time; so philosophy also is its time apprehended in thoughts."[4] Philosophical apprehension of its time becomes more obvious as we move towards modernity. The breakage of classical Hellenic polis has shown that deeply collectivistic world couldn't stand the breach of subjective will into its core. In time that was about to come, beautiful Hellenic spirit, which strived towards a noble idea of being a good citizen of a good polis, transformed itself into the self-perceptive understanding of human will as almost buried in ethics. Paradoxically, ethics arises in the world of collective spirit and collective duties, in which the politics has its last word in matters of human behaviour and purposes. The concept of individual measuring and filtering of the general believes of justice had ruined the very root of collective idea of justice, as directed towards the wellbeing of polis. And yet, in the Hellenistic world, in which the unity of ethics and politics doesn't exist anymore, ethics itself becomes the true power of freedom, which will evolve into the infinite right to subjectivity. Of course, in those specific circumstances, that freedom is still only *internal*, but empowering of internal freedom and understanding the very essence of human being as internal freedom is a step towards the later understanding of freedom which must express itself in outer world in order for human being to confirm his own existence.

Although Fichte has "deduced the whole character of Modern Time"[5] from Christianity, Christian ethics is somewhat of *contradictio in adiecto*:

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[4] G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right,* trans. S. W. Dyde (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 19.

[5] J. G. Fichte, *Characteristics of the Present Age,* trans. W. Smith (Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2008), 174.

> In contrast with classical moral philosophy, the moral philosophy of the medieval Church is not the result of the exercise of free, disciplined reason alone. This is not to say that its moral philosophy is not true or that it is unreasonable; but it was subordinate to church authority and largely practised by the clergy and the religious orders in order to fulfil the Church's practical need for a moral theology.[6]

Ethics in fact can't stand any restrictions regarding its applicability onto human kind as a whole. Nonetheless, Christian ethics represents a significant "improvement" of relations between moral individuals. Now the main focus isn't anymore the question of my relation to myself, as, for example, in stoic philosophy, but my relation to Other (god) and others. By worshiping other beings, I simultaneously worship the god, so the "good morals" becomes the way of obeying god's will, not just nurturing my own freedom. The question of virtues and vices is experiencing its paroxysm and the problem of motivation is in the centre of attention. And precisely this problem of motivation, alongside with medieval concern for dissolution of conflict between the idea of human free will and god's providence, will become the focal point of the modern age, but from a rather different perspective.

In Luther's dispute with Erasmus, which is in a way a remake of Augustine's dispute with Pelagius,[7] it becomes obvious that question of Christian ethics had evolved into two separate directions, each of them setting its own way towards a modern epoch. While Protestantism strives to reach the lost unity of different levels of praxis through idea of *call* and priesthood of all believers, humanism tends to recreate antique understanding of complete human being whose will itself shall make a differ-

[6] Rawls, 6.

[7] Of course, social circumstances evolved enough to allow for both of these options to be plausible. Not without effort and fight, but both Protestantism and humanism have had the opportunity to develop, unlike pelagianism.

ence in the world(s). Luther thinks that there can be no good deed which can guarantee divinity, only faith will lead us to god. This concept is not directed against good deeds as such, but against the wrong motivation behind them. And eternal salvation proves itself as a wrong motivation for good deeds: "Ironically, Martin Luther, one of the most intolerant of men, turns out to be an agent of modern liberty."[8]

So the question of motivation becomes the most relevant question of modern ethics, alongside with the problem of freedom. It can be said that beginning of modern thinking of ethics shows similarity to epoch of sophists and Socrates. Ancients had to ask who the measurer was, so does the moderns. The great measurer – god – is no longer the measure of all things; man must again take that roll to himself. And just like Socrates tended to find firm ground which can resist to relativizations, so must the modern philosopher. Still, the overgrowing power of natural sciences makes philosophical efforts much harder in modern epoch because philosophers are now cut off from the great unity of investigation of world. Newton still names his explorations "philosophy," but in modern world philosophy will become separated from sciences, and man will be separated from philosophy:

> One could say that what differentiates ancient from modern philosophy is the fact that, in ancient philosophy, it was not only Chrysippus or Epicurus who, just because they had developed a philosophical discourse, were considered philosophers. Rather, every person who lived according to the precepts of Chrysippus or Epicurus was every bit as much a philosopher as they.[9]

When Luther asks all men to be preachers, he is – in certain amount – reviving that antique moment of which Hadot

[8] Rawls, 348.

[9] P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life,* trans. M. Chase (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 272.

speaks. But modern times treats philosophy as a sort of a spinster cousin who lives in past and is utterly outdated.[10] In such circumstances, philosophers at first took the *easier* or more obvious way – they themselves reached for natural sciences and its models of interpretation of reality. Although this approach has made possible for nature to become something substantial, rather than just a product of god, it also has made almost impossible to develop a systematic moral theory.

We will consult Descartes' conception as an example. In Descartes' philosophy, primary *method* of apprehending reality isn't any more faith, but the exact opposite: doubt is the only acceptable approach. What remains after *scepsis* is the pure thinking, the very core of subjectivity. Nonetheless, pure thinking remains not only after sceptical method, but beyond it. Subject is now in the centre of the Universe, subject understood as pure thinking, but the mechanism that stands in the ground of the subject's self-understanding remains hidden. In the conception that defines two substances as parallel and not mediate with one another except through divine intervention, it isn't possible to maintain moral as anything but obscure fluctuation between *perfect* and *provisory* moral concept. The "provisional moral code" that Descartes formed for himself, consisted of "only three or four" maxims:

> The first was to obey the laws and customs of my country, and to adhere to the religion in which God

[10] "The great intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century which brought to light modern natural science was a revolution of a new philosophy or science against traditional (chiefly Aristotelian) philosophy or science. But the new philosophy or science was only partly successful. The most successful part of the new philosophy or science was the new natural science [...] By virtue of its victory, the new natural science became more and more independent of philosophy, at least, apparently, and even, as it were, became an authority for philosophy." Leo Strauss, and Joseph Cropsey, "Introduction," in *History of Political Philosophy,* eds. Leo Strauss, and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1.

> by His grace had me instructed from my childhood, and to govern myself in everything else according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions, being those commonly received among the *wisest* of those with whom I should have to live; […] My second maxim was to be as firm and resolute in my actions as I could, and to follow no less constantly the most doubtful opinions, once I had opted for them, than I would have if they had been the most certain ones; […] My third maxim was to endeavour always to master myself rather than fortune, to try to change my desires rather than to change the order of the world, and in general to settle for the belief that there is nothing entirely in our power except our thoughts, and after we have tried, in respect of things external to us, to do our best, everything in which we do not succeed is absolutely impossible as far as we are concerned; […] Finally, as a conclusion to this moral code, I decided to review the various occupations that men have in this life, in order to try to select the best one. Without wishing to pass judgement on the occupations of others, I came to the view that I could do no better than to continue in the one in which I found myself, that is to say, to devote my life to the cultivation of my reason and make such progress as I could in the knowledge of the truth following the method I had prescribed for myself.[11]

This provisional moral code is specific mixture of earlier ethical beliefs. Descartes' morality demands a man who is good citizen (but without a question of "goodness" of his country), true believer, consistent and constant in his actions, more willing to change himself than to change the world, and, finally, ready to fulfil platonic ideal of justice as a doing one's own.[12] Here

[11] R. Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian Maclean (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 21-24.

[12] Plato, *The Republic,* trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 2016),

we can see that moral consciousness is not capable to follow the same route of doubt and reach the goal of self-consciousness as "regular" one. The root of this incapability should be searched in hypostasis of theory over the praxis, which itself is the consequence of mathematization of philosophy. Spinoza's philosophy also shows that dogmatic position with only one substance can't give birth to legitimate moral conception, if the main assumption is *deterministic*. Neither Descartes nor Spinoza offers a possibility for human freedom as a mixture of rational and irrational element. Yet, this snowball of subjectivity as a self-made and self-guided entity will lead to avalanche that will transform ethics permanently.

Beside this current of *naturalization* in modern thinking, which doesn't show itself as particularly fruitful in the domain of practical philosophy, there is another, much more convenient for development of philosophy of praxis. This current has its roots in objective circumstances of transformation of feudal society into liberalistic paradigm. Most of philosophies of Modern Age find their objective in dissolution of a knot of feudal relicts, through the discussion on the questions of human nature and its role in political engagement. If human nature is intrinsically good, as Lock argued,[13] then legislation is necessary

433a-b. "Surely we set down and often said, if you remember, that each one must practice one of the functions in the city, that one for which his nature made him naturally most fit"; "this – the practice of minding one's own business – when it comes into being in a certain way, is probably justice."

[13] He defines the state of nature as "a state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another, there being nothing more evident than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another, without subordination or subjection, unless the lord and master of them all should, by any manifest declaration of his will, set one above another, and confer on him, by an evident and clear appointment, an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty." J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government,* The Works of John Locke, vol. V (London: Thomas Tegg), 106.

for a private property to be guaranteed. If, on the other hand, human nature is in itself egoistic and hostile, like Hobbes believes,[14] then we need laws for protection of life itself. In both cases, lawful regimes that stand on the grounds of ideas of freedom and equality are being seen as a *conditio sine qua non* of social life. The most important question, therefore, isn't directed towards moral character and virtues, but towards political structures. What is happening in a dawn of a new epoch is actually on the other side of spectre regarding Hellenistic epoch. While in Hellenistic epoch whole range of human practical life was withdrawn in morality, in modern age political activity is sphere which absorbs in itself the whole experience of human freedom.

That kind of turn was inevitable. Firstly, the gain of inner freedom, which was attained in Hellenistic ethics, still had its mayor worth. A medieval transformation of cause of morality hasn't influenced the principle of internal freedom in a great deal. It means that devotion to permanent building of one's own character remains plausible cause, even if its *final* cause is determined in relation with transcendence. These circumstances have allowed modern theoreticians to be a bit insensitive when it comes to the question of final purpose of morals, considering the fact that its plausible cause was still plausible. Rawls defines it in this way:

> Let's agree that there is this difference between ancient and modern moral philosophy. So, to conclude, we say: the ancients asked about the most rational way to true happiness, or the highest good, and they inquired about how virtuous conduct and the virtues as aspects of character – the virtues of courage and temperance, wisdom and justice, which are themselves good – are related to that highest good, whether as means, or as constituents, or both. Where-

[14] Although he claims that government is necessary not because man is naturally bad, but because he is by nature more individualistic than social.

> as the moderns asked primarily, or at least in the first instance, about what they saw as authoritative prescriptions of right reason, and the rights, duties, and obligations to which these prescriptions of reason gave rise. Only afterward did their attention turn to the goods these prescriptions permitted us to pursue and to cherish.[15]

Secondly, actual political circumstances were of such a revolutionary nature that they have absorbed most of the practical philosophical strivings. In other words, question on possibility of learning the individual virtue was largely overshadowed by a much more urgent question: What should we do with our society?

Plato is motivated by the same intention and his *Republic* tends to answer on exactly the same question – what Helens should do with their society. But context of that question is quite different. Plato is trying to discover what individual justice is, and that quest leads him into the discussion on general, political justice. He tends to show that moral character and (just) organization of state are inseparable. On a contrary, modern thinkers are trying to prove that *just* organization of the state is almost undependable of human character – good men or not, they all must live in a good state. As mentioned above, Hobbes and Locke can't be more different in their definitions of human beings in "natural state." However, they are both utterly convinced that social contract is necessary: "The mere social instinct implies a conscious purpose of security for life and property; and when society has been constituted, this purpose becomes more comprehensive."[16] Thus, it is urgent to define what the grand elements of sociality are, and grand elements of individuality can be left for individuals to work on.

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[15] J. Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2.

[16] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 39.

Modern western societies are anchored in this soil even in contemporary circumstances. What are you going to do with your own moral character is up to you, as long as you are respecting what is defined as freedom of others. No more, no less. Your moral character is a space of your infinite subjectivity and society – state – would not interfere, unless you directly endanger some of the state rules. How different is this picture compared to Plato's! Paradox is that Plato's own work enabled this kind of dissolution. If it wasn't for his attempt to strengthen Socrates' conception of subjective will, it wouldn't be possible for subjective will to become purpose by itself, parallel to general purpose but not subjected to it. As Adorno notes:

> Modern history begins with the discovery of the individual, and this has a quite different pathos and what might be called a quite different three-dimensionality form the manifestation of individuality in antiquity.[17]

Modern states are built on the principle of subjective freedom as a necessary element. Objective of the state is to make individual freedom untouchable at the widest possible range, bordering it only with other individual freedoms. That is the concept of modern liberal democracy. As we saw, the roots of this state of the affairs could be found in ancient Greece and "discovery" of the subjective will, i.e., discovery of morals. Ever since the subjective will has shown its head from the eggshell of Greek *ethical life*, it was meant for it to become the most powerful force of one's self-confirmation. And yet, it has been years and centuries until both social circumstances and philosophical reflections recognized individual freedom and freedom of believes as the most important task of every society:

> [...] That a State is then well constituted and internally powerful, when the private interest of its citizens is

[17] Adorno, *History and Freedom,* 86.

> one with the common interest of the State; when the one finds its gratification and realization in the other. [...] The epoch when a State attains this harmonious condition, marks the period of its bloom, its virtue, its vigor, and its prosperity.[18]

Of course, whole of this perspective is in its roots Hegelian: if we accept the thesis that people don't have the idea of freedom, but they *are* that idea, then all transformations in history must lead to conscience of one's own freedom as essential objective of development of the spirit: "The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom."[19] And all endeavours, transformations, negations and contradictions are part of the same work of the spirit on his way to freedom. From such perspective, what seems as a paradox is simply the way of transforming the apparent necessity into the freedom.

Philosophers of rationalism thought that there can't be anything in experience which wasn't in the mind before. Philosophers of empiricism thought exactly the opposite. Neither option was productive enough for the moral philosophy. Kant was the one who broke the vicious circle of oppositions of mind and experience, necessity and freedom, determinism and indeterminism.[20] He has shown that every option has its own field of competence. Taken isolated from one another, they couldn't be successful, neither of them can't be the whole truth. Nature and freedom both have their own fields of *extension*. Freedom

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[18] Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 38-39.

[19] Ibid., 33.

[20] Although Adorno claims that in certain respect Kant himself is a rationalist, precisely: "I have already argued that in this respect Kant is to be found in the mainstream of modern rationalist thought because he infers even the existence of God form reason, which is identical with the moral law, and does not postulate God as an absolute." T. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 85.

can't beat the gravity, for example. But gravity also can't determine human actions.

It is quite simple, actually. I can decide to fly – jump through my window and fly away. The decision is within the competence of my free will. But fulfilment of my intention, transforming this decision into the real act, must come under the laws of nature. Freedom allows me to decide that I want to jump through window and fly, but gravity has the last word. And both realms can and must exist together. Natural laws can't make my will to be obedient, but my will can't ignore the laws of nature, although it can understand natural laws and find the way to use them in its favour. That is a huge lesson of development of natural sciences in modernity and the true significance of this development for morality. My decision to fly is absurd, because my body can't fly, and yet – my will to fly can use natural laws in my favour and help me to make an airplane, so that my will to fly can be satisfied. Thus, the will has certain advantage to nature, i.e., practical reason has certain advantage to speculative one.

Maybe it looks like oversimplification of Kant's conception. Of course, we do not have intention to claim that primacy of practical reason tells us merely that men's will can find the way to subject the nature to itself. Nevertheless, primacy does also lead to that conclusion.

> Thus, in the union of pure speculative with pure practical reason in one cognition, the latter has primacy, assuming that this union is not *contingent* and discretionary but based a priori on reason itself and therefore *necessary*. For, without this subordination a conflict of reason with itself would arise, since if they were merely juxtaposed (coordinate), the first would of itself close its boundaries strictly and admit nothing from the latter into its domain, while the latter would extend its boundaries over everything and, when its need required, would try to include the for-

> mer within them. But one cannot require pure practical reason to be subordinate to speculative reason and so reverse the order, since all interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone.[21]

Primacy of practical reason enabled both Fichte and Hegel to move towards the idea of freedom as productive force. Thinking is no longer subordinated to will, they are both only expressions of freedom and only world is the one that man produces. In Kant's philosophy, world is still divided onto phenomenal and noumenal, but latter philosophers will erase demarking line between them and define human conscience as an ultimate productive force. First move towards this solution was made into Kant's thesis that practical reason has primacy over the speculative one.

In our flying example, speculative reason helps us to understand that jumping through the window would be at least very painful, but it is practical reason that helped us to invent airplanes. And what this got to do with modernity? Everything. The very concept of modernity can't be properly understood if it isn't for this turnover. For centuries, *being* was prior to what *ought to be*. Descartes' intervention made subjective form the only certain form. We can doubt in everything, except in the fact that we are in the process of doubting. This act of subjectivity is even more radical by its consequences than that of Socrates. Socrates' invention of subjective will was 'only' of practical nature, it made changes into the world of social relations. Modern concept of subjectivity extends itself onto the *whole* reality. So Protagoras' claim, that man is the measure of all things, in modern philosophy gets its complete fulfilment. Now the subject produces its own objectivity, in every meaning.

Of course, the road that leads from doubt in reality to concept of production of reality by subject was neither simple nor

[21] I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason,* in *Practical Philosophy. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant,* trans. by Mary J. Gregor (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), A 5:121.

straightforward. It took a great effort to overcome an absolute belief in objectivity and abandon the pattern of knowledge in which thinking is merely a reflection of what actually exists. On that road, there are many stations and also many sideways, alongside with frightening landscapes of ever-growing freedom. Modern man is left to himself. He has no god or gods, no general beliefs or customs that will guide him through life without him needing to question them. He produces his own world and his own freedom; nothing is given to him as a firm ground that remains undoubted. Nature, society, science, philosophy equally are the product of consciousness and latter the product of self-consciousness. Modern man can't blame it on god, nature, obvious truth etc. It is only his very own freedom he can blame for every mistake, badly organized state, poor marriage, poverty, destroy of nature, lack of human rights. It is an unprecedented burden on his shoulders.

The opening sentence of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* summarizes this painful experience of modernity. "Man was born free and everywhere he is in chains."[22] And what is even more painful, these chains prove to be of a self-made sort. But what is important is that one who knows how to make chains also must know how to break them.

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[22] J-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses,* ed. Susan Dunn (New Haven and London: Yale University, 2002), 156.

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