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On the decaying moral space. Is there a way out?

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The concept of moral space is presented here, in the arguments of classical authors who treated the decay of moral space as an inevitable cost of modernity. Three areas are identified where the decay of moral space is manifested in our period of 'late modernity'. They are: violent crime, distrust and cynicism, and the vanishing of social capital. Paradoxically, however, opportunities to overcome the current moral void are discovered in the very traits of modernity: reflexiveness and globalization. They allow the process of moral healing through the reconstitution of primordial communities, ethnic, national, religious, in an open, tolerant and ecumenical manner, as well as the constitution of new communities of universalist and global reach.

The concept of moral space

The term 'space' and the more specific concepts of 'social space' and 'moral space', which will be used in this essay, are obviously metaphors. Metaphors make sense only if they allow new insights, without implying misleading similarities. To serve such a heuristic function their meaning has to be carefully unwrapped. Space, in the most general sense, is the area where certain objects are located in some mutual interrelations. The crucial 'spatial' relations are proximity or distance.

Social space, or interpersonal space, is the field in which pluralities of persons are located in some social interrelations. Those interrelations may have two opposite 'vectors' – towards others or away from others, either to the formation of social bonds, or to social distance, estrangement or separation.

Social space is multidimensional, perhaps more so than physical space. Moral space, which is the topic of this essay, is only one selected dimension of social (interpersonal) space. Two levels of interpersonal space should be distinguished. There is the tangible, 'hard' level of interactional space, filled with personal

contacts, encounters, conversations, cohabitation and collective action. The simplest single measure of this aspect of social space is the density of population. In this respect, urban space differs markedly from rural space, and the deserts of Africa from modern industrial agglomerations.

Emile Durkheim at the end of the 19th century called attention to another level of interpersonal space, which he labelled the 'moral density' of a population.[1] He had in mind the intangible, 'soft' dimension of the cultural-normative space, infused with mutual obligations, duties, rights, and expectations. This is the domain of social rules covered by Robert Merton's '4-P Formula':[2] prescriptions, prohibitions, permissions or preferences – specifying the proper conduct of people vis-à-vis other people.

Not all obligations and rights are the same. Some are 'cold', derived from binding contracts, official duties and formal codes. Others are 'hot', derived from moral sentiments such as trust, loyalty, solidarity, responsibility, reciprocity and help. They make the core of such complex, interpersonal arrangements as love, friendship and cooperation. Durkheim referred to them as 'pre-contractual bonds',[1] paraphrasing the earlier notion of 'pre-contractual conditions of contracts', already proposed by the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment.

This is precisely a moral space in the sense used in this essay: the fabric of moral obligations, duties, rights and expectations existing among a plurality of persons. Such a fabric may be dense, rich and robust, as for example in the 'primary groups' defined by Charles Cooley,[3] or the 'Gemeinschaft' of Ferdinand Tönnies.[4] But the moral tissue may also be thin, fragile and depleted, as for example in the 'secondary groups', formal organizations, or 'Gesellschaft' in the sense of Tönnies. In the extreme case we can speak here of the 'empty moral space'.

Moral space and the development of modernity

What is the condition of moral space in the society known as modern? In the 19th century, the period of triumphant modernity, dense moral space was treated as a mark of a pre-modern, traditional society, slowly passing away with the progress of modernity. It was believed that processes of urbanization, industrialization, bureaucratization and massification of society, replaced primordial moral bonds and 'hot' relationships with 'cold', rational, calculated contracts. Such a diagnosis was put forward in the typical polar models formulated by sociological classics: the opposition of 'military and industrial' society by Herbert Spencer,[5] 'Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft' by Ferdinand Tönnies,[4] 'mechanical and organic solidarity' by Emile Durkheim,[1] or later in the 'folk-urban' dichotomy of Robert Redfield,[6] or the 'sacred-profane' of Howard Becker and Harry Barnes.[7]

However, already more perceptive observers were noticing a certain ambivalence. They already saw the dissolution of moral space as a heavy cost to

be paid for the blooming of modernity and as a negative side of progress, with serious dysfunctional effects. Underlying their doubts and warnings there were two arguments. The first referred to the idea of *human nature*, as immanently moral, pervaded with 'natural will' (Tönnies[4]), 'pro-social orientations' (Marx[8]), or 'spontaneous sociability' (Simmel[9]). The modern institutions, organizational forms and settlement patterns, suppressing or erasing the moral impulse, constrained and depraved human nature, in fact, destroyed something quite basic for 'homo socius'. This argument has proved highly enduring. In recent literature it is central to the famous book by James Q. Wilson, which defends the notion of innate 'moral impulse' or 'moral sense', as universal human capacities.[10] The second argument invoked the idea of 'moral fabric' as a necessary pre-condition for viable functioning of modernity, and particularly for its two central institutions, the market and democracy. It was pointed out that for the market to be viable the 'invisible hand', must be supplemented by an 'invisible handshake', the bonds of mutual trust, loyalty to the firm, responsibility toward partners, credibility of pledges etc. In recent literature, the recognition that entrepreneurship requires an ethical context is the leitmotif of a book on trust by Francis Fukuyama.[11] Similarly, it was argued that political democracy cannot operate without civic spirit, solidarity, citizen's loyalty, public obligations, truthfulness and other 'republican virtues'. In recent times, this is the leitmotif of the rich literature on 'civic culture' and 'social capital', from Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba[12] to Robert Putnam.[13–15]

Rooted in those two fundamental premises, the debate concerning the costs or ambivalence of modernity has continued from the 19th century until our time. A number of more specific diagnoses and criticisms have been proposed. Three main themes of the ongoing dispute seem particularly important. The first may be called 'the lost Gemeinschaft theme' running from Tönnies[4] to Riesman,[16] and focusing on the unbridled individualism, the atomization of human society, egocentric narcissism, the loss of intimacy, loosened personal attachments and uprooted communal bases of identity. The second is 'the iron cage theme' – running from Weber[17] to Bauman.[18] focusing on the 'dark legacy of Enlightenment'; the de-humanizing, impersonal, purely instrumental rationality of bureaucratic organizations, the oppressiveness of institutions, pervasive calculation, and the 'cash nexus', leading to reification and manipulation of human subjects. The extreme manifestations of this syndrome were found in the horrors of the Holocaust, or the Gulag, when mass extermination was treated by their perpetrators as a purely technical task to be accomplished within the shortest time and at the lowest cost. The third is 'the anomie theme' running from Durkheim[19] to Merton[20], and focusing on the breakdown of traditional regulations, normative chaos, and the loss of compelling guidelines for human conduct, with the resulting

personal misery, meaninglessness, and hopelessness expressed in the acts of suicide or other forms of deviance.

The fate of moral space in late modernity

We live in a period when the consequences of modernity have shown themselves in strongest relief. This epoch, which Giddens[21] labels as 'late' or 'high' modernity, has brought to the extreme, both the achievements and costs of modernization. The ambivalence has become more pronounced than ever.

On the negative side of the balance sheet one crucial item is the decay of the moral space. There are three areas of empirical facts where such decay seems evident. The first has to do with crime. Of course, crime is not exclusively a modern phenomenon. It has probably accompanied the human race from the earliest beginnings. What, however, is new is the scale of viciousness, indicating the growing suppression of the moral impulse. As far as the moral ingredient is concerned, not all crimes are equal. There are at least four steps on the scale of moral degradation.

Common crime is an attempt to satisfy one's interests by bringing harm to others. It implies the temporary suspension, or 'bracketing' of moral considerations, motivated by expediency (it falls under the Weberian category of 'Zweckrationalität'.[17] But even the hardened criminal would recognize the legitimacy of norms and would himself be morally outraged and cry for the police if somebody else did the same to him, and he would not be particularly surprised if when caught he was put in jail.

The second step is the ideological crime, committed in the name of some strongly held belief, faith or ideal, often a prejudice or stereotype (it falls under the Weberian category of 'Wertrationalität'[17]). Religious wars, the Great Inquisition, witch-hunting, racial lynching, ethnic cleansing, tribal wars, the holocaust, the Gulag all fit under this label. These are crimes committed against whole categories of others, defined as enemies – infidels, heretics, Blacks, class traitors, Jews. The crucial mechanism allowing the suppression of moral impulse, as noticed by Zygmunt Bauman[18] in his study of the Holocaust is the re-definition of the enemy in non-human terms; treating people like weeds, or pests, or rats, or mad dogs, which have to be eliminated. And even here, in spite of the outrageous scale and repulsiveness of such crimes, we do not yet witness the complete destruction of the moral impulse, because de-humanization, reification, refers to clearly selected categories of people, and not indiscriminately to all people. After all, even Nazi killers were known for their kindness and sympathy for children, provided they were Aryan.

The third step on the scale of viciousness is terrorism, also committed in the name of some ideal, but directed against completely innocent, often randomly

encountered, people. Blowing up a bomb in a public restaurant, or on a bus, or in the marketplace, or in a church, demands complete moral indifference, total elimination of any moral impulse. And yet, looming behind this indiscriminate viciousness is at least some ideological justification, some higher reason, however sick and misguided.

The fourth and final step is pure violence, completely disinterested and devoid of any ideology. In Poland we have recently been shocked by a number of senseless murders without any cause: a student clubbed to death by young thugs in Krakow, a school graduate tortured and executed by a juvenile gang in Warsaw. These cases, just a fraction of similar ones all over the world, are the symptoms of the ultimate decay of the moral space. They are expressions of evil incarnate, the frightening indicators of the complete and final moral void.

Crime and, particularly, senseless violence are the most spectacular but not the only symptoms of the decay of moral space in our time. The second area where this phenomenon is clearly visible is the collapse of trust.[22] Of course, distrust, like crime is a multifaceted phenomenon and may take many forms. It may be quite healthy, provided it is directed toward untrustworthy objects. To distrust crooks is a sign of prudence, moral discernment and the mark of rationality. Some measure of healthy distrust is institutionalized in any democratic regime, by means of accountability, control, checks and balances, periodic electoral tests etc.[23]

But a completely different situation is obtained when distrust becomes detached from any rational considerations of trustworthiness, and turns into generalized suspiciousness directed at a vast array of objects. We can speak then of the 'cultural syndrome of distrust'[22] or as Stivers[24] calls it, 'the culture of cynicism' that pervades both public and private life. Survey data from the US in the period between 1966 and 1976 provide good examples of the steep decline of trust. In 1966, people in charge of major institutions were trusted by 73% of the population, but only by 42% ten years later. Trust in law firms fell from 24% to 12%, in major companies from 55% to 16%, and in advertising agencies from 21% to 7% (Ref. 25, p. xvii). In such a cultural climate, extending trust to others is taken as a measure of naivety or stupidity, and people who are trusting are contemptuously regarded as 'suckers'. Being constantly on guard, outwitting others, lying or cheating, turn into highly esteemed virtues. Of course, the culture of cynicism is not so drastic an indicator of moral decay as vicious, violent crime, but its importance derives rather from the scope of the people affected. After all, violent crime, however visible and shocking, is still a statistically exceptional phenomenon, whereas the syndrome of distrust may become the everyday reality for most people. Let us just look at some symptoms of the '*culture of distrust*' pervading late modern societies.

We observe growing litigiousness, resorting to law enforcement, courts, arbitration and the police, in defence of abused, breached, or potentially threatened

trust. It reaches the extreme in the US, but is observable in many other developed societies. Secondly, we are faced with a growing formalism in business deals, contracts and the meticulous safeguarding of all transactions. Thirdly, there is the phenomenon of 'vigilantism'; spontaneous measures of self-defence taken by common citizens, such as 'walled communities', private police forces outnumbering the public police, and the growing possession of guns and other defensive weapons. Fourthly, people withdraw from the public sphere – there is growing political apathy, passivity, reluctance to commit and a low electoral turnout. In all these ways the hot moral space is replaced by a cold space of suspicion, control and enforcement. The third area, symptomatic of the decay of moral space is adumbrated by the idea of depleted 'social capital', invented by James Coleman[26,27] and made fashionable by Robert Putnam.[13] Based on rich empirical evidence, Putnam lamented 'The strange disappearance of civic America',[15] i.e. the collapse of the dense network of voluntary associations, clubs, civic groups, parent-teacher circles, bowling leagues, etc, which, along the line of Tocquevillean diagnosis, he credits the strength and vitality of 19th century 'heroic' America. As he puts it in a famous phrase 'people in the US are now bowling alone'.[14] The disappearance of networks of association produces growing egoism, rampant individualism, solitude and distrust. It seems to be another important factor in the decay of moral space.

The parallel erosion of cohesive communities touches the domain of the family. Just consider the rate of divorce, increasing in the US over the last 30 years from 16% to more than 40%, or the number of single-parent households coming close to half of all households, or the proliferation of births out of wedlock, rising from 5% in 1960 to 30% in 1991 (Ref. 28, p. 77). Equally staggering numbers will be found in most other developed societies.

Putting all those observations together, it seems that at the end of our Promethean century of supposed unlimited 'progress', the human condition is coming close to the sad Hobbesian image, as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish'. As you recall Hobbes added 'and short', which is the only point in his list invalidated by modern healthcare. And yet, lengthening of the life span can hardly compensate for the deteriorating moral quality of life.

Toward the reconstitution of the moral space

Is the situation hopeless? Is there any way out of this predicament in which modern society has found itself at the end of the 20th century? There are two traits of late modernity, which give some foundation for hope.

First, as Beck, Giddens and Lash observe in a recent book,[36] modern society is becoming increasingly self-reflexive, both in the contemplative sense of awareness of its own problems, challenges and dangers, and in the activist sense

of readiness to mobilize collectively to overcome the gravest threats. 'Reflexive modernity', as they call our period, has a chance of turning upon itself and ameliorating its own condition. Perhaps the demoralization is extreme enough, and the shock to conscience strong enough to incite the backlash, reawaken the moral impulse and initiate the re-moralising of social life. More and more people revolt against the poverty of the moral void. Witness the nine huge marches of protest against senseless violence, that have recently occurred in Poland and even more massive ones in Belgium; the reaction of American people to the bombing at Oklahoma City, or the British to the murder of children at a local school. Thus, a healing effect seems to be initiated.

Secondly, as widely recognized now, late modern society is dramatically accelerating the process of globalization. As a British sociologist, Peter Worsley wittily observes, up to the recent time, a 'human society' has not *really* existed.[29] 'Humanity' was at most a philosophical, or religious, myth. Nowadays, due to the constantly expanding network of interdependencies, economic, financial, political, military, cultural etc, it has acquired an ontologically solid status. Most important for our argument, the scope of opportunities for interpersonal contacts, interactions and resulting bonds, has been radically extended due to the real revolution in communication, telecommunication, travel and tourism. Perhaps this new scale of inter-personal space opens the chance for reconstituting the moral ties along new lines.

However, the effects of globalization may also be ambivalent. Globalization pushes the reconstitution of moral space in two different directions, with opposite implications for the healing of moral space. First there is the revival of primordial, 'primary' social ties – of kinship, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion and gender. We have recently observed the proliferation of groups and communities integrating around such old but rediscovered bases of identity. Michel Maffesoli offers an apt term 'new tribalism'[30] to refer to this tendency. It is a backlash against the uniformalization and homogenization of the world, similarity brought about by globalization. Internally, primordial communities restore strong bonds, loyalties and moral commitments among their members. At the same time, however, they orient themselves with distrust, xenophobia, hostility or outright aggression against outsiders, excluding them from the moral space. Just consider religious sects, chauvinistic ethnic groups, radical feminists, and football fans, not to speak of juvenile gangs or Mafia 'families'. In all these cases, the moral space is limited to the insiders, whereas outsiders remain in a moral vacuum, treated as enemies or easy prey.

True morality cannot be particularistic, divisive, exclusive, restricted to the narrow 'we' and denied to the much more plentiful 'them'. Authentic morality is universal and inclusive. The more authentic it is, the more expanded the category of the 'we'. It is here that the process of globalization may play salutary

role. It provides the opportunity for the most promising reconstitution of the moral space, not in the defensive, exclusive manner, but in the open, inclusive way. When Edward Tiryakian[31] considers ethnic, national, religious, and familial solidarities as a possible asset ('wild card') of modernity, he has in mind those rare open, tolerant forms of them so different from prevailing hostile chauvinisms, or nepotistic 'amoral familisms'.[32] Another chance for the development of sanity in moral space may be found in the appearance of communities cutting across all primordial identities, embracing many categories of people, and acquiring the global span. Let us call them the 'new communities'. I have identified five types.

The relatively oldest type, among new communities, consists of the *professional communities*, from the 'invisible colleges' of scholars, regional or global academies or learned societies, networks of colleagues and collaborators from a scientific discipline, artistic circles, worldwide literary societies (e.g. PEN Club) etc.

Then come *value communities* gathered for the defence of some universal goals, particularly those which Ronald Inglehart labels 'post-materialist values',[33,34] such as the quality of life, self-realization, ecological balance, peace, security, dignity. Think of the rich category of 'new social movements',[1] or clubs and associations such as the Rotary, Lion's club, Amnesty International, Sierra Club, Greenpeace and the like.

The third types are ecumenical religious movements, anti-sectarian in spirit, reaching out behind their traditional borders, focusing on moral unity rather than theological differences.

The fourth type are integrative political movements, attempting to overcome traditional ethnic or national divisions and to constitute a comprehensive polity of regional, or continental scope, with accompanying new identities of their members.

Finally, as the fifth type, I would include the nascent category of *virtual communities*, linked by indirect contacts through the technical media: similar to pen pals in the old days, there are the worldwide networks of Internet buffs at the present time.

Opening up old, primordial communities as well as the emergence of new global communities provides a ray of hope that eventually humanity will be able to save itself from itself, and that modernity will be able to correct the dangers of modernity, and in particular to overcome the threat of a moral vacuum. Perhaps it is not too farfetched to hope that moral space will eventually reconstitute itself in a new shape difficult to envisage today. The vision of the 'world as a moral community',[35] may sound a little premature today, but is worth keeping in mind as a guideline for our efforts.

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