Liquid Modernity and its consequences to ethics

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Abstract:

Zygmunt Bauman, the Polish philosopher and sociologist, created a sensation by publishing his work 'Liquid Modernity' in 2000. To the shock, much of the work has taken a different position in studying the idea or project of modernity. Bauman demarcated the project of modernity into two trajectories, solid and liquid. Modernity, according to him, in its transition from a solid state to a liquid form, everything is unbearably flexible and created a situation in which the concept 'anything goes' is accepted by every. This kind of attitude resulted in the degeneration of everything, including ethics. Modernity transformed ethics into laws in the transition from a solid to a liquid state. This transformation has severe implications for the public sphere, which is already filled with individual issues rather than the public. This paper will briefly study the idea of liquid modernity and focus on its implication for everyday life. It also focuses on adiaphorization, a concept developed by Bauman to refer to the insensitivity of the individual when it comes to the other.

Albert Camus, the French philosopher, said that a man without ethics is a wild beast loosed upon the world. To be free from crisis, ethical aspects, and practices are vital for society. Human life has always been conditioned, in one way or the other, by ethics and moral principles. The two World Wars created a situation in which people were compelled to reflect on ethics concretely. The debates are still going on about the fundamental aspects of ethics and morals. Zygmunt Bauman had taken 'these debates to further levels with his Postmodern Ethics' (1993), 'Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality' (1995), 'Postmodernity and its Discontents' (1997), 'Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?' (2008). in these four works, he discussed the concepts of ethics and morality in concrete terms. From 1993 to 2017, Bauman only published a word referring to ethical issues. Ethical aspects became integral in all his works. The words of Town Campbell and Cris Till are noteworthy in this context:

> Zygmunt Bauman's work has reinvigorated sociological interest in ethical questions. Ethics has been at the core of his work for at least the past two decades. He has convincingly positioned ethics and morality as central issues for sociology in our globalized world and liquid modern times.
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> Hviid Jacobsen 2008: 172

As Manni Crone and others observed, Bauman strongly critiqued the transformation of ethics into laws in modernity. The influence of

Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, strengthened Bauman's thoughts on ethics. Even after so many Holocausts and Auschwitz, the individuals responsible for them tried to justify their position in executing millions of Jews. They justified themselves with judicial principles. In the wake of the arguments of Eichmann, a high-ranking Nazi German official, who organized the deportation of 1-5 million Jews from all over Europe to ghettos and killing centers in German-occupied parts of Poland and who along with his subordinates deported millions of Jew to Auschwitz, Which has become the symbolic site of the final solution for Jewish question found by the Nazis and where 1.5 millions of Jews were exterminated by poisonous gas in the big chamber. In justification of his acts by Eichmann without any ethical concern shocked Bauman. In that context, Bauman problematized the very idea of ethics and the transformation of the concept of ethics with the advent of modernity.

Bauman rejected the idea of liking ethics with laws in the context of Eichmann's arguments. For Bauman, ethics must be discussed on the individual's responsibility but not on the foundation laws. Bauman's ideas about ethics were greatly influenced by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

According to Levinas, ethics is always based on context and is not universal. It always associates with sacrifice and be responsible for others. Bauman did not approve the universal ethics and treated ethics as laws. In his assertion, he had written 'The Postmodern Ethics'. But, Bauman did not think that ethics would degenerate into laws, ethical relativism would surface, and the idea of anything going would emerge in modernity. In contradiction to that, Bauman thought that morality would come in Postmodernity in place of ethics. To cite the words of Manni Crone:

Postmodern Ethics' is not a book on postmodern ethics but on postmodern morality. (61)

Bauman discerns the difference between ethics and morality. In his view, what was practiced in modernity was ethics, and what is adopted in the Postmodern is morality. Modernity, in the name of universal laws, transformed ethics into legal principles and implemented ethical principles as legal acts. According to Bauman, the fundamental lacuna in Modern ethics is reducing it to legality and viewing it as a social construct. While studying Western ethics, Bahaman analyzes the foundations of Western ethics.

According to Bauman, Immanuel Kant accepted the idea of universal laws about ethics in modernity. Almost all Modern philosophers rejected the metaphysical foundations of ethics. They believed that ethical principles emerged out of human reason. Again, Kant was responsible for this belief. In the moral philosophy proposed by Kant, there is no reference to the fact that ethical decisions can be made in concrete situations.

On the contrary, Kant believed that the moral agent has to behave according to the abstract universal laws as an autonomous being. The individual who is in autonomy by using his rational free will has to follow ethical rules. Any tradition or religion will not influence his decision. In this context, Bauman says:

> According to Kant, the modern moral subject was 'free' because he was not ruled by tradition, religion, or human nature but by a universal law he had formulated himself. (62)

According to Bauman, Kant's consideration of ethics as law influenced the social reality of modernity to a large extent. That is the reason for modern ethics getting transformed into law ethics. Current rulers felt

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that the people could not run their lives ethically and follow universal moral principles. Hence, they introduced strict ethical codes and laws to control them. The autonomy that Kant proposed about ethics became heteronomy. In the heteronomy, the individual is passive; the external forces are like laws that decide their behavior and choice.

The Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadias compares autonomy and heteronomy and says that independent societies would frame the culture, laws, and behavior patterns per their needs. The people will have an understanding of the rules. In opposition to the communities in heteronomy, Bauman says, the people would be under the influence of God, religion, state, and social needs. When viewed in this dimension, the ethics considered vital in modernity are those that the people in their autonomy frame. Instead, they were framed as universal laws by Modern rulers or legislators. One should remember that the state supported the legislators.

According to Bauman, as Kant proposed ethics as legal principles, Emile Durkheim later proposed that ethics is a social construct. According to Durkheim individual has no natural, ethical capacity. In the social process or training, he becomes a moral being. This idea, in a way, Bauman says, belongs to Thomas Hobbes, who mentioned the natural state of humans, by their ego-centric and amoral states, would be ready for conflict. In simple terms, the idea proposes that the individual only thinks about ethics by leaving his natural state and entering into a social process. Outside the social, ethical individual is nothing. Individuals will be transformed into moral beings by joining the social revolution and accepting and practicing ethics. Along with Durkheim, many modern sociologists believe that individuals must be taught ethics through socialization, education, and discipline.

In the view of Bauman, if we consider ethics as a social construct, transform them into legal codes, and apply them with universal implications, then there won't be any scope to discuss them and to decide their merits and demerits because they are made absolute. The bureaucracy will do this. Then, in that process, there will be every possibility of events like the holocaust and Auschwitz. The history of modernity is the best example of that they are possible. That is why Bauman focused much on the consequences of a concrete idea of ethics. Bauman did not accept that the relationship between society and ethics is 1:1. The ethics proposed by Kant equated ethics with law. Because of that, incidents like Auschwitz were carried out. Modern ethics provided the moral ground for carrying out such holocausts. In this context, Manni Crone says:

> Auschwitz became a reality when a particular conception of ethics was linked to specific features of modern society," e.g., modern bureaucracy. (63)

In light of the above, modernity is not just the emergence of democracy but a long journey toward primitivism. This conclusion was arrived at in the 1940s by the members of the Frankfort School, like Horkheimer and Adorno before Bauman. Foucault also recognized it. For Horkheimer, Adorno, and Foucault, the major problem of modernity is related to reason and how logic is used to establish order and discipline in society. But Bauman did not understand the reason as the problem of modernity; instead, he saw it in ethics. In his view, reason did not exist in carrying out the holocaust; it is also a concrete understanding of ethics. In this process, Bauman makes certain propositions about ethics.

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Bauman did not see Morality and Ethics as the same. Morality is related to the heresy of good and evil. It is related to man's thinking, experience, and actions. Ethics, unlike moralists, brings rules, codes guidelines. In a way, it is the codification of universal laws. Ethics brings into the social process the ethical principles that would be in the service of the state. Morality is related to thinking of good and evil in a concrete situation. Morality and Ethics have a long history in the Western world. Their mythical roots can be seen in the Bible.

The story of Adam and Eve is an example of morality without law. In the beginning, Adam and Eve do not know that good and evil are divided. Only after eating the apple and the criticism of God made them know that there was a division between good and evil, and they understood that reality and practice are divided into good and evil, and they had to choose from them. This awareness made them moral beings. They were compelled to choose between good and bad and right and wrong. In opposition to this, Moses's Ten Commandments are an example of morality with laws. The commandments are prescriptions for not committing sins and accepting the orders of God. All forms of ethics that emerged in modernity are like commandments. They are aimed at controlling people. In this process, there is no choice for individuals. That is why Bauman called modernity the age of ethics. Modernity has defined ethics in concrete terms and has seen that there is ambiguity in them.

Like many thinkers, Bauman did not see modernity as a phase in which religious beliefs are weakened, secular ideas are strengthened, and the individualization process starts. In his view, modernization, industrialization, and urbanization are crucial things in modernity. These aspects have fragmented the lives of individuals. In the context of this fragmentation,

it is inhuman to propose ethics of one dimension. All the modern rulers tried to implement morals with rational principles. It resulted in ethics or current codes of modern ethics. It was mandatory to be adopted by every individual living life rationally as modern ethics is universal. The idea of universal ethics resulted from the belief that humans have the same kind of nature; hence they follow the same ethics. In Bauman's view, universal ethics is repressive, leading to dangerous consequences in practice. It is a paradox.

Bauman considered Postmodernity as a phase in which ethics will end. It doesn't mean there will not be any ethics; instead, the deterministic ethics, either of religion or rationality, will end. The Postmodern situation opens new doors about ethics. At the same time, there may not be any guarantee that postmodern ethics will be better than Modern ethics. But there is a possibility for the emergence of better ethics. In this context, Bauman says:

> It remains to be seen…. whether the time of Postmodernity will go down the history of morality as the twilight or renaissance.

Bauman 1993: 3

The concept of responsibility is very vital in postmodern ethics. There was a concrete objective in bringing rationality to the forefront of modernity. The goal is to establish a rational society, in which only rationality would be the determining factor of everything and a parameter for everything. In a way, rationality would be absolute. But postmodern ethics is against any total. Postmodernity believes that ethical choice intrinsically will be in ambiguity. In the view of Bauman, postmodern ethics re-personalizes the moral aspects. It means it emphasizes individual responsibility for ethical decisions. In a way, postmodern ethics is an ethics with no ethical codes or laws.

According to Bauman, ethical relation is a responsible relation. It is not an activity of mutual exchange of things. It won't demand that as one behaves responsibly with the other, the other should act responsibly. To be responsible to others is a fundamental responsibility. It is one-sided. I am for others, but the others are not for me. Their existence is my existence. Whatever I do for them, I don't expect anything from them. Bauman says that this type of approach is the foundation for postmodern ethics. Responsibility, by its very nature, is not universal. It is against the concepts of codification and universalization. If ethics is practiced with an expectation of return, it is no more ethics. Postmodern ethics, by its very nature, moves away from rationality. It won't fall into the logic of achievements and objectives.

According to Bauman, morality doesn't have any foundation. It is based only on ethical impulses. Modern moral philosophers and rulers did not believe in the individual's ethical motivation and ethical capacity; they proposed ethical laws formulated based on rationality. Kant had very clearly that feelings had no moral importance. That is why in modernity, law ethics become prominent. In this context, Bauman says:

> Virtue meant for Kant and his followers to stand up to one's dynamic inclinations and neutralize or reject them in the name of reason. (p.67)

According to Bauman, the scope of reason in ethical issues and actions is minimal. When we encounter an individual, we will need complete information about him. It is only possible to have a partial understanding of them. We cannot form a rational opinion about them. But, in our encounter with that, we can understand our nature or objectivity, as our

ethical response or behavior would have been formed by then. The question of whether we should be ethical doesn't arise in that context. Involuntarily we have to respond ethically. We should reflect on whether that individual would be helpful to us because honest responses should not expect anything in return. In our moral responsibility to others, we should also consider the usefulness of our response to the other. In this context, Bauman says:

> If I love and desire her happiness, I must choose what would make her truly happy.
>
> Bauman 1995:64-65

Adiaphorization or ignoring the ethical implications in contemporary societies is conspicuous everywhere in modern societies. Ignoring the ethical implications in human relations means segregating ourselves from others and not considering the existence of others. It also means that we are treating others as objects valuable to us. Then only the concept of adiaphorization comes onto the scene. In adiaphorization, we don't recognize certain people as ethical beings. We don't respond to any of their concerns. We remain unemotional even when somebody is suffering in our presence. Even when the most inhuman acts occur, we stay uninterested spectators. In this context, Bauman observes:

> Modernity did not make people crueler; it only invented how non-cruel people could do evil things. (Pp.197-198)

Keeping others away from our ethical preview is nothing but dehumanizing them. According to Bauman, the holocausts that took place and the people's obsession with consumption, by ignoring all other aspects, are examples of adiaphorization. People are intrinsically good says Bauman. If the question of whether propel is good put Rousseau, it would

say 'yes,' but Kant said 'no'. According to Bauman, people, by their nature, are good. The ethical principle is very vital for humanity. These ethical principles are only distinguishing humans from other species. To be ethical doesn't mean to be good. In addition to being honest, man should be able to say 'no'. In an interview, Bauman says:

> 'No' implies that things 'do not have to be as they currently are, that they can be altered: also made better than they are."
> Tester 2001: 44

According to Bauman, when one cannot do so, all our dialogues are useless. Ethics or morality is a matter of choice. If the option is not, there is no ethics. Society itself is coordinated choices. The society in which we live is chosen from many alternatives. Like all our choices, our community may be good or bad. Hence, there is always a possibility to rectify it. To recognize it means making an ethical choice. This process will be going on. But it is not possible to build morality or ethics like building other structures. The individual should not ask,' why should it be ethical?' If it is posed that is the end of ethics.

Modernity means to 'clean the society', 'to keep it transparent', and to 'keep it in order'. Keeping society in order means rectifying it and eliminating dirt, ambiguity, and uncertainty. If this process beings once, it destroys or annihilates everything that comes its way. It will justify that it is done for a better society. Even if a race or tribe is considered a hurdle, even that race or tribe will be annihilated. This was what precisely the Nazis and Stalinists did. Bauman says:

> Once you assume that an orderly society must be free from dissidents and troublemakers, throwing the heretics in dungeons and shoving the nonconformists out is a rational means to the end. (58)

When viewed from the ethical perspective, a society that accepts the opinion that it is not as democratic as it should be is just; the idea that it is just today may not be just tomorrow. No, it just would remain forever. It moves forward. It will be trying to be better, and at the same time, it protects those who are pushing for its betterment. According to Bauman, the idea of justice itself is not static; it is always in a process. It is like a horizon; the just society would be moving toward that horizon.

In Bauman's view, it is impossible to prove the value of ethics or morality. Ethics is an end in itself; it has no purpose. It should not be practiced either for self-satisfaction or for economical interest. Our ethical behavior should give confidence to the people around us. To be with them for them is our moral objective. In earlier times, it was like that. Now its character has completely changed. Self-protection and calculations of problems have acquired prime importance today. That is why people are under the impression that it is problematic to be ethically sound.

We are in a society that propagates self-interest and selfishness only. It pushed the organization to such an extent that we could change it. This is the result of irresponsibility. We have to at least now recognize our irresponsibility. At present, all the people are sailing in the same boat. Nobody should think that he has no danger. We have to think about the predicament of others. We should come out of our carelessness and callousness. Only then can we create meaning for our lives. People who have ethical capacity cannot lead a peaceful life. In the world, which is consisted of 6 billion people, 800 million do not have nutritious food, 900 million have no medical facilities, 1 billion people have no drinking water facility,2 billion have no electricity, 2.5 billion do not have toilet facilities, 1 billion have no access to education,

and 11 million children are dying every year due to various diseases, which can be cured. Knowing all this, how one can live peacefully is the fundamental ethical question that Bauman raises. In his, this callousness is a humiliation to all of us. It is the result of the fact that we are guided only by selfishness. Ignoring all this is nothing but escaping from our responsibility. Bauman says:

> "Responsibility" means now, first and last responsibility to oneself ("you owe this to yourself").
>
> Bauman 2009: 53

When people pamper their selfishness, there cannot be any space for self-criticism. They fail to recognize the need to change social and moral situations. They cannot think of a better life. People get recognition or identity through their actions. The award is not given; one has to acquire it through their effort. It has to be created as we create artifacts. When we can make ourselves an art piece, why can't we transform our life into an art piece, asks Foucault.

Bauman says arts and literature are vital in our effort to transform life into art. Arts and literature show our alternative reality. They keep people from falling into the trap of consumerism. People must explore those possibilities, which will help individuals mold their lifestyles independently.

As has been observed, religious institutions, monarchies, and dictatorships have all made the people surrender to the ethical systems they had evolved. Modern societies have also moved along the same lines. They aimed at controlling the people, and for that purpose only, they framed ethical systems and criminal procedure codes. All most all the modern rulers were under the impression that people are inherently disordered. Hence, they needed training. By training only, they would be expected and move on the right path; otherwise,

they go beyond control. They felt that people should always be kept on the right track. Modernity with its 'will order,' divided society into two categories; those who implement ethics and those who accept them and live accordingly. According to Bauman, this is known as legislative reason and is essential beyond it. Bauman believes that the situation to come (ought to) should be better than the present situation (is), and the active utopia should be better than the utopia. Living by confining to the present is not the nature of people. Hope is the force that always drives humans. Thinking beyond the limitations of the gift is one of the defining characteristics of humans.

Bauman, while discussing the concepts of 'existence for others' and 'responsibility for others', refers to the story of Kane and Abel from the Bible. When Kane faced the question, 'where is Abel? Kane asks a counter question, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' According to Bauman, this question reverberates throughout Western history. According to Bauman, the response of Kane is an unethical question. Because it openly declares that he is not for others. Though there is honesty in their response to Kane, there is no morality in it. It reflects only ontological aspects, he is he, and I is me, and about existence, we both are different. Bauman says that the moral self has to respond by transcending itself. To put it in philosophical terms, ethics has to conquer ontology. Ethics should become primary. The opinion of Bauman in this context was analyzed by Benjamin Adam as follows:

> In affirming the importance of the other, I challenged that there is always another to whom I am responsible and that one should not be contested with merely having followed one's legal or finite duties.
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> Adam 2014: 190

According to Bauman, sociology did not focus on the need to go beyond the limitations of contemporary ethics. It focused only on the practice of the ethical system that is in existence. It could not extend its imagination beyond that.

In Bauman's view, ethical choice and practice should not differ. The individual's responsibility is not observed when ethical aspects are expressed collectively. In that way, it liberates individuals from responsibility. The group, by becoming a force, kills the role of the individual or at least hides him. In this context, Bauman clearly says:

> In the crowd, we are alike; we go about together, dance together, punch together, burn together, and kill together.
>
> Bauman 1993:132

In the above situation, the question 'what am I doing? It doesn't seem meaningful. We do what others are doing. There won't be any scope for the questions, whether just or correct. This is a kind of socialization process. In this context, morality and ethical responsibility will disappear. "Sociality of the crowd disposes of responsibility," says Bauman in his 'Postmodern Ethics', p.132). This situation leads to ethical adiaphorization. Precisely in this kind of situation, only people like Eichmann are born. According to Bauman, this process of adiaphorization extended from solid modernity to liquid modernity. In liquid modernity, in the process of social transformation of individuals from producers to consumers, the responsibility individuals have to show towards others has limited to them.

After the 1980s, the non-political forces are dictating the lives of people. They are transforming individuals into mere consumers. The consumerist attitude infected the entire society and consumer psychology spread everywhere. From the economy to the environment, everything was forced into crisis. In this crisis-ridden situation, individuals are responsible not just for others but also for themselves. The political systems and organizers need to reflect on meaningful changes. Every change takes place only in the interest of capital. Society could have done better in keeping a model of dignified and meaningful life before the people. The idea that society can be better than the present is found nowhere. At least, it is not found even in political circles. Moreover, they are bringing the meaningless slogan TINA (There is no alternative). As the desires of an individual, his consumption became the only priority; ethics have lost their importance.

In the above context, Bauman proposes that there is a need for the revival of the ancient Greek practice of *Agora*. Agora was a public meeting place in ancient Greece. According to Bauman, at the present, we are in such a place in which people discuss issues with regard to individuals and society and come to a consensus. There will be scope for democratic discussion without prejudices on any aspect. Before participating in the talks in *Agora*, people have become humans and come out of partial thinking in the present context; the mutual dependency on people and places is increasing. In this context, Adam Hirst says:

> Bauman's emphasis on the possibility of hope, the critique of the self-enclosed rational subject, and the necessity of responsibility offer a credible challenge to sociology. It demands a reinvigoration of its ethical imagination.
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> Adam 2014: 196

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