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Postmodern Ethics. by Zygmunt Bauman

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otherwise more ambitious and will ask “for a reconsideration of all those other domains, such as of law and state and market, where moral principles recommended by nonfeminist moral theories have been thought applicable” and will further “ask how these domains might have to be reconstructed and transformed in the light of feminist approaches to morality” (p. 218).

Held’s use of “feminist moral approaches” signals, among other things, her deep aversion to the universalistic claims of other moral theories. In her view, morality must respect particularisms, notably the specifics of unequal human relations. She directs her greatest impatience at contractual moral theorists who have grounded morality in the relations of purportedly rational independent beings. Their views reflect assumptions about the split between public and private, family and polity, that feminism has shown to be inherently oppressive to women. Held is correct that the postmodern world has effectively destroyed the boundaries that protected a semblance of corporatism within the family. She is not correct that all previous moral theorists have ignored the claims of charity or particularism. Nor, we may be permitted to suspect, is she necessarily correct that the relations between “mothering person” and child alone provide a better model for a comprehensive moral theory than contractual relations. Theories that attempt to apply the contractual model—the language of rights—to all human relations have recently been subjected to devastating criticism by Mary Ann Glendon, Elisabeth Wolgast, and Amitai Etzioni (none of whom appears in Held’s index or bibliography), to name only a few of those who do not merit her attention. While many agree that theories grounded in contractual and individual rights are open to criticism, exposure of their inadequacies does not, ipso facto, demonstrate the superiority of their opposite.

The figurative split between public and private that has informed much moral theory, especially that associated with bourgeois individualism, has bequeathed a tendency to tolerate the divorce between morality and power that has accompanied the triumph of capitalism. Held sees that split as primarily an embodiment of the domination of women by men and as the devaluation of the immediate, situational, and relativistic moral principles

that women typically have practiced. In effect, she is arguing that the morality of mothers should be recognized as superior to that of the market. What she unaccountably misses is that the divorce of public and private effectively relegated God—that is, religion—to the private. The women who practiced particularistic morality within their families normally understood better and typically hoped that their personal actions towards others indeed observed God’s laws. The danger then as now was that those who act particularistically confuse their personal inclinations with divine dictates and believe themselves justified in imposing them upon others.

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*Postmodern Ethics*, by **Zygmunt Bauman**. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993. 255 pp. \$52.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-631-18692-1. NPL paper. ISBN: 0-631-18693-X.

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Zygmunt Bauman’s *Postmodern Ethics* is not the kind of book empirically minded sociologists are likely to find persuasive or endearing. Readers seeking a sociological analysis of postmodern morality, that is, of the mores or of the hotly contested ethical terrains of so-called postmodern societies, are likely to be disappointed. Actual mores are not, however, as the book’s first paragraphs make sufficiently clear, the intended object of investigation. “The true subject-matter of this study is the postmodern perspective itself,” a perspective that is supposed to illuminate the obsolescence of all previous ethical theories and to open the “possibility of a radically novel understanding of moral phenomena” (p. 2).

In true postmodern fashion, the book does not display a systematically coherent or linearly structured argument. Yet, beyond the postulate that the modern age has reached its self-critical, self-denigrating, and self-critical stage, the disparate and very often illuminating fragments that constitute the book are integrated by the effort to establish the autonomy of morality as a space in need of being liberated both from cognitive-instrumental rationality and from subjective-

expressive aesthetics. The partial success of the effort derives in no small measure from the author's ability to play modernity and postmodernity against each other. From postmodern discourse he borrows the relentless critique of the illusory modern rationalist project to establish universal moral codes grounded in objective logical and impersonal foundations. But Bauman refuses to accept the notion that the postmodern condition entails the triumph of moral nihilism or moral relativism, the demise of the ethical, or the substitution of aesthetics for ethics. What postmodernity offers is the possibility, but only the possibility without any certainty, of the recovery of the autonomy of the moral self, an autonomy of which individuals have been constantly robbed by coercive legislators and rational philosophies bent on imposing external heteronomous legal codes.

But the attempt to establish the autonomy of morality and of the moral self by setting a dichotomous absolute contraposition between a universal human moral *a priori* and all socially underwritten ethical codes, which according to Bauman are akin to heteronomous law and coercive state rules, must lead to all sorts of contradictions. Even if one were to accept Bauman's postulate of an innate moral conscience, a sort of morality-acquisition device shared by all humans, akin to the universal language-acquisition device, it would still need to become actualized in every individual in and through a particular moral discourse transmitted by some particular normative tradition. Without embeddedness in some particular moral tradition, the morality of the autonomous self has no content and must perforce be vacuous.

Instead of transcending modernity, in their disregard if not antipathy for all normative traditions Bauman and the postmoderns reveal themselves as faithful heirs of the enlightened philosophies they so frequently attack. It is symptomatic that a book aiming to establish the foundations of a postmodern morality makes frequent references to Lévinas, Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, Nietzsche, and other ethical gurus of postmodernity, while completely ignoring religion and the normative traditions of the great civilizations, traditions whose appropriation by ordinary humans still guide the everyday moral choices individuals face in the postmodern world. In this respect, Bauman's analysis

reproduces the very "great schism" between the emancipated elites and the ignorant masses, a schism that he attributes to modern Western developments since the Renaissance. All too often the book replaces the modern grand narrative of progress with a one-dimensional negative philosophy of history that reduces the postulate of universality to nothing more than a reflection of the coercive practice of universalization carried out by a conspiracy of rational *philosophes* and state legislators.

Bauman must be given credit for placing what Kant called the mysteries of "moral law inside me" as the ultimate riddle of morality. His criticism of all moral theories that reduce morality to the utilitarian rational choice of social actors is convincing. Durkheim, who perhaps more systematically than any modern thinker searched for a sociological explanation of the source of morality, argued convincingly that "between God and society lies the choice." Durkheim's reduction of the divinity to "society transfigured and symbolically expressed" is surely unsatisfactory. But, sociologically, Bauman's attempt to ground the autonomy of the moral conscience without reference to god or society is even less satisfactory. Bauman defines postmodernity as "modernity without illusions." Yet there is no greater sociological illusion than the author's postmodern assumption that the book's deep universalist moral impulse owes nothing to the universalist religious-humanist normative traditions of modernity.

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*The Logics of Social Structure*, by **Kyriakos M. Kontopoulos**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 481 pp. NPL cloth. ISBN: 0-521-41779-1.

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This is an impossible book, which makes some contributions. First, the impossible aspects; then I turn to the contributions.

In his introduction to Weber's *Economy and Society*, Talcott Parsons writes, "Weber apparently did not intend this material to be 'read' in the ordinary sense." I always wondered if this was intended to be a compliment of sorts—from Parsons, that is.