


Bauman on Moral Blindness


Analyzing the Liquidity in Standards of Moral Valuation

Anthony Chuwkuebuka Ohaekwusi

ABSTRACT This article analyzes Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of moral blindness against the backdrop of his designation of modern culture as a dynamic process of liquefaction constantly dissolving every paradigm and subject to the flexible and indeterminate power of individual choice. Bauman argued that the social conditions of this radically individualistic liquid modernity result in a kind of moral insensitivity that he calls *adiaphorization*. *Adiaphorization* for him places certain human acts outside the “universe of moral obligations.” It defies the entire orthodox theory of the social origins of morality as it reveals that some dehumanizing monstrous atrocities like the holocaust and genocides are not exclusively reserved for monsters, but can be attributable to “frighteningly normal” moral agents. The present text therefore attempts to discuss the various moral implications of Bauman’s analysis of moral blindness, with a view to highlighting its weaknesses. It moves on to explore Bauman’s recourse to Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics of the “face of the Other” as a viable ethical remedy that trumps the uncanny effects of this whole *adiaphorization* effect. Finally, the paper further advances his call for a rediscovery of the sense of belonging, by appealing to some major insights originating from African traditions of ethical communalism in order to propose a possible route towards the avoidance and amelioration of this moral challenge.

KEYWORDS adiaphorization; communalism; individualism; liquid modernity; liquefaction; insensitivity; moral blindness; moral valuation; responsibility; self; standards

✉ Anthony Chuwkuebuka Ohaekwusi, Catholic University of Lublin, Department of Philosophy, Al. Raclawickie 14, 20-950 Lublin
✉ tonyebuka1984@gmail.com  0000-0002-7592-6524

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INTRODUCTION

When a question about moral blindness is raised, what possibly comes most readily to mind is the gross insensitivity manifested in interpersonal forms of moral behavior. This insensitivity, which manifests itself in certain depersonalizing aspects of human behavior, may be attributable to various factors that characterize one's response to moral stimuli. At the same time, it may also be regarded as revealing the vulnerability of moral consciousness in the face of dynamic social circumstances. That is why, when Zygmunt Bauman, in his ethical analysis of modernity and the Holocaust, points to the liquefying impact of modern culture as constitutive of a form of moral insensitivity, we can help but be struck and concerned by his diagnosis. Indeed, the impression it makes has prompted a number of questions to be raised, centered on whether this total loss of moral perception is a reflection of ongoing changes in our standards of moral valuation, or a response on our part to such changes, or both. This has to do with the fact that Bauman pushes his discussion of this blindness in a direction that is quite unique, presenting the dissolving effects of liquid modernity as having a neutralizing impact on the moral attitude *per se*.

This paper therefore aims to critically analyze Bauman's discourse on moral blindness against the backdrop of his concept of liquid modernity. It begins by discussing the extent to which his postmodernist depiction of a consumerist modern culture that liquefies pre-existing standards of valuation is reflected in his ethical analysis of moral insensitivity as expressed by what he calls moral "adiaphorization." This essay will also discuss the consequences of his analysis of moral blindness for our day-to-day experiences of interpersonal relationships, with a view to exposing its strengths and weaknesses, as these are revealed under certain social circumstances that would tend to support or challenge it. Moreover, appealing to a traditional African community-based conception of morality, it interrogates the purported objectivity of his ultra-individualistic stance on a variety of issues, and thus attempts to show how best to combat the challenging effects of moral *adiaphorization*.

TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF LIQUID MODERNITY

Bauman's postmodernist phenomenology centers on his idea that modern culture is becoming increasingly liquid as its basic solid components continuously dissolve with time. He proposed a certain "evolution of cultural theory"—one which portrayed the present modernity as a "loss of position" constituting a transformation from a solid phase at the service of the

status quo to a liquid phase at the behest of individual willingness. He employed the term “fluidity,” construed as a unique characteristic of material objects, to distinguish this modern era from the previous one. According to him, “fluidity is the quality of liquids and gases. What distinguishes both of them from solids . . . is that they ‘cannot sustain a tangential, or shearing, force when at rest’ and so undergo ‘a continuous change in shape when subjected to such a stress.’”¹ He sought to construe this element of fluidity as a fitting metaphor for describing the present phase of history, which is characterized by continuous systemic changes from solidity to liquidity. This is evident in the observable transition from the analogue to the digital and from crude or hard ways of doing things to softer and more flexible ones.

Bauman acknowledged that history has always been a process of liquefaction: a melting down which transforms things from crude to refined, dissolving whatever persists over time and persistently smashing the protective armour of various beliefs, paradigms and loyalties. Fluidity therefore demonstrates here the indeterminate nature of modern culture. Such elements of liquidity include an inability to retain a definite shape for long and a constant proneness to changing it, as well as an ability to flow easily and lightly with extraordinary flexibility, along with a capacity to dissolve obstacles. In Bauman’s words,

I use the term “liquid modernity” here for the currently existing shape of the modern condition, described by other authors as “postmodernity,” “late modernity,” “second” or “hyper” modernity. What makes modernity “liquid,” and thus justifies the choice of name, is its self-propelling, self-intensifying, compulsive and obsessive “modernization,” as a result of which, like liquid, none of the consecutive forms of social life is able to maintain its shape for long.²

Modernity is therefore part of this historical process of liquefaction from inception, continuously melting down every solidly pre-established paradigm, profaning the sacred, disavowing and dethroning past traditions and standards, and keeping all social relations in a permanent state of becoming:

“Dissolving everything that is solid” has been the innate and defining characteristic of the modern form of life from the outset; but today, unlike yester-

1. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 1.

2. Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 11.

day, the dissolved forms are not to be replaced, and nor are they replaced, by other solid forms—deemed “improved” in the sense of being even more solid and “permanent” than those that came before them, and so even more resistant to melting. In the place of the melting, and so impermanent, forms come others, no less—if not more—susceptible to melting and therefore equally impermanent.³

Liquid modernity therefore presents a culture of constant flux and flexibility, which melts every pre-existing paradigm of social forms and operates as an impermanent mechanism of indeterminate forms. “‘Culture’ was to be an agent for change rather than for preservation of the status quo; or more precisely, it was to be a navigation tool to steer social evolution towards a universal human condition. The initial purpose of the concept of “culture” was not to serve as a register of descriptions, inventories and codifications of the prevailing situation, but rather to appoint a goal and direction for future efforts.”⁴ It follows that liquid modernity is “a ‘post-paradigm’ era in the history of culture,” “an arena of constant battle till death, waged against every kind of paradigm—and in effect against all homeostatic devices serving conformism and routine, that is to say imposing monotony and maintaining predictability.”⁵ Like Cartesian scepticism, this post-paradigmatic conception follows a methodology that is void of every presupposition, but unlike Descartes’s methodology it is not a process headed towards discovering an indubitable standard; rather, it continuously melts down all structural norms and general standards pertaining to the human social condition with a view to creating “a flexibility of preferences” that places everything under the control of a perpetual temporariness and inconsequence of choice. There is no paradigm shift here, of course: we only have a post-paradigm era because within this dissolving process, impermanent forms are continuously replaced by still other such forms, susceptible to individual whims and choosiness.

Bauman identified various factors that characterize the liquefaction of modern culture. According to him, social forms like structures, institutions, and patterns of behaviour that control and restrict individual choices can no longer sustain their shape for long in this liquid modernity. Modern technologies of travel and communication have facilitated contacts, broken down hitherto solid boundaries, and empowered politi-

3. Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, 12.

4. *Ibid.*, 6.

5. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

cally uncontrolled global spaces, leaving no barriers to individual action and relations, and exposing everything to the compelling influence of inherently unpredictable market forces and individual whims. Inter-human bonds have therefore become increasingly fragile, arbitrary and temporary as individuals exist in networks of virtual connections. “‘Society’ is increasingly viewed and treated as ‘network’ rather than a ‘structure’ (let alone a solid ‘totality’; it is perceived and treated as a matrix of random connections and disconnections and of an essentially infinite volume of possible permutations.”⁶ With points of reference becoming increasingly disempowered by the pressures of market competition, traditional solidarities are eroded as individual solutions are given to socially generated problems. Social projects are conceived in terms totally bereft of long-term planning, with guarantees and assurances subject to constantly changing circumstances. Responsibility therefore comes to be subordinated to the consequences of individual choices and interests, as flexibility rather than conformity to the rules thrives as the best individual moral quality, corresponding to a greater readiness to abandon commitments, change course at random, and pursue whatever preferred options happen to be available.

It is clear that the individual is central here to Bauman’s liquid modern culture, and that the flexibility and fluidity of this modernity is itself a function of the indeterminate possibilities of choice available to him or her:

It can [therefore] be said that in liquid modern times, culture . . . is fashioned to fit individual freedom of choice and individual responsibility for that choice; and that its function is to ensure that the choice should be and will always remain a necessity and unavoidable duty of life, while the responsibility for the choice and its consequences remains where it has been placed by the liquid modern human condition—on the shoulders of the individual, now appointed to the position of chief manager of “life politics” and its sole executive.⁷

Suffice it to say that when everything is subject to the dictates of individual will, we become trapped in the clutches of a realm of endless possibilities where every action counts as permissible just insofar as it gets the will flowing towards it. The only element in Bauman’s culture of today that plays the role of a homeostat is “the overwhelming demand for constant

6. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 2.

7. Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, 12.

change” without pre-established direction. Thus, culture in liquid modernity is prospective, not normative, in that it “consists of offers not prohibitions, propositions not norms.”⁸ Liquid modernity therefore presents the contemporary world as one that is individualistic, all-embracing, open-ended, omnivorous, and amorphous; a world of possibilities and not of dilemmas or specifics. It is an unpredictable world, where anything can happen and anything goes.

Supposing, for the sake of argument, that Bauman’s observation of this new individualism is plausible, then one may hypothesize that in this liquid culture, where every socially pre-established standard and or practice is unreliable and everything possible is permitted, pre-existing bonds and loyalties will have been neutralized and morality disconnected from pre-existing norms and rendered subject to the flexing of the will itself. Thus, a culture of indifference comes to be created, where every aspect of life tends to be governed by largely pragmatic and utilitarian factors. Moreover, this new way of life manifests itself in various human endeavors—such as technology, fashion, entertainment, education, market economy and politics—that promise substitutes for the hitherto dissolving paradigms. It then follows that

everything is permeated by ambivalence; there is no longer any unambiguous social situation, just as there are no more uncompromized actors on the stage of world history. To attempt to interpret such a world in terms of the categories of good and evil; the social and political optics of black and white; and almost Manichean separations, is today both impossible and grotesque. It is a world that has long ceased controlling itself (although it obsessively seeks to control individual people), a world that cannot respond to its own dilemmas and lessen the tensions it has sowed.⁹

This culture and politics of individualism, liberalism, consumerism and moral relativism that is distinctive of liquid modernity manifests a “Do It Yourself” (DIY) syndrome championed by the power of globalization and automated technologies that, in turn, create a “selfie-lifestyle” committed to an unconstrained exposure of every element of the private realm and a thoroughgoing loss of boundaries. Leonidas Donskis, who together with Bauman co-authored *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liq-*

8. *Ibid.*, 13.

9. Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis, *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 5.

uid Modernity, calls this “Liquid Totalitarianism”—a condition in which our social activities are controlled and our privacy colonized by the compelling influence of a greatly advanced set of forms of modern mass media, sophisticated technology and consumerist politics. In this self-absorbed age obsessed with consumption, attention-seeking, self-exposure and sensationalism, the individual is at the centre of everything, yet with its craving for cyber-relevance and commercialization of every relevant value, “Privacy is Dead!” This is a world where everyone is more interested in the sensational rather than the sensible, in celebrity rather than integrity, in the possible rather than the permissible. It is a “world which leaves increasingly less room for people like Andrei Sakharov, John Paul II or Vaclav Havel.”¹⁰

Liquid modernity is a culture where everyone seems right in his or her own terms, and everything goes. It is “the epoch of non-engagement,” with an “ideology of the end of ideology.” It promises some sort of multiculturalism: a manifesto of adaptation to various realities, letting affairs “run their own course” without questioning or undermining them. For Bauman,

the aim of enlightenment and culture was no less than the creation of a “new man,” equipped with new points of reference and flexible, adaptable standards in place of the lifelong rules hitherto imposed by traditional communities, from cradle to grave, which in the dawn of the modern era were gradually but implacably losing their pragmatic value, or falling out of use at an accelerated rate.¹¹

He therefore admits that in liquid modernity every paradigm is undermined and nothing can count as indispensable, in that the attitude of reverence within human beings is rendered numb by market-driven liquefying factors that seek to view morality in economic terms. Thus, within this “market-place modernity,” moral sensitivity stands neutralized and the whole exercise of first getting to know what counts as good, and then acting to bring it about, becomes irrelevant. This may also result in some sort of unlimited pursuit of individual interests, such as may then clash in a contest for relevance. Worse still, this breeds a culture of indifference that trivializes the social structures that foster moral obligations and a sense of community-based responsibility. For if changes in culture do truly affect the moral responsiveness of people, then it would seem that

10. Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 51.

11. Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, 52.

“Bauman is right to observe that the liquefying impact of modernity sprinkles tranquilizers on the moral consciousness and so reduces to nullity the essence of a morally based relationship with another.”¹² Little wonder, then, that he employed the term “moral blindness” to express the extent to which this loss of sensitivity in liquid modernity could lead to the death of sociability, not to mention other unpalatable consequences, such as might well plunge one into a terrifying sense of fatalism.

BAUMAN’S MORAL ADIAPHORIZATION

After receiving the Amalfi prize for his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman set out to analyze the moral sphere via the social conditions that characterize it, with the aim of giving substance to the idea that the “liquid modern world” is subject to a compelling scourge of moral indifference and loss of sensitivity. Together with Leonidas Donskis, Bauman undertook an existential analysis of moral blindness construed as a consequence of what he termed “liquid modernity.” As one commentator puts it, “[t]he book *Moral Blindness: the Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* is a series of conversations between Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis on themes that are central to Bauman’s earlier works, namely: What are the lessons of the Holocaust? How can one act ethically in a consumer-driven world of liquid modernity? And is it possible to balance rationalization and efficiency with sensitivity to others?”¹³ Having described everything in postmodern consumerist society as turning liquid, Bauman sought to analyze the moral conditions of this fluid modernity.

Bauman began by acknowledging that “all social organization consists therefore in neutralizing the disruptive and deregulating impact or moral behavior.”¹⁴ As such, we are trapped in the clutches of indifference and a relativism which has neutralized and numbed the moral alertness of people, thus rendering the solid foundations of morality liquid and amorphous. Like Dietrich von Hildebrand,¹⁵ he identified moral blindness as

12. Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 150–1.

13. Siobhan Kattago, “In the Shadow of Antigone: Resisting Moral Blindness,” *Journal of Political Power* 7, no. 1 (2013): 149, doi:10.1080/2158379X.2013.846556.

14. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 216.

15. Hildebrand identified two manifestations of moral-value blindness: namely, value-indifferent blindness and value-hostile blindness. See Dietrich V. Hildebrand, *Morality and of Ethical Vales: A Study of Some Fundamental Issues of Ethics*, transl. Robin D. Rollinger, unpublished, 46–47. (The original version of this unpublished translation was sent to me by Prof. John F. Crosby in July, 2015.)

something that manifested itself in both monstrous and indifferent forms of behavior, but emphasized the overarching influence of consumerist culture which, while lubricating the wheels of the economy, nevertheless exerts a tranquilizing effect upon our moral bearings:

When we deploy the concept of “moral insensitivity” to denote a callous, compassionless and heartless kind of behavior, or just an equanimous and indifferent posture taken and manifested towards other people’s trials and tribulations (the kind of posture epitomized by Pontius Pilate’s “hand-washing” gesture), we use “insensitivity” as a metaphor.¹⁶

This anesthetizing effect creates some level of normalcy—and even, sometimes, an impunity that is taken as a cause for celebration—in the face of horrible evils, and serves in some way to suppress the human capacity to feel sympathy and empathy: “Evil lurks in what we tend to take as normality and even as the triviality and banality of mundane life, rather than in abnormal cases, pathologies, aberrations and the like.”¹⁷ Moral blindness is therefore observable in that attitude which trivializes matters of moral relevance and refrains from imparting a moral significance to evil, even in its most terrifying forms. Bauman himself had this to say:

Evil is not confined to war or totalitarian ideologies. Today it more frequently reveals itself in failing to react to someone else’s suffering, in refusing to understand others, in insensitivity and in eyes turned away from a silent ethical gaze. It also inhabits secret services when they, motivated by love of country or sense of duty (whose depth and authenticity would not be questioned by experts on Immanuel Kant’s ethics nor by Kant himself), unflinchingly destroy a little man or woman’s life just because . . . one just had to prove one’s loyalty and dedication to the system, that is, the state and its controlling structures.¹⁸

To clarify his claims, Bauman introduced the notion of “the adiaphorization of human behavior,” deriving this from the Greek word *adiaphoron* (plural: *adiaphora*), which means an unimportant thing,¹⁹ to analyze how

16. Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 13.

17. *Ibid.*, 36.

18. *Ibid.*, 9–10.

19. Zygmunt Bauman, “Social Manipulation of Morality: Moralizing Actors—Adiaphorizing Action, the European Amalfi Prize Lecture 1990 in Honour of the Book *Modernity and the Holocaust*,” published as an appendix to the book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 208–22.

social systems encourage moral indifference and the dehumanization of the other:

All social organization consists therefore in neutralizing the disruptive and deregulating impact or moral behavior. . . . It simply renders social action *adiaphoric* (originally, *adiaphoron* meant a thing declared indifferent by the Church)—neither good nor evil, measurable against technical (purpose-oriented or procedural) but not moral values. By the same token, it renders moral responsibility for the other ineffective in its original role of the limit imposed on the effort to exist.²⁰

An *adiaphoron* is a temporary withdrawal from one's own sensitivity zone: an ability not to react, or to react as if something were happening not to people but to natural physical objects, to things, or to non-humans.²¹ Moral blindness manifests itself mostly in the context of interpersonal actions and relations that usually do have moral implications. Consequently, whenever one treats the other directly or indirectly as an object, or as something that is irrelevant and so not deserving of moral attention in human terms, one expresses moral *adiaphorization*. This is equally reflected in the attitude of refusing to see anything wrong with doing something morally wrong. "*Adiaphora* is simply moral numbness and an attitude of indifference to the world and others."²² In the words of Bauman:

by "adiaphorization" I mean stratagems of placing, intentionally or by default, certain acts and or omitted acts regarding certain categories of humans outside the moral—immoral axis—that is, outside the "universe of moral obligations" and outside the realm of phenomena subject to moral evaluation; stratagems to declare such acts or inaction, explicitly or implicitly, "morally neutral" and prevent the choices between them from being subject to ethical judgement—which means pre-empting moral opprobrium (a contrived return, one could say, to the paradial state of naivety preceding the first bite of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil...). To me the term "adiaphoric" does not mean "unimportant," but "irrelevant," or better still "indifferent" or "equanimous."²³

20. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 215.

21. Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 39.

22. Kattago, "In the Shadow of Antigone," 3.

23. Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 40.

He further emphasized that it is the current social situation of liquid modernity that provides a suitable and compelling background for moral *adiaphorization*, noting that the Holocaust amounted to a wakeup call where this sort of awareness is concerned. Today, “the hidden and unseemly face of our confident, affluent, brave world, and of the dangerous game this world plays with human moral impulse, seems to be resonant with ever more widely shared concerns.”²⁴ Bauman considers “*adiaphoric acts*” to be “those exempted by social consent (universal or local) from ethical evaluation, and therefore free from carrying the threat of pangs of conscience and moral stigma. Courtesy of social (read, majority) consent, the self-esteem and self-righteousness of the actors are *a priori* protected from moral condemnation; moral conscience is thereby disarmed and made irrelevant as a constraining and limiting factor in the choice of actions.”²⁵

Adiaphorization is, therefore, a consequence of Bauman’s liquid modern culture that is manifested through the irresistible pulling power of affectively tempting drives legitimized by power politics and economic systems: one that banalizes morality itself. It vitiates one’s perception of what is good or bad, numbing one’s sensitivity to what is recommended or condemned and completely neutralizing responses to what is prescribed or proscribed. In other words, we are dealing here with an anesthetic effect that renders everything uniformly good and evil, important and unimportant: a perilous devaluation that makes the moral agent lose moral sensitivity. This is the kind of insensitivity quintessentially embodied in Hannah Arendt’s “Eichmann,” whose monstrous acts during the Holocaust she (Arendt) attributed to mere pragmatic dutifulness rather than hate or psychopathology. She referred to this blindness as “the banality of evil”: a “deadly phenomenon that can turn ordinary non-psychopathic people into cold-blooded murderers”²⁶:

In this respect Bauman is not far from Hannah Arendt’s thought, . . . her disappointment with the evil of the new world. Everyone expects to see a monster or a creature of hell, but actually sees a banal bureaucrat of death whose entire personality and activity testifies to an extraordinary normality and even a high morality of duty.²⁷

24. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 209.

25. Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 41.

26. Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2016), 9.

27. Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 9.

Thus modern society, by creating such an *adiaphorizing* mechanism, demonstrates a new kind of moral worldview that dehumanizes victims and cedes space for such cruelties as the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide—endemic in human history—to happen: “Dehumanizing the victim relaxes intrinsically felt moral restraints; enemies are often depicted as repulsive animals like rats or cockroaches.”²⁸ At the same time, this would appear to defy altogether the orthodox theory of the social origins of morality: “It explains in particular why at a time of war or crusades or colonization or communal strife normal human collectivities are capable of performing acts which, if committed singly, are readily ascribed to the psychopathy of the perpetrator.”²⁹ It therefore follows that “the banality of evil does not refer to the Final Solution as just one more commonplace evil in human history, but to an unprecedented evil that arose from the commonplace in the sense of ‘the ordinary.’”³⁰

Of course, Bauman’s conception of this sort of moral blindness shifts the entire domain of radical evil from being the exclusive reserve of monsters or devils to something with the potential to include within its scope some “frighteningly normal” person or other, whose loss of sensitivity—often resulting from the prevailing influence of consumer-driven tendencies in our society—renders the sanctity of moral values worthless. “The idea is quite clear: a decent man can harbor a monster inside him.”³¹ What is puzzling here is that in the liquid modern world of accelerated capitalism, *adiaphorization* follows the pattern of consumer-commodity relations, which has been effectively transplanted into inter-human relations inasmuch as one plays down evil in the context of the latter with such utterances as “Sorry, nothing personal, it’s just business!” It is thus hardly surprising that such “‘frighteningly normal’ people, when put into situations of authority, are ready to sacrifice humanity for obedience.”³² Like the devil or monster, such normal people lose their attitude of reverence and willingness to remember, such as would otherwise make them critical of their own actions. They lose their powers of valuation and association, as well as their basic moral and political sensibilities, being ultimately left with just the experience of anesthesia, numbness and loss of moral sensitivity to the plight of other human beings.

28. Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (London: Saqi Books, 2015), 149.

29. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 217.

30. Bernard J. Bergen, *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and “The Final Solution”* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), xiii–xiv.

31. Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 9.

32. Kattago, “In the Shadow of Antigone,” 3.

As the destructive potential of today's technology comes to be placed at the service of *adiaphorized* action, are we not bound to witness a total decline of moral valuation, especially in our dealings with the human community? Bauman agrees that "the realm of *techne*, the realm of dealings with the non-human world or the human world cast as non-human, was at all times treated as morally neutral thanks to the expedient of *adiaphorization*."³³ This is, of course, manifest in today's social interactions, which atomize the individual and greatly amplify stereotypes rather than arousing empathy and sensitivity. With a heightened obsession centered on reality shows and celebrity cults, today's social-media have created "liquid friendships and communities" and a "Do-It-Yourself" selfie-culture where everyone is expendable and "everything is becoming uniformly important and unimportant."³⁴ Worse still, knowledge has become a commercial commodity, at the whims of an *adiaphorized* bureaucracy, as universities gradually deviate from their original mission to serve as citadels of classical education and become increasingly bureaucratized as market-driven mass-educational institutions that themselves exhibit consumeristic tendencies. "The 'reformatory' label had almost completely disappeared; and behind this shift lay an attempt, more representational than real, . . . to abandon the remnants of a rigid and fixed style of institutional routine."³⁵

What is intriguing about Bauman's analysis is that the manner in which this moral challenge is formulated conveys a mood of fatalism and helplessness. The deterministic nature of the *adiaphorizing* effects of liquefaction occupies an absolutely central position in his discourse. He makes it clear that "our epoch is one of determinism, fatalism and the total absence of alternatives."³⁶ Notwithstanding this fatalism, Bauman has recourse to Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of the "face of the Other": a new ethics that trumps the uncanny effects of this whole *adiaphorization* effect. As the source of his optimism, he credits the defiance of people who chose disobedience, and were 'arrogant' enough to trust only their own judgment, rather than blindly following authority in such times as that of the Holocaust. These heroes, for Bauman, justify Levinas' claim that "moral behavior is triggered off by the mere presence of the 'Other' as a face, that is, as an authority without force."³⁷ So amidst Bauman's fatalistic presentation

33. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 217.

34. Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 122.

35. David J. Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1980), 263.

36. Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 201.

37. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 214.

of moral blindness, his hopeful call for a new ethical endeavor in response to today's *adiaphorized* morality sets us the challenge of analyzing just how far moral valuation, together with our own capacities for evaluative response, have been vitiated—one that we can only hope to meet through ethical reflection upon this liquid modernity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MORAL VALUATION AND THE CAPACITY FOR EVALUATIVE RESPONSE

Bauman's call for a new ethics would seem to presuppose that antecedent ethical systems are poorly equipped to offer guidance and protection in relation to our contemporary moral concerns when faced with the *adiaphorizing* effects of liquid modernity. The fatalistic nature of his analysis of moral blindness in liquid modernity leaves us at an impasse. But what is very clear is that his discourse on liquid modernity presents a change in the act of moral valuation itself, as it retraces the historical dynamics of culture from solid to liquid, from paradigmatic to post-paradigmatic. Actions now receive moral approval or disapproval based on one's own sense of judgment or moral valuation, while an individual's moral considerations may well reflect influences that can appear by turns either utilitarian or deontological: given its practicability, Bauman's consumer-driven liquid model would certainly seem in a way to be utilitarian, yet it proposes a baseless and indeterminable standard that operates strictly in terms of individualized rationality—albeit one where causal determination is substituted for purpose and choice. When he describes *adiaphoric* acts as “those exempted by social consent (universal or local) from ethical evaluation, and therefore free from carrying the threat of pangs of conscience, and moral stigma,”³⁸ he is, unsurprisingly, addressing moral blindness just as it relates to a post-paradigmatic perspective involving the “absence of morality.” Thus, in the context of Bauman's construal of such blindness, morality is simply rendered non-existent as a result of liquefaction. If there is no morality, and individual actions have no moral implications, then moral insensitivity is a given. It follows, therefore, that good and evil will make no sense, and “if one doesn't understand ‘goodness’, one doesn't understand ‘evil’ either.”³⁹

All the same, the fact that Bauman invokes Levinas' moral philosophy

38. Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 41.

39. Manfred Deselaers, *And Your Conscience Never Haunted You* (Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2015), 231.

shows that for him, moral blindness is not a “death sentence” where contemporary moral valuation is concerned. This is because Levinas presents a still more comprehensive ethical view with regard to human beings—a framework that calls evil by its name, and does so in a manner that leaves no room for flexibility or liquidity of opinion. The latter attempted to describe evil from the perspective of an understanding of “primordial human goodness,” and so centered his view of morality on inter-human encounters of the sort that would seem to pervade almost all philosophical thinking. Bauman agrees with his view that

moral behavior . . . is triggered off by the mere presence of the “Other” as a face, that is, as an authority without force. The “Other” demands without threatening to punish or promising reward; his demand is without sanction. The “Other” cannot do anything; it is precisely his weakness that exposes my strength, my ability to act, as responsibility. Moral action is whatever follows that responsibility.⁴⁰

On the other hand, Bauman may have overlooked the part where Levinas noted that this inter-human encounter provides us with freedom and responsibility rather than the false freedom expressed in individualistic liquid modernity. You can take responsibility for the actions you performed freely only because there is an “Other” who demands a response: “This responsibility presupposes that I am present for the other. It also means that I have something to share.”⁴¹

The problem of moral blindness is therefore closely linked to Bauman’s presentation of a liquid modernity that is void of humanity. Liquid modernity demonstrates a “technical omnipotence” that has reduced human agency to an instrumental tool in a negatively globalized world: “The unconstrained rule of technology means that . . . no intellectual or moral reference point seems to be conceivable from which to assess, evaluate and criticize the directions technology may take except for the sober evaluation of possibilities technology itself has created.”⁴² But one cannot deny that the whole enterprise of culture as a way of practical life and reasoning should be treated integrally as a human endeavor: one where humanity is put at the center of everything rather than simply being at its behest. Consequently, technical reasoning should not be given so much prominence

40. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 214.

41. Deselaers, *And Your Conscience*, 241.

42. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Christian Ethics* (New York: David McKay, 1953), 238.

and pre-eminence over the ethical. What humanity *can* do should not take the place of what humanity *should* do. It follows that moral blindness is better referred to as a distortion resulting from the technical overreach of modern culture rather than as a default consequence of a normal trajectory of history. It boils down to a defect in moral value judgment: one which, of course, affects our evaluative responses themselves, and so obstructs our being-with-others.

To talk of evaluative responses in this context is to advert to what a thinker such as Dietrich von Hildebrand has in mind when he speaks of “man’s sensitivity to values as precisely the capacity to grasp things important in themselves, to be able to be affected by them, and to be motivated by them in his responses.”⁴³ Evaluative responding is not just a response to something merely subjectively satisfying or agreeable, as liquid modernity might itself suggest. It goes much deeper: to one’s relation to an object as ontologically “important-in-itself” and not merely egocentrically satisfying. A proper discussion of what the correct grounds would be for determining something as being “important-in-itself” cannot, of course, be realistically pursued here, yet the distinction between this and being “merely subjectively satisfying” is surely clear enough for present purposes. Viewed in this light, moral blindness therefore goes with “silencing the reverent, loving, value-responding center.”⁴⁴ Consequently, Bauman’s liquid modernity spells both a change in the standards of moral valuation, and a correlative change in the structure of our evaluative responses themselves. For when standards change, responses follow—at least as regards our willingness to feel and express attitudes of approval or disapproval. Good standards of valuation evoke a good evaluative response, and *vice versa*. When a standard of valuation is deficient or defective—as in the case of liquid modernity, which is arbitrary and whimsical—there is a need to rediscover the missing link between these. Of course, our liquid modern culture is itself devoid of organic relationships, on account of its techno-commercial nature. That is why, in spite of the tremendous capacities of our globalizing modernity as regards different possibilities of convergence, we can only see ourselves connecting, and not relating. For we now exist as a network of individual compartments. For instance, we can engage today in a business transaction with a seller or client without relating to him or her in any way. Of course, this is more efficient,

43. Von Hildebrand, *Christian Ethics*, 203.

44. Dietrich von Hildebrand and Alice Jourdain, *Graven Images: Substitutes for True Morality* (New York: David McKay, 1957), 13.

but it is less organic, because something is missing in this inter-human contact: machines separate us from one another, and so deprive us of the organic human element latent within such contact. Bauman is therefore quite right to call his discourse on moral blindness “a dialogue on the possibility of a rediscovery of the sense of belonging as a viable alternative to fragmentation, atomization, and the resulting loss of sensitivity.”⁴⁵

Our project of rediscovery should therefore begin with a re-examination of our relationships in the world, focusing critically upon those standards of valuation that fail to transport humanity out of the trends prevalent within modernity. It should be established that social relationships are dying because of the liquid mentality of modern culture. In the face of liquid modern tendencies, if everything is becoming consumer driven, then our capacities for valuation stand to be robbed of their sensitivity: “The death of sociability in late modernity is no fantasy at all. People no longer want to be together. They no longer have any reason to stay with one another.”⁴⁶ That is why we said earlier that even in our better connected “global village,” we cannot relate properly to one another, as the connecting powers of globalization are imbued with other tendencies intrinsic to commercialism. Hence, it would appear that the progress-oriented drive of modernity is ready to sacrifice humanity on the altar of consumer-driven gains, with an overly commercialized sense of value numbing sensitivity to moral values—especially when the latter stand in the way of technological progress. Today, bankers are losing their jobs to Automated Teller Machines (ATMs). Even in emergency situations impacting upon human beings (e.g. accidents), people are more likely to stand back, take photos, and put these online for public consumption, than they are to step up, help others out, and try to save the situation. That is why Levinas’ call to discover morality in the “face of the Other” remains a relevant starting point for this process of recovery and redress. For “I know that the Other is a free human being and represents much more than what appears on the surface. The other becomes like myself, a second edition of the self.”⁴⁷

As migration and digitalization knits us into a web of “liquid relationships,” Bauman affirms that “the world is more than a mass of countries; it is an ‘archipelago of diasporas.’”⁴⁸ Notwithstanding the various changes in loyalties resulting from liquefaction, the fact remains that there are

45. Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 12.

46. *Ibid.*, 198.

47. Deselaers, *And Your Conscience*, 247.

48. Kattago, “In the Shadow of Antigone,” 5.

relationships all around us that simply need to be there. This is because relationships are not arbitrary, like commercial commodities: they come with a lot of factors fundamental to human existence and morality. Duties emerge because people meet, and “to be for the ‘Other’ means to be good.”⁴⁹ Being conscious of the other implies being morally sensitive. This is a “pure value response,” but attitudinal indifference or neutrality towards moral value is an inappropriate response, as “value deserves an appropriate response from us.”⁵⁰ Our moral valuations and responsiveness are greatly enhanced, and their relevance increased, when we live in community and understand community. By doing so we may rediscover the immutably organic character of human life, which is exactly what will spell the death of *adiaphorization*.

We may also observe this idea coming to light in the context of some African communalist philosophies, according to which a person remains unfulfilled without relationships—with God, with others, and with the world: “Instead of a Western emphasis on ‘particulars,’ ‘individualism,’ and ‘autonomy,’ the African highlights ‘universality,’ ‘collectivity’ and ‘communalism.’”⁵¹ This is not a relegation of the quality of an individual to an aspect of a totality or simply some part of a whole, but rather a realization of that integral aspect of human nature that means that he or she does not remain in isolation, but engages instead with others interpersonally: “The African worldview presents the individual, not as an isolated entity, but always in-relation-to-the-whole.”⁵² A normal African village is a close-knit natural and organised community of life “where everyone knows everyone else and they all share numerous commitments together as one people.”⁵³ Communalism lies at the very core of African philosophy and culture. This is because “the entire African peoples possess a deep (sense of) community spirit founded on this basic kinship of belongingness.”⁵⁴ Thus, we find among African people not only shared elements such as their common historical, geographical and socio-economic situation, but also common cultural elements and shared

49. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 261.

50. John Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 205.

51. J. Chukwuemeka Ekei, *Justice in Communalism: Foundation of Ethics in African Philosophy* (Lagos: Realm Communications, 2001), 71–72.

52. *Ibid.*, 71.

53. Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Kpim of Personality, Treatise on the Human Person* (Owerri: Eustel Publications Nigeria, 2000), 97.

54. *Ibid.*, 98.

values such as communal solidarity, the extended-family system, a deep religiosity, a sense of being one, and the sense of the sacred.

Within the tightly organized structure common to their shared life, all find their identity. They participate, and thereby receive recognition.⁵⁵ This, moreover, echoes the conception typically favored by personalists, who use terms such as “participation,” “harmony,” “intersubjectivity,” and “community” to demonstrate the indispensability of interpersonal relationships to human life. In the realm of the spirit of the African, no one lives in isolation, as to do so would be to risk one’s very identity and relevance: “[i]n a word, the community remains a social fact that is part and parcel of the identity of the African person.”⁵⁶ Even in the African practice of giving names, we can find this communitarian essence reflected. Apart from bearing a surname (*aha nna*—the name of the fore-father) which reflects the ancestry of an extended family, as is practiced in other cultures, some people have the name of their community appended to their names (for example, the Igbo⁵⁷ name *Okafor Umuhu* [Okafor from Umuhu], or the Hausa⁵⁸ name *Umar Tafawa Belewa* [Umar of Tafawa Belewa]), in order to reflect this communitarian element in their personal identity. However, the fact that in conceptual terms everyone is regarded as being a product of the community does not make a person a slave of, or otherwise subordinate to, their community: “Community does not exist either above or below its members, it exists in and through them,”⁵⁹ as the community is nothing but the coexistence and organic interrelation of members. This community cannot be *adiaphorized*, even though it derives its identity from individual actors, who are certainly the driving force behind it. This is because individuality, in this sense, means *participatability*, not *separability*: “To be an individual is to be able to take part, i.e. to be capable to participate in life and its demands.”⁶⁰

The radical individuality and subjectivity that are distinctive of liquid modernity need not be an alienating or isolating reality: rather, they should form a basis for the development of interpersonal relationships. This is because, as a participating being, the individual possesses the ability to review life and respond to the value(s) of the community. This ability makes him or her neither a mass that has no face or identity, nor a moral agent de-

55. *Ibid.*, 99.

56. *Ibid.*, 100.

57. Igbo is a major ethnic group found chiefly in South-Eastern Nigeria.

58. Hausa is a major ethnic group found chiefly in North-Western Nigeria.

59. *Ibid.*, 102.

60. *Ibid.*, 104–5.

void of sensitivity or responsibility: “For it is in the context of being-with, that the individual moral responsibility is offered for acceptance.”⁶¹ The community thus furnishes an ambience, within which individual morality develops as an expression of one’s subjectivity. There is a co-existential dynamics between the individual and the community, or, to put it another way, “a somewhat communal dialectics in which the individual is in the community and the community is in the individual. . . . There is no community without the individual, just as there is no individual without the community. Both are intrinsically involved in each other.”⁶²

Adiaphorization, by contrast, emerges alongside the radical individualism central to liquid modernity. Consequently, moral blindness prevails in the contexts of radical individualism, where not only are we alienated from community and interrelationship, but also moral valuation and responsibility come to be vitiated. As Frey Reed puts it: “[i]nterpersonal relationships are integral to our belief and value formation and contribute to our personal moral development.”⁶³ But a morally blind person, in the sense invoked by Bauman, cannot claim moral responsibility, since he or she appears clueless before moral values and exists in isolation, operating in his or her own world with no point of reference and no unique purpose for acting. For this person, everything is in a constant state of becoming, because there are no fixed points of reference and no limits:

Indeed, no intellectual or moral reference point seems to be conceivable from which to assess, evaluate and criticize the directions technology may take except for the sober evaluation of possibilities technology itself has created. The reason of means is at its most triumphant when ends finally peter out in the quicksand of problem-solving. The road to technical omnipotence has been cleared by the removal of the last residues of meaning.⁶⁴

If there are no stable reference points or limits, then there can be no identity. For how could one do anything if one did not do it for the sake of something, on the basis or grounds furnished by something, or against the backdrop of something?

A person cannot just exist in constant flux as someone and so, of course, “a point of reference.” They cannot build their life on a trajectory of ar-

61. Ekei, *Justice in Communalism*, 112.

62. Iroegbu, *Kpim of Personality*, 106.

63. Frey Reed, “Personal Incommunicability and Interpersonal Communion,” *Quaestiones Disputatae* 9, No. 2, (2019): 20.

64. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 220.

bitrariness. That is why a person's actions inevitably come with some considerations that have communitarian implications. We could identify people by what they do, and the relations they keep. Moreover, one's individual liberty is best protected when one is in a society of others. There is an Igbo proverb in Africa that says *Igwe bu ike*, meaning "multitude is power (or strength)," thus affirming the strength, assurance and safety that reside in our communal co-operation, where these in turn serve to attenuate the vulnerability and limitations of the individual. It shows that "man is fulfilled by his fellow men who bestow meaning and recognition of his existence."⁶⁵

Another Igbo proverb, which says *nwanne onye ara ka ihere na-eme*, meaning "the madman's relation feels the shame of his madness," points to the social impact of individual pathology, making the point that even in a situation of evil or misfortune, no man is an island. Hence, "the evil which is created by our action or by our not acting is done by us, but not for its own sake; it consists in the fact that we accept the offense of the moral demand in order to realize a higher good, which at that moment seems more important."⁶⁶ This implies that in the context of African morality, the actions of Bauman's morally blind person, even as he or she remains oblivious to their value, still carry a moral relevance which affects us all. In traditional African ethics, the moral relevance of every human action is not considered only from the individual's perspective as a moral agent: it also incorporates other dimensions, such as the social (communitarian), the cosmic (environmental) and the metaphysical (religious). All these work together to create a comparative balance in the moral sphere. Responsibility for moral actions therefore requires a cumulative reference to these dimensions reflecting the African holistic view of reality: one founded on the communitarian philosophy that asserts that every moral action affects the entire unity and order of existence. "Thus moral evil presupposes an action capable of disrupting the entire social order which is counterproductive to human or communal survival and flourishing, directly or indirectly."⁶⁷ More often than not, the social consequences of an evil deed override its personal significance, as it is the community that accords the individual some moral obligations in the spirit of "I am because we are." Thus, the individual does not act in isolation: rather, his or her actions will always count as violating or respecting the obligations created by the community.

65. Ekei, *Justice in Communalism*, 86.

66. Deselaers, *And Your Conscience*, 307.

67. Ekei, *Justice in Communalism*, 125.

Without stifling the personal dimension of moral action, the collective responsibility created by the dialectical relationship between a person and his or her community places a considerable premium on the “whole,” which in turn itself consists of individual “parts.” So, when a problematic—say, mentally unstable—individual commits an atrocity such as incest, the elements of agency which reveal his or her individual culpability take second place after the communitarian character of such behavior. Such actions are first considered from the perspective of communitarian responsibility, which requires the agent and the community to “appease the land” (*ikwa ala*)—typically through some reparatory rituals—in order to restore the social order, even given his or her mental condition. This also applies to an *adiaphorized* person, who commits heinous evil and still remains accountable for it. Blindness will not exonerate one from moral responsibility, as African morality holds that if someone lives and acts within the community, it is impossible not to live and experience the outcomes of one’s actions. One cannot act in a void. I cannot say “I do not see,” or “I do not know,” because to be morally oblivious would be tantamount to consciously removing oneself from the community from which I receive my identity.

It follows that in a close-knit society, an *adiaphorized* person cannot be excused from the culpability that comes from the social dimension of evil, in that the organic nature of communitarian morality engenders certain shared responsibilities that are bound to be brought into play by any disruption to the moral order. This explains why an African would say “I’m sorry” whenever something bad happens to another: to express his or her solidarity and shared responsibility, even when it is not his or her fault. Moreover, it is on such grounds that one could be blamed for neglecting (i.e. passively failing) to prevent an evil. For instance, the traditional Igbo proverb that states *okenye anaghi ano n’ulo ewu amuo n’obu* (meaning that it is absurd for a goat to give birth on tethers when an adult is there) demonstrates that one cannot be morally absent, in that one’s responsibility extends even to certain cases of negligence. If everyone in a given community has a place in one’s experience, whether good or bad, then it will be absurd to claim that an act is void of sensitivity. It follows, therefore, that in this context, moral blindness happens by choice, and morally blind actions already amount to a betrayal of the default moral position implicit in the sheer fact of organic community. Everyone is expected to be morally sensitive, unless one chooses otherwise. That is why every immoral action is seen as disrupting an order that must be restored.

African communitarian ethics may thus be said to trump the forces of insensitivity responsible for dehumanizing humanity within liquid mo-

ernity in their entirety. In this ethical system, every action is evaluated for its communitarian relevance, and egoism is considered an anathema which enforces insensitivity and immoral attitudes. To be egoistic, narcissistic or self-obsessed implies that one's moral vision is too blurred to enable one to discover the relevance of another as a fellow self within the community of selves. And when liquefaction narrows everything down to individual interest, then egoism is dignified and impropriety normalized, in that the egoist only sees himself or herself and not others. Meanwhile, the individual does not disappear into anonymity on this communalistic approach: rather, its full identity is realized as unique among other selves, and its being-with-others saves it from the *adiaphorizing* danger of effacing the human face of the "Other" and reducing the "Other" and the rest of the world to objects of self-gratification. In communalism, the individual self is not diminished; it is rather distinguished and properly identified by the mutual recognition from the selves. Hence, in line with Levinas, the individual self is not lost amidst other selves rather it is discovered in the face of the other that makes it a fellow but unique self. Thus, communalism allows man "to compete and cooperate in order to achieve maximum activity."⁶⁸ In so doing, human beings express their ethical ambivalence as regards being capable of both good and evil. But the fact remains that when the competitive overwhelms the cooperative, selfish tendencies manifest themselves, doing so in a way that makes one "indifferent and even actively hostile to the welfare, needs, and interest of other human beings."⁶⁹

Communalism thus considers the narcissist a monster that sees only itself alone, without others in the world, manifesting a blindness that makes one subject everything to one's individual interest. In the absence of others, such a person loses their own identity, because "the identity of the self is entirely a gift, i.e. "grace." At the beginning there is an identity of oneself in the accusative, perceived from the perspective of the other who calls me."⁷⁰ Today, the secularized Western world has relinquished these values of social collaboration and reverence that once helped to preserve marriages and communities, and has embraced the liquid culture of individualism and hedonism that has led to acts of terrifying morally blindness. "It is not surprising," writes Jonathan Sacks, "that young radicals, eager to change the world, turn elsewhere to express their altruism, even

68. *Ibid.*, 131.

69. *Ibid.*, 132.

70. Deselaers, *And Your Conscience*, 233.

if it involves acts that are brutal and barbaric.”⁷¹ Social collaboration is a natural legacy, which ought to be treasured, lived, recognized, developed and preserved at all times. Furthermore, when we recognize the necessity of this value above every individual interest, moral blindness will hopefully diminish and possibly vanish altogether.

CONCLUSION

When the respectable moral maxims that determine social behavior, and the religious commandments that guide the human conscience, vanished almost in their entirety during the Holocaust, scholars like Arendt and Bauman were prompted to analyze the danger of moral blindness as a new kind of evil disposition. Arendt described Eichmann’s attitude as exemplifying “the banality of evil,” asserting that his “normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied . . . that this new type of criminal, who is in actual fact *hostis generis humani*, commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong.”⁷² Bauman, though, focused on analyzing moral blindness as a product of social systems’ influence upon the individual. For him, contemporary forms of human agency are becoming dissociated from morality because the modern world is becoming morally fluid. Virtue and vice have been made matters of choice, so much so that the veils of restraint and horror are gradually being removed from our moral eyes when evil comes into play. Of course, “the cruelest thing about cruelty is that it dehumanizes its victims before it destroys them. And the hardest of struggles is to remain human in inhuman conditions.”⁷³

Bauman certainly raised a pertinent question with his call for a rediscovery of the sense of belonging that is missing from liquid modernity:

but can culture survive the devaluation of being and the decline of eternity, possibly the most painful kinds of collateral damage caused by the triumph of consumer markets? We do not know, and we cannot know the answer to this question yet—and so we could do worse than to heed the sensible advice of the philosopher Hans Jonas, to trust more, when times are uncertain, the dark predictions of the “prophets of doom” than the placatory assurances of the promoters and fans of the “wonderful new world of consumers.”⁷⁴

71. Sacks, *Not in God’s Name*, 256.

72. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), 287.

73. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 208.

74. Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, 110–1.

Bauman's points are germane, considering the changes to modern Western culture that form the object of his analysis. But the situation would obviously be rather different, were we not to be in Bauman's worst-case scenario. The determinism and fatalism with which he analyzed liquid modernity makes the case look irreparable. But if I look at this from another perspective—say that of African communalist philosophy—then I see that effects of the changing culture may yield a different outcome, with less uniformly adverse effects on moral valuation and responsiveness. Bauman envisages the death of morality, given the overwhelming effects of liquefaction. Yet is he not being too simplistic in his one-sided approach? To what extent does his argument provide grounds that would actually vindicate some of the effects of our changing culture? Would the globalizing elements of modern life not also enhance some cross-cultural exchanges of values, in ways that may limit the effects of radical individualism and reinforce the organic character of a communitarian spirit?

I therefore broadly concur with Bauman's clarion call for a reawakening of the communitarian consciousness that is gradually disappearing in the West as a result of changes in modern life: his presentation of moral blindness as an insensitivity that breeds "frighteningly normal" persons that could perpetuate unprecedented evil with no malicious motive is impressive and, on the whole, convincing. Yet I must add that to be entirely successful, his argument must form just part of a persuasive cumulative case for the preservation of moral values in the face of the adverse effects of modern "advances." Instead of expressing some sort of pessimistic despair about the outcomes he foresees, such a discourse should, in place of its "prophet-of-doom" stance, adopt a more redemptive approach, re-emphasizing the need to treasure the moral values that foster our togetherness. Thus, while I regard Bauman's response to the moral challenge of liquid modernity as a splendid attempt to confront this phenomenon of our times, I must say that it falls short of being entirely successful in its own terms and, as such, can better serve a reawakening of moral consciousness when complemented with Emmanuel Levinas' moral philosophy of the "Other" and the African moral "gestalt" of communitarianism.

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