

Practicing Humaneness and Civic Virtues: On Ethical Orientation in Today's World

I assume that many of our compatriots will agree that today an ethical orientation seems extremely difficult. Too many factors all exert their influence here – the decline of traditional moral values, globalization, and something rather contrary to it, since here on the post-Soviet territory we have quite a significant and painful experience of how something once so close, familiar, and our own becomes different, foreign and inaccessible. The orientation that we are talking about is essentially troubled, to say it mildly, by both the acute crisis of identity and by the distinct style of today's life which appeals to people in a manner of advertisement and simultaneously levels out the rights of all existing alternatives and decisively limits their seemingly alternative character.

All these trends of our era – further topped with the typical process of a political “seduction” of ethics that becomes more obtrusively obvious every day – cannot but call an individual who values her/his own moral evidence and intuitions to a heightened attention. After all, emerging from the above-mentioned trends, we have certain grounds to acknowledge that we find ourselves in an initial “neo-Socratic” situation, which a contemporary German philosopher Georg Mohr expressed as “I know that I have no clue.”¹

¹ Georg Mohr, “Chy potrebuyut suchasni suspilstva orientatsiyi i chy mozhe yikh nadaty filosofiya?” transl. from German by M. Kul'taieva, *Filosofska dumka*, 2 (2010), pp. 68-83.

In order to get to more certain ground, we obviously find it reasonable to survey anew our everyday wherein so many seemingly self-evident things turn out to be tampered, falsified and in which people are more ably manipulated *precisely as subjects of free will*.

To begin with, in my opinion, it is worthwhile to establish for oneself a kind of moral *epoche*: not to permit oneself to be induced into causes and activities in which the moral principles are not transparent to us (even if in being so, they do preserve their immediate attraction). Understandably, such an ethical stance would directly contradict that which is most often demanded from contemporary personalities in politics, business interests, and community life.

However, to claim the role of a meaningful element of social reality, ethics should in one or another way express its inherent unyieldingness, its inherent resilience. It is also clear that the realization of the above-mentioned attitude of moral *epoche* can never be absolutely consistent, or theoretically perfect. The exposition of its flaws under a totally theoretical viewpoint will not require much effort. However, in the given case, we have in mind the properly practical attitude, that which according to Aristotle is bound “to the good and usefulness... for a good life,”² (*Eth. Nic.* 1140a 26-28), that is, in a situation in which we look after the agreement not with the truth, which cannot be otherwise, but where we attempt to find the optimal solution under the polyvariant conditions when “everything could be different”³ (*Eth. Nic.* 1140a 35). However, *practical actions* in this sense we will examine later.

² Aristotle, *Nikomakhova etyka*, transl. from Ancient Greek by V. Stavniuk (Kyiv: Akvilon-Plius, 2002), p. 249.

³ *Ibid.*

Returning to the basic thread of this exploration, I note that the principle of *epoche* bears for me an association with the names not only of the ancient skeptics, who introduced it, or further Edmund Husserl, but also with Merab Mamardashvili, namely with his teaching on the *pause* as the real beginning of any philosophizing and conscious orientation in the world.

A pause in such an understanding means a moment of internal focus, “a re-collection of oneself”, and together with it, a starting point of a *spiritual resistance* against any kind of outside elements that force a person to uncontrolled, not directed by the moral mind, actions – finally, a resistance against the principal trends of time itself, its “mainstream,” if it threatens those values without which we cannot imagine dignity and the sense of one’s own existence. According to stereotypes, inherited from the modern age, philosophy, ethics, and spiritual culture are meant to attempt to primarily “reply to the demands of the times.” To respond, specifically to “the challenges of globalization” because, you see, they are timely. However, maybe sometimes it is more productive to argue with one’s own time? As the Apostle Paul taught: “Don’t fit into these times” (*Rom. 12:2*) – because truly there are things more important than time with all of its “destiny affecting” directives. At least, to respond to the needs and questions of people who immediately surround us, sometimes it is necessary to react in a more operative manner than in one’s dealing with “the challenges of time.”

Naturally, the described position of a moral *epoche*, a pause as the beginning of a spiritual resistance, cannot be self-sustaining. It basically gains sense only with the presumption that we really *have something worth safeguarding* in today’s world. In what can we perceive “that for the sake of which”? By which I mean: how can we keep of a memory about something which, in spite of everything, does not permit us to recklessly and irrevocably delve into

the vortex of political passions and business profits, but impels us to adhere regarding all of this – at least in the depth of our own souls – to the heavy and responsible position of moral prudence?

Bracketing in our humble examination such weighty constants as the fear of God, care about one's soul and respect for the categorical imperative, let us pay attention to the following: since we all remain people, we possess an inherent desire to act *humanely*. To do something "humanely," to behave "as a human" – in this polysemic expression one can feel a certain lofty yet unquestionable moral value. Meanwhile the predicament of the current civilization lies in the fact that from the communal nature of existence with other people that humane dimension gradually "gets aired out." Unquestionably in history, there were times incomparably crueler than those of today. And yet, obviously, there was no historical era during which the mere prospect of the preservation of *human identity* of the rational residents of the Earth was as problematic as it seems today.

Let us grant their due to those thinkers – philosophers, writers, scholars – who during the last century placed the requisite amount of warning signs along the path of possible de-humanization of people. For me as an ethicist, far more troubling than the predicted willfulness of the genetic "design" or the terrors of implantation of a computer into a human being is the progressing "inhumane dismantling" of our normal daily life and the consciousness which structures it.

One can define this "inhumane dismantling" – actually it would be more precise to say "inhumaneness" as a loss of *humanity* as a properly moral (and perhaps, crucial) aspect of human identity as a whole. *Our world has to become more humane in order to become more human.* To what degree is it really humane today? Some possibility (although not too hopeful, to be discussed later) of judging this is

provided, particularly, by the character of those representative tendencies of the present era, with a mention of which this discourse began, and by the moral constitution of current life as a whole “visible to the world”.

Here, certainly, is the time to look more closely at the phenomenon of humaneness itself. How to approach this vitally significant and yet such an intangible reality in whose absence one would probably not even desire the most just good?

Obviously, above all, *humaneness is not humanism*. Humanism as such can really be as inhumane as possible, whereas real humaneness can transcend far beyond the specifically humanistic worldview. Humanism inoculates every human individual with pride for his being human and, therefore, for oneself, while humaneness is more closely associated with humility. Humanism is bound with self-assurance, a vertical position; humaneness is a turning to someone else, or even a bowing before the other. Humanism breeds self-assertion; humaneness leads to forgiveness and a selfless gift. Humanism appeals to ideology and an ideal while simple norms of human morality are at the core of humaneness. It is known to all that the essence of an individual lies in the fact that his personality is unique, essentially irreplaceable; norms teach us that even the repeated can be vital – it is why they are humane. One can state with certainty that the list of elementary moral norms, if one examines them closely, provides us with a certain *code of humaneness* as such.

Is humaneness a virtue? Calling to mind the basic principles of the Aristotelian ethic of virtues, as it was particularly described by Alasdair MacIntyre, one wants to say yes. Furthermore, it is not difficult to find grounds which would permit one to regard humaneness, at least under current circumstances, as a kind of virtue *par excellence* – since obviously it mostly directly relates to the inner

telos of human existence⁴ – both as a means of its achievement as well as its own integral part.⁵ And yet, something hinders us from qualifying humaneness as a virtue. And the reason lies not in the fact that, as a moral characteristic, humaneness does have a more general or foundational character.

Rather the concept of humaneness needs to be acknowledged as more ambiguous and vague exactly in its moral sense than that of virtue. In all the alterations in the understanding of virtues from Homer to Aristotle, B. Franklin and so on, a common fact is that its possession invariably denotes the person as “righteous,” flawless, open to judgment and examination. A righteous person has nothing to hide. Therefore, the connection between the culture of virtues and the public sphere, known from the times of ancient Athens, Sparta and Rome, in my opinion, is in no way accidental or temporary. Some applicable material in this aspect is also provided by etymology. We know that the Latin *virtus* – also followed by the English *virtue* – derives from *vir* (man) and, accordingly, has as its primary meaning courage, valor, heroic deeds and only then virtue as specifically moral excellence.

To be humane, in addition to the mentioned above, also means to have the ability to deviate from one’s own “correct” or “flawless” image, and to make one’s own moral status problematic. If truthfulness is an indisputable virtue, then humaneness entails the possibility of abandoning this virtue in cases of extreme need – let us say, for the sake of saving someone else’s life. Humaneness as such cannot be made into a monument – in public perception it would most likely be perceived as hypocritical or pretentious.

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Pislia chesnoty: Doslidzhennia z teoriiy morali*, transl. from English (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2002), pp. 81-82.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

Reflection on humaneness is meaningful for the description of the current moral situation as a whole. The cultivation of virtues (not only specifically “civic virtues” but virtues in general) in the contemporary public arena – against the background of problematic fields of democratization, globalization,⁶ etc. – is a topic that in spite of all its significance and relevance should not in itself overshadow the no less essential problem of humaneness, a range of problems that still require for its understanding a different type of discourse, a somewhat different vocabulary. Essentially, it remains a big question whether today’s democratic transformations as such are capable of “automatically” making our society more humane – or, whether on the contrary, they prompt people to become more cruel, selfish, isolated, persistent in calculating and defending their own personal egotistic interests.

In either case, the general trend of our contemporary life, especially in its public manifestations, is difficult to consider as one that adheres to the minimal needs of humaneness. This is evidenced not only by information which circulates in society and is always subject to suspicions of tampering, as by direct life impressions, known to each one from one’s own experience. This is evident in the barked intonations of our everyday, in that disregard for the other, which is manifest everywhere today in the rebirth of a cruel confrontational style of thought and relationships. Let us consider that this new cold cruelty and basic animosity of one to another no longer depends on any misleading ideological soap bubbles – therefore, it is harder to overcome. Openly inhumane seems to be that semi-rational and self-centered pragmatism which, having seeped through all pores of life, forces itself upon our contemporaries, regardless of thousands of own regular failures.

⁶ Otfried Höfe, *Demokratiya v epokhu globalizatsiyi*, transl. from German by L. Sythichenko, O. Lozinska (Kyiv: PPS-2002, 2007), pp. 172-205.

Sometimes one gets the impression that the already mentioned and other similar elements of dehumanization irrevocably get the upper hand in our reality and that due to the callous skin of egoism, hedonism, suspicion, trading, and fury, one can no longer reach the living human soul. Fortunately, it is not so. Regarding this, once again, one needs to appeal mainly to the direct experience of each individual, which undoubtedly testifies that human selflessness, compassion, and goodness have not yet definitively disappeared from today's world. Yet we *learn* about their expressions much less; media-providers, at least in Ukraine, have other priorities today. To stand by the mentioned unchangeable concepts of humaneness in our day often means going against the current, against "what time dictates," opposing the "common sense." However, without these moral foundations *human* society cannot exist. Probably the most sudden, yet also the "most unbelievable" form of courage in our day is the *courage of goodness*. The courage to be good.

And here we return to the issue of practice. One more peculiarity of humaneness in contrast to humanism is that it is not announced, but is manifested in concrete human actions, and at that, often in the most unexpected manner. Any task can be done humanely or otherwise. One can be humane or inhumane in journalism, medicine, behind a lecture stand, in relating to one's neighbors. Depending on the content of each of these tasks the demands of humaneness stand out in a unique manner: to be a humane teacher does not mean the same as to be a humane detective. Therefore, it makes particular sense to talk about the *practices of humanness* in the plural – in relation to the forms of activity and human relations.

It is known that practice, practicality in general, today is mostly understood as effective, result-producing activity. Practical meaning has, supposedly, that activity which leads to felt external changes –

the production of some goods, the development of energy, the saving of money, etc. However, it is worth noting that, in the passage already quoted, Aristotle clearly differentiated between *praxis* and *poesis* (or between in general) specifically on that basis that the goal of *poesis* “is different from it [itself]” and the goal of *praxis* “obviously is not, because here the goal is exactly the goodness in the act (*eupraxia*)”⁷ (*Eth. Nic.* 1140b 6-7). According to etymology itself, a result (from *resulto*) – is that which “jumps out” or “recoils” from the action which caused its existence, whether it be a beautiful vase or simply a pair of already not such nice boots. As to a moral act as specifically a practical act, then it results in such a transformation of the entity, which, with all of its possible external meaning, does not “recoil” by itself from the practice which caused it, but remains its proper quality, its *eupraxia* or, as Alasdair MacIntyre would define it, its *as* “internal good.”⁸ The gains of practical activity do not obviously jump away from its subject. A person who does good becomes a good person, and grows in his/her goodness. A person who does wrong, goes, as it is said, on the road of evil and becomes an evil person.

The same applies also to humaneness as an internal value that could be supported and cultivated through the direction of human practices. Whatever, I repeat, would be the productive and resulting determination of this or that activity or relationships, the latter, beyond that could have – or not have – that unique inner dimension, in which they become practices of humaneness. The one for whom humane actions are natural and for whom humane acts be-

⁷ Aristotle, *Nikomakhova etyka*, transl. from Ancient Greek by V. Stavniuk (Kyiv: Akvilon-Plius, 2002), p. 249.

⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Pislia chesnoty: Doslidzhennia z teoriiy morali*, transl. from English (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2002), pp. 278-282.

come something significant, becomes himself solidified in his humaneness and spreads its presence in the surrounding world.

A conscious moral stance in the current world, as one imagines, in most cases entails not lofty gestures and heroic acts, but a developed feeling of responsibility, a fastidiousness in the choice of methods, the ability on every step of one's activity to find adequate methods of cleansing from ethically unacceptable tendencies and to stand up for unique expressions of people's goodness, trust and love. One of the unrelenting paradoxes of our time lies in the fact that humaneness – that seemingly most unintentional of all moral virtues – of course, can no longer maintain itself on its own in the world; one really needs to *practice* it. At the same time, any sort of life practical experience can be tested for humaneness. Any life can be lived humanely – or otherwise.