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Has Public Morality Had Its Day?¹

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Abstract. The article considers the following question: in the course of human and social evolution, does public morality² increasingly tend to give way to private morality combined with legal norms serving as social regulators? It is shown that such a tendency would be a consequence of the dominant (neo)liberal paradigm, which, since oriented towards the implicit idea of the “end of history”, excludes the possibility of social change outside of capitalism and liberalism.

Keywords: public morality; private morality; liberalism; capitalism; social change; political struggle

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I'll sing her, first, a moral song, (The surer, afterwards, to cheat her).

Mephistopheles, Faust

Does public morality tend to disappear over the course of human and social evolution? Social philosophers and political journalists, both in Russia and in the West, have long noted a “moral and ethical decline”. Such an alleged

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² *Translator's Note:* In the original Russian text, the author distinguishes between the concepts in Russian thought designated by the words *мораль* and *нравственность*. Unfortunately, there is no simple way to make this distinction in English. Moreover, *мораль* and *нравственность* are sometimes used synonymously for rhetorical effect. Therefore, I have translated the terms differently depending on the context in which they are used. For the purposes of definition, *мораль* is taken to indicate a kind of public morality or conformity to a common external or socially defined code of behaviour, whereas *нравственность* refers to a private or internal quality pertaining to an individual or group according to which more or less moral actions are taken by those individuals or groups.



decline, which is primarily understood in terms of traditional values, such as those based on the central idea of the family, has been observed since the beginning of the Modern era. While this kind of complaint has long been a favourite topic within various conservative discourses in the West, the topic is no less relevant in Russia.

For example, Andrei V. Yurevich and Dmitriy V. Ushakov write that the moral degradation of our society can be considered a truly “interdisciplinary” fact, having been noted by representatives of the most diverse sciences. For example, psychologists maintain that Russia has for many years served as a “natural laboratory” in which “the morality and legal consciousness of its citizens have undergone severe tests”. Sociologists note a tendency occurring towards the end of the 20th century – at a time when Russian society was plunged first into perestroika and then into “radical reforms” – of constantly experienced “moral deviations” and a deficit of “not so much social, economic and political standards, but rather moral guidelines, values and behaviour patterns”. Here may also be noted the “moral aberration” of the thinking of Russian politicians revealed in their “replacement of moral values and guidelines with economic categories such as economic growth, GDP, inflation rates, etc.”

Meanwhile, economists note among the components of the exorbitant social price that had to be paid for radical economic reforms in Russia “a disregard for the moral and psychological lifeworld, involving an intensive eradication of the moral and ethical component from social existence”. Philosophers connect what is happening in contemporary Russia with the obvious fact that “freedom releases not only the best, but also the worst human instincts”, implying “a need to apply restrictions to prevent the release of the worst”. “What will a person who is not mature enough for political freedom make of it if he experiences it as unbridled freedom?” asked Ivan A. Ilyin, answering that “he himself becomes the most dangerous enemy of the freedom of others, as well as the freedom he enjoys in common with them”. Attempting to explain what happened in Russia during the early 1990s, Valentina G. Fedotova complains that “the anarchic order of the 1990s gave birth en masse to individuals who understand freedom as will” (Yurevich, Ushakov 2009).

From such a conservative-moralistic point of view, it appears that, despite – or perhaps because of – its long history, humanity is yet to come up with anything better for regulating social behavior than traditional values. Accordingly, when these values are finally destroyed, the societies they underpin will also disintegrate and human civilisation will decline. This principle is extrapolated in Christian eschatology to show how humanity, despite its many achievements in other areas, will ultimately fall so low in terms of its morality that God will judge it and finally bring the world to an end. From this point of view, all that remains is to try to delay the inevitable by preaching a revival of traditional public and private morality.

The main problem that arises within this prescriptive approach is that the recipe is not feasible for application on a global scale. Approaching public and private morality from a historical and sociological point of view, it can clearly be seen that given societies tended to grant less and less space for traditional public

morality as modernisation progressed in them. Indeed, from a practical point of view, while moral prohibitions were previously used to solve a number of problems, these are now being tackled by scientific and technical means (for example, the technical solution of contraception to the problem of premarital sex, etc.). As a result, the practical need for such prohibitions has sharply decreased.

Finally, since the Enlightenment, if not earlier, it was already becoming clear that a coherent system of public morality cannot be rationally justified: when subjected to critical analysis, all such attempts turn out to be based on an arbitrary set of values, which may be considered natural by a particular author, but only because they have been acquired over the course of their upbringing in a particular social environment. In particular, as a result of relativisation and historicisation, the general idea of justice has been lost, thus finding itself constantly in the process of having to be established anew (Martyanov 2006: 66). In this way, public morality was deprived of its universal character. Although modern attempts at rationally justifying moralities continued as part of various ideological and utopian projects, their time also seems to have come to an end. This is reflected in the general “fall in demand” for ethics, which is due to their being seen as representing a branch of philosophy whose primary investigated phenomenon is in the process of dying out.

However, societies do continue to exist. Why? Is it due to residual public morality or to the presence of alternative behavioural regulators – laws, habits, etc.? Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there is a natural departure from the public morality of traditional, pre-industrial societies in favour of other kinds of behavioural regulator? In this case, traditionalist lamentations about the decline of public and private forms of morality, as well as the various calls to revive them (but which ones specifically?), seem doomed to disappointment.

Moreover, there is reason to believe that public morality itself is not a generally significant phenomenon, especially if we do not confuse it with its private form. In reality, societies are regulated not by public morality, but by the exercise of various private virtues; therefore, to impose strict moral demands onto the whole of society seems wrong and senseless. Being a consequence of social upbringing and general education, private morality – or *virtue*³ – is accessible to all; at the same time, it by no means always coincides with public morality. In terms of its public value, moralisation is an activity that is only ever endorsed when engaged in by a very select circle of people, and that not in every era. In this regard, for example, Elena K. Krasnuhina notes that public morality – or *moralisation*⁴ – is “elitist by definition; it is the lot of the chosen few, requiring a special gift and personal independence (Krasnuhina 2002: 48-49).

³ *Translator’s Note:* While author does not specifically reference the concept of *virtue* (as in “virtue ethics”), it seems to be implied by the use of *нравственность* in this context.

⁴ *Translator’s Note:* Again, the distinction between “public morality” and “moralisation” is not exactly parallel to the rhetorical distinction made by the author. Like *нравственность*, *мораль* can have both private and public aspects. However, confusing them can lead to accusations of hypocrisy (in English discourses, the distinction between *morality* and *moralisation* approximately captures this nuance).

However, by distinguishing *public morality* from *private virtue*, the picture begins to look less catastrophic. Happily, the exact schema governing how these concepts are distinguished does not seem to be of vital significance. Such a decoupling can always be performed by contrasting a system of values tied to the external regulation of behaviour against one based on obedience to some inner moral sense. At the same time, the future likely to be increasingly structured by the latter due to its greater rootedness in the human soul and a person's individual character. Thus, for others writing on this topic, *private morality* becomes something much more subtle and situational than its public form, the latter being much more easily reduced to some system of external prohibitions. Writers such as Alexander Nikonov emphasise the personal dimension to private morality, which is denied to its public equivalent: "The main difference between *public morality* and *private virtue* is that the former always presupposes an external value-assigning entity, whether social morality, mass consciousness, neighbours, or religious ideas about God. Private virtue, on the other hand, is about internal self-control. A privately moral person is deeper and more complex than someone who merely observes public morality. In the same way, an aggregated unit that operates more or less autonomously is more complex than a manual machine that is set in motion by someone else's will" (Nikonov 2008: 377).

As the world naturally becomes more complex, so does a person. In short, public morality as a social regulator is a historically transitory phenomenon and will eventually die out. There is no need, therefore, to be upset by the decline of public morality: "The world is moving towards public amorality, this is true. But it is also moving in the direction of private morality" (Nikonov 2008: 378).

However, due to its very nature, one can only imagine what kind of private morality this might be. Some have already gone to the extent of attempting to set it out in so-called "*Commandments of Modern Society*" (which conflates *public morality* with *private virtue*). "Modern society has its own most important values, which in traditional societies were far from being in the first place (and were even considered negative):

- "don't be lazy, be energetic, always strive for more";
- "develop yourself, study, become smarter – in this way you contribute to the progress of humanity";
- "achieve personal success, achieve wealth, live in abundance – thereby you contribute to the prosperity and development of society";
- "do not cause inconvenience to other people, do not interfere in their lives, respect their personal rights and private property".

However, contemporary *private morality* is not a mere indulgence of egoism and "baser instincts". On the contrary, such an impulse to be *virtuous* makes greater demands on people than ever before in human history. Traditional morality gave people clear rules of life, but did not demand anything more from them than their obedience to these rules. An individual person's life in a traditional society was well regulated; for centuries, it was sufficient to simply live according to the established order. Requiring little mental effort, it was simple yet primitive. Contemporary private morality requires a person to develop and

achieve success through his or her own efforts. However, it does not provide instructions of how to do this other than stimulating a person to constantly search within, to overcome him- or herself and exert the necessary effort. In return, the contemporary version of internal morality gives people the feeling that they are not just cogs in a senseless machine that has been invented for some unknown reason, but the creators of their own futures and even co-creators of the entire world... In addition, self-development and increased professionalism lead to the acquisition of material wealth, providing prosperity and well-being already "in this life" (*Nravstvennost'*...).

Thus, it can be seen that the main goal of contemporary internal morality is personal prosperity and success. Although the means of achieving such goals are not regulated, the requirement not to interfere with others is explicitly stipulated. Of course, the impossibility of achieving success and personal prosperity without infringing on the interests of others under the conditions of the market and private property (which must be respected) is self-evident. For this reason, the conventional liberal rhetoric of "live in abundance and in doing so contribute to the prosperity and development of society" is often wheeled out. In short, live as you please, do as you will, but only do so within the framework of ideas according to which "self-development" is achieved through "success" and "wealth". These are the commandments of the abstract "contemporary man", who as such resembles nothing more than an ordinary conformist consoling himself with the thought that he is contributing to the "progress of humanity" by the very fact of his existence.

There is nothing unexpected in this train of thought. This refrain is approximately as old as classical liberalism, within which paradigm most of the problems pertaining to "contemporary" – that is, capitalist – civilisation continue to be understood. For example, François Guizot, a famous apologist for liberalism, distinguished between two main factors of progress: the progress of social institutions and progress in the development of individuals. Guizot believed that "an external way of life that has developed better and more justly makes man himself more inclined towards justice; that the internal world is transformed by the external world, and vice versa; that both civilisational elements are intimately intertwined; that even if they are separated by entire centuries and all sorts of obstacles, even if their unification requires countless modifications, sooner or later they will certainly reunite; this is a natural law, a general fact of history, and the instinctive belief of the human race" (Guizot 2007: 31-32).

In other words, liberal thinking from the outset closely links the improvement of social institutions with the enhancement of individual dispositions. Accordingly, someday in the future, social institutions will become so perfect that an individual who fits into them seamlessly will not be separately concerned with issues of public morality. The consistent conclusions from this theory were drawn by none other than Hegel, who understood *public morality* – in contrast to *private virtue* – as something historically transient. According to Hegel, *virtue* was initially the preserve of rather primitive societies, in which people are directly guided in their behaviour by habitual, established rules. In such a society, there were no "morals", but only "customs".

The transition from *virtue* to *morality* occurs when civilisation has already progressed to a fairly advanced level, for example during antiquity. Then the idea of the “universal” appears and “the immediate no longer has the same power, but must justify itself before thought”. Generally accepted norms of behaviour begin to be criticised by the individual consciousness, which, “experiencing uncertainty in the existing law”, demands that the latter legitimise itself before consciousness. This is how the “separation of the individual from the general” occurs, which entails the simultaneous “rejection of social mores and the establishment of morality”.

In this case, moral consciousness is not content to passively reflect the actual state of affairs in society, but on the contrary, demands that reality be consistent with its prescriptions and the demand for the good. The ensuing moralistic criticism of the existing order contrasts it with a putatively proper and asseveratively superior world order. According to Hegel, such criticism, due to its subjectivity, is nothing more than a “vain dream”, a presumptuous running ahead of the world spirit (ger. *Geist*). Therefore, Hegel refutes the legitimacy of moral judgment over historical figures, or so-called *men of destiny*, who invariably serve as adequate instruments of the world spirit in public affairs.

As a result, in Hegel, *public morality* must be replaced by some kind of *ethics*, but of a different order than those based on simple virtues. This new ethical order will be conditioned by the rationality inherent in the socio-state structure of the lifeworld. Here, it is necessary to recall that Hegel valued the state extremely highly: it is “the present, truly moral life”. Thus, the new ethics is to be conditioned by the law or other social institutions, as well as corporate norms. The place of “personal duty” in public morality is taken by certain “obligations” that no longer claim to be universal. Rather, these are specific to particular living conditions, corporate affiliations, etc. (Drobnicky 2002: 81-85).

In short, if consistently developed, the liberal paradigm confidently states only the progress of social institutions and progress in individual development – if you like, the progress of morality according to the type “more justice, less violence”, etc. As such, it does and can not provide any kind of guarantee of the eternal existence of morality.

It is not difficult to see that the presented concept almost completely coincides with the views of people who preach an imminent end of morality in favour of personal behavioural codes. Indeed, it is significant that contemporary followers of Hegel (whether willing or involuntary) place their main hopes on legal regulation, moderation by social institutions, corporations, etc. For example, Nikonov notes that legislation in “advanced” countries is drifting towards the principles of non-interference in other people’s lives – “no victims, no crime”, “the one who was the first to be offended is wrong”, etc. He writes: “We live in a world of multiple moral standards. Corporate ethics and rules of conduct emerge in one’s professional or social environment or simply in the company of friends... And in the limit, this moral differentiation can be fragmented to the smallest particle of society, i.e., an individual person. And then everyone will have their own personal morality” (Nikonov 2008: 379-380). Or, as Slavoj Žižek ironically put it, “You have your world, and I have mine; we just need a neutral legal system that sets out how we can politely ignore each other” (Žižek).

In other words, the moral person of the present is someone whose essence recalls Hegel's or even Fukuyama's "end of history". Such a person no longer criticises the existing order enshrined in laws and corporate norms; neither does he or she burden him or herself with vain dreams of improving society: once one has surmounted the pinnacle of history, one may merely sit back and enjoy the view. In such a person's consciousness, there is no longer a gap between what is and what should be. That is, by proclaiming the imminent death of public morality and its replacement by private ethics, one is essentially claiming that we are close to the end of history and that in principle the search for a social ideal is close to completion. All that remains is to refine the details and disseminate the ideal to all of humanity.

To put it mildly, it is clear that this approach is not without its problems. Indeed, if we are approaching the end of the moral era, then it becomes necessary to create a holistic philosophy of history, from which *the end of morality* and *the triumph of private ethics* necessarily follow. There are only two possible candidates for such a philosophy: either some version of liberal progressivism or a version of the civilisational approach. From the first point of view, a rationally structured liberal state plus civil society can be expected to triumph on a global scale. Then people will not have to want for anything better, because nothing better can possibly be. From the second point of view, the potential of a particular civilisation will simply be exhausted. In forfeiting the ability to create something new, the spirit of the people (culture, ethnic group, etc.) will settle down amongst the familiar forms of social institutions, customs, and ethical codes, which obviously implies the senescence and eventual death of the civilisation in question.

In the minds of some thinkers, both of these approaches can be organically combined. Hegel had already clearly realised that the disappearance of the gap between what is and what should be portends the beginning of decline and eventual spiritual or physical death. Such an observation can be applied equally to individuals and nations. *The end of morality* is also implied by the philosophy of postmodernism, which proclaims the end of all generally significant value systems, i.e., the decline of metanarratives (Lyotard 1998). In any case, *the end of public morality* can be deduced either from the end of a certain type of political discourse, the end of politics as an external regulator of human behaviour, or from the disappearance of individuals of the old type, i.e., those primitive and retrograde souls who still allow themselves to be guided by traditional morality.

However, the chief vulnerability of *end-of-morality* theories that ignore the concrete content of "contemporary society" consists in the awkward fact that *capitalist contemporaneity* is not the last word in history. Indeed, the transition to this phase, which should imply the end of all legacy morality, is also not the last in history. "Contemporary society," "contemporary man", and "contemporary morality" are euphemisms for capitalist society and the socialisation of the individual for success in it. Paradoxically therefore, contemporary references to abstract *contemporaneity* are references to the past. In essence, such deeply pessimistic references boil down to one or another version of the theory of the cycle, growth and death of civilisations.

Theories that proclaim *the end of morality* also fail to take into account the fact that political struggle, which also gives rise to morality, does not vanish with the disappearance or weakening of ideologies and utopias. In any case, the struggle of new social groups for the present and the future remains. In advancing their demands, such new social strata also advance new moralities, and they do this at first unconsciously. Morality arises in the gap between *what is* and *what should be*; moreover, this interstice does not depend on the end of meta-narratives of a specific type, even historically transient ones. Change implies social struggle and criticism – i.e. *moralisation*. The bearers of the new ethics (and it is, of course, emerging) are not always inclined to conformism and do not perceive themselves as living in the era of the “end of history” or the “autumn of civilisation”. If the new ethics is drawn into political struggle and is thus forced to become a political force, then the formation of a new morality becomes inevitable.

We live in an era of change. Namely, in the era of the next transformation of capitalism and the *capitalist world system*. While various attempts to limit capitalism have been carried out for political and moral reasons, these should be understood as palliative measures, since no new social strata equipped with a new ethics that permits them to live independently of capitalism have yet emerged. (Prior to this recent transformation, capitalism tended to be opposed by social groups based around former non-capitalist or traditional culture-based morality.) In any case, the situation now appears to be changing again.

Whether referred to in terms of *the flat world* (Friedman 2006) or *digital capitalism*, contemporary society gives rise to a new type of human being. Although this new type of person is forced to work within the framework of a capitalist enterprise, he or she generally is more oriented towards “self-creation” than towards work and consumption. “What enterprises consider ‘their’ human capital is in fact a free resource, an external given that arose by itself and continues to reproduce itself. Firms merely capture this capacity for self-creation and direct it in the desired direction. Of course, this human capital is not purely composed of individuals. Self-creation does not arise out of nowhere. Developing on the basis of a common culture and common knowledge, it is disseminated as part of the process of primary socialisation” (Gorz 2010: 28). In other words, this nascent but increasingly widespread contemporary person is not only clearly superfluous for supplying the needs of capitalism, but is also of a type that resists being easily “assimilated” by capitalist enterprises. Moreover, there is reason to believe that this type transforms existing social relations by its mere presence, as well as its way of life, from which it cannot be easily separated.

What does this mean? Not only demanded by “digital capitalism”, but also superfluous to it, the contemporary person genuinely possesses a new system of values. However, the birth of a new value system can only imply the epochal end of previous attempts to morally compensate for capitalism. All previous attempts were the result of the long transitional period during which societies had no means of coping with the imposed costs of capitalist development (or, if you prefer, the transition to an industrial society) other than by trying to regulate them through an appeal to residual Christian-traditional morality. Continuing

to contradict capitalism in many ways, the earlier morality of traditional society was forced to defend itself against the former, prompting the formulation of moral and political concepts having an ideological and utopian nature. However, the moral and political consciousness generated by the need to resist capitalism did not just passively reflect the actual state of affairs in society, but also demanded that reality conform to its prescriptions. The constant political and moralistic criticism of the existing order that characterised the era of Modernity nevertheless remained merely a defensive mechanism. Despite the fact that projects for overcoming capitalism also arose within the framework of political and ideological moralisation, they could not be realised, since they relied on the more or less transformed morality of the past, and not that of the future (Martyanov, Fishman 2010: 11-37).

Today, the “superfluous man” turns his back on the capitalist system with his entire way of life – that is, he has different morals – or personal ethics. At the same time, this is associated with what others may consider a decline in public morals. But does it imply the end of all moralisation? Not at all. The transition period from Marx’s “prehistory” to genuine human history, or to Hegel’s or anyone else’s “end of history”, is far from complete. Such a transition never occurs without a struggle. The more contemporary *digital capitalism* defines our reality, the more people will prefer to “drop out of the race”. In this connection, Peter Glotz writes: “From the depths of this group a new (or at least a newly composed) worldview will emerge... The struggle between the digital proletariat and the digital elite will not be fought over individual technocratic or economic concepts, but over fundamentally different and emotionally charged issues of lifestyle... The subject of discussion will be the entire social ethics of modern capitalism” (Gorz 2010: 91).

Of course, merely having a different *private morality*, an ethical system “in oneself”, is not in itself sufficient for a comprehensive social transformation. Nevertheless, a conscious attempt at social transformation undertaken by a new socio-historical subject always implies a political struggle, a struggle of worldviews, which is not limited to questions of lifestyle. *The public morality* that emerges in the struggle is not simply a type of morality generated by new historical realities, but also one that is aware of its difference from the previous morality – and capable of explaining this difference. The new morality is a morality “for oneself”. It will not be limited to purely individual or corporate factors, since this will be insufficient as a means of consciously changing the world.

The inevitable socio-political struggle will be accompanied by attempts to formulate a different morality. This implies the emergence of new forms of utopian moralisation that express the self-awareness of the new morality. Admittedly, the desired emergence of such utopias will be a matter for the future. However, until now, the political thinking of leftist circles in the area of *morality* has been encumbered by the dominant liberal paradigm; as a result, its content comes down to the struggle for the already discussed “neutral” legal system, which provides a means for people to politely ignore each other. The consequence of this is the imposition of a political agenda by the right,

which turns out to be more sensitive to those profound social changes, as well as the reaction to them, which gives rise to new political struggles, coupled with attempts to justify them morally. However, in history, the one who harnesses the horse first is not always the first to arrive.

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