Moral Vertigo, Moral Panic, and Moral Disengagement – Preliminary Searching for Useful Notions to Examine the Migrant Crisis in Europe

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Abstract
This article is an introductory attempt to find such notions that could serve as descriptive tools for the migrant crisis in Europe in the vocabulary of ethics and related disciplines. The adopted perspective to tinker on the notions allows to traverse the narrow frames of theoretical ethics and reach for other resources. This paper contains a preliminary analysis of the notions of moral vertigo, moral panic, and moral disengagement, as well as an overview of potential benefits and problems stemming from using those terms.

Key words: ethical notions, ethics, European migrant crisis, moral disengagement, moral panic, moral vertigo

1. STARTING POINT – REVISION OF THE VOCABULARY

The considerations carried out in this paper are exclusively preparatory in nature – they focus on the problem of the language we use or may use for narration about moral practices before attempting to reach any normative solutions. Two positions are accepted as main reference points in the article. The first one is borrowed from Maria Ossowska, the program of "small philosophy" that was formed under the influence of her studies under Tadeusz Kotarbiński at the

Warsaw University, and whose central element was "an ineffective but necessary effort of notion-related enquiries aiming at giving philosophical problems a form allowing for a responsible attempt of solving them" (Kiciński 1983, 561; own transl.). The second patron is Charles Taylor and his postulate of narrative ethics derived by the author of *Sources of the Self* from Socrates and that can be expressed by the formula: "We aren't full [human] beings (…) until we can say what moves us, what our lives are built around" (Taylor 1989, 92).

The main task here, generally speaking, is to construct and continuously improve a vocabulary (i.e. the program of seemingly only purely semantic undertakings) that on account of constant revision, polishing, confrontations and fitting to practice the technical motions describing moral practices, ultimately brings us closer to normative judgements. It is accompanied, again, by a Taylorian intuition that we search for notions that succeed in making sense of our life, which "have to make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses" (Taylor 1989, 58), and may become "part of the story that makes best sense of us, unless and until we can replace them with more clairvoyant substitutes" (Taylor 1989, 58).

We should remember, however, that while Charles Taylor's reflections are pertinent to ambitious theoretical aspirations – a specific elaboration of philosophical narration about moral identity, our goal is far more modest: we want to evaluate (or even just initially propose a possibility of performing such an evaluation) the usefulness of a few arbitrary chosen notions for one of the current debates and, at the same time, to unveil some important, more general issues related to the ways of how a technical language of ethical reflection is shaped.

2. *LAMUS* – LAPIDARIUM – LABORATORY

In order to create a space for reflections for the aforementioned notions and their potential usefulness for describing the phenomena of the migrant crisis in Europe – because it will be the background for my argument – let us introduce a certain metaphorical scheme of a threefold understanding of the approach towards the resources of the ethical vocabulary. It should be said however that the term "vocabulary" is understood here very broadly, because it does not only contain single technical notions, but also the ways they are collocated, aggregated, synthesized and arranged in theoretical constellations.

2.1. *LAMUS*

The starting point of the notional triad that I want to construct here is the Polish word *lamus* – a word that in a sense has devoured itself, because it has ended up in the semantic *lamus* (i.e. warehouse, storeroom) of rarely used terms. Nowadays it seems archaic for it shaped its meaning in an already bygone culture: traditional agricultural holding. In consequence, we do not know its material designata, and its usage today is limited to literary phrases and idioms. The word *lamus* derives from the Middle High German word *lēm-hūs* meaning a house or mud hut, and in time a lumber room or utility building for storing grains, armor, documents, valuable items. As a rhetorical figure it has obtained the meaning of "rarely visited lumber room where useless and rarely or never used things end up" (Dubicz 2006, 397; own transl.).

This dual "falling into oblivion" – of the term itself as well its source and material basis is the foundation of a powerful metaphor of the forgotten moral notions and constructed with their use ageing descriptions of moral practices. Just like in the *lamus,* we may find anachronistic terms such as "knavery" or "boorishness," but also notions that change their meaning by narrowing them down (like for example in the Polish language virtue understood as chastity), undergo the process of external associations, break away from their original context (dependability understood by some as dependency), or notions that have moved even more radically by totally changing their meaning and now are to be found on the side of virtues in spite of the initial description of negative features ("wicked" – evil or morally bad is now often used in the meaning of "great" or "cool").

Generally speaking, the metaphor of *lamus* serves the depiction of an approach where ethics is understood and eventually condemned as using an archaic vocabulary that is not adequate for the rapidly changing world; contrary to other, more swiftly developing disciplines like sociology or psychology. A critique of hermeneutical disease ("*morbus hermeneticus*") may serve as an example of such an approach. Spelt out by Herbert Schnädelbach, the critique was meant to refer to the way of doing and teaching philosophy (Schnädelbach 2001), and when reformulated it can be applied to ethics. "*Lamus* ethics" constructed in such a way would suffer from "historical illness" as recognized by Friedrich Nietzsche: "there is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture" (1997, 62).

After Schnädelbach and by narrowing the perspective to ethics, we can understand Nietzsche's words quoted above as an accusation of too extensive pondering the history of ethics instead of cultivating a direct reflection on good and evil, or in other words, of focusing on not

only the problems themselves, but classic theories that examine them. Another objection quite handy in characterizing the "ethical *lamus*" formulated by that author is over-reliance to the text – or more generally, to the language, not the problems, and in our context – to moral practice.

It is not the role of this concise essay to enter into discussion about Schnädelbach's objections. The evocation of that strand serves merely as an illustration; it enables us to draw the problem of "ethics as *lamus*" more clearly. In the proposed conceptualization, it would come down to the accusation against moral philosophers that they escape to the safe realm of historical research in the veil of classic theories and that, on the account of their anxiety over being too hasty in their evaluations, they distant themselves from the most current ethical challenges, even at the cost of moral vigilance. In consequence, the wide-ranging and controversial issues of the contemporary world are taken over by other actors – politicians, journalists, more seldom by economists or sociologists. The latter claim will be partially strengthen when we see that only one of the notions presented below that are relevant for the analysis of the problems of the migrant crisis was coined by a philosopher, while the other two are of sociological and psychological provenience respectively.

2.2. LAPIDARIUM

The second rhetorical figure we want to use here is lapidarium. This term is directly linked to the previous one, because it refers to the concept, which stems from Renaissance, of amateur gathering of historical stone artifacts, which itself goes into the terminological *lamus*. Amateur collections have been replaced by professionally managed museums, which incorporate these stubbornly persistent pieces of stone into broader sets of exhibits representing a given epoch. Access to the artifacts remains difficult for amateur collectors and given into the custody of the state or other institutions. Moreover, our contemporary forms of life seem not to harmonize with the concept of collecting a pile of stale stones in a corner of the garden. Hence, if we want to use this concept, we should do it in a metaphorical sense, i.e. in the sense it has been popularized in literature by Ryszard Kapuściński and his "*Lapidaria.*" Let us try to shed some light on that.

Since the 16th century, the term lapidarium has been used as a name for a collection of stones gathered due to collectible reasons. They were mainly flaked off reliefs, remains of tympana of long non-existent buildings, sculptures, especially those strongly worn by the time (let us take a look at the icons of the Antiquity that dazzle with their mutilated rudimentary outlook like *Nike of Samothrace* or *Venus de Milo*). What is important here is that cast into a corner of a garden, often carelessly, they were stripped of their original context they had been created in. Lapidarium was not a systematized collection, a complete collection in the current sense, but

rather a loose compilation of things, where each one of them tells their own story that does not create a coherent narration, apart from the one that the collection in its whole referred to the past riveted in stone. One may walk around lapidarium freely and with no rush, and take from it whatever the visitor finds interesting.

Equipped with such an understanding, we shall treat ethics-lapidarium as a metaphor of a stockyard of scattered fragments, splinters, contents taken away from their original surroundings. It resembles the *lamus* described above with a difference that as far as *lamus* remains closed within the lapidarium of ideas, from time to time, a poacher snicks in and randomly looks for something useful, being apparently unaware of Nietzsche's words that "worst readers are those who behave like plundering troops: they take away a few things they can use, dirty and confound the remainder, and revile the whole" (Nietzsche 1996, 245).

That poacher, whom many deconstructionists would find delightful, is not necessarily an ethicist, i.e. a thinker systematically reflecting about good. They would be rather a homespun moralist, who, although not willing to dismiss the whole moral heritage of their culture to the *lamus*, has no patience for systematic studies of that culture either. They poach searching for ready-made and simple recipes, concise, preferably aphoristic (lapidary!) expressions, moral recommendations of the instant type that can be implemented at once, written down in a diary for the future, tattooed on the body in a visible place and treat as a primary life motto.

We should note that vitality of lapidarium is situated above all where the meaning of the adjective "lapidary" has taken root. It partially remains in connection with a kindred "laconic," which has a different source (although there are attempts to distinguish between and reserve "laconic" for human beings and "lapidary" for artifacts and things). Lapidarity is mainly about briefness, but about contrariness of a kind as well. Therefore, proverbs, aphorisms, bon mots, and mottos are elements of it. This vitality partially translates into its range; exhibits in the lapidarium of ideas appear to be important, inspiring, meaningful, although as devoid of the original context they turn out to be empty. For they are fuelled not by the primary energy flowing from the adequate recognition and naming the practices, which there were incorporated in, but an inertia of moral codes that are valid only apparently. To list just a few examples: the category of chivalry in the bourgeois culture, the notion of melancholy in contemporary psychology and psychiatry, or the aforementioned virtue reduced to chastity. Ultimately, it may turn out that at a closer look, these "stone" debris of old ethical stories should occupy only historians of morality or the collectors of past ethea. For they are the only ones for whom they still possess a contextual value.

2.3. LABORATORY

The third rhetorical figure closing the triad is laboratory. In the common parlance, laboratory is understood as a place where science is practiced in a systematic way. Another less popular tradition refers to the opposition of the notions of *laboratorium* and *desidiabulum* from the Latin word *desidia* (idleness), i.e. an idyllic place of resting, relaxation, but also of reflection. It brings to the forefront the labor, but not in the ancient meaning of innate and indelible effort that the gods sentenced human beings to, and which is supposed to stem from the same source as *labare* ("to stumble under a burden") (Arendt 1998, 48).

Our understanding follows rather towards the process of "overworking," or "essaying," "trying," and "tinkering." A peculiar ally of such understanding is Bruno Latour who carried out a great amount of work to rearticulate the notion of scientific practice, including the notion of laboratory. Within such a grasp, laboratory, contradictory to the popular common linguistic intuitions, is not an isolated space of that what is technical, scientific, theoretically ordered, sterile, but becomes a place of a particular game between *the internal* (scientific) and what has remained *external*: elemental, disorganized, disrupted, complex. Latour uses the example of the "outside" of Ludwig Pasteur's lab and aims at the thesis that, generally speaking, laboratories are created to contravene or dismantle the very distinction between "inside" and "outside" (Latour 1999, 143). For this essay, let us only take the perspective where "laboratory of ethics" is a space of mutual interference. On the one hand, there are ethical theories and their technical language and conditioning, on the other – an element of common intuitions (also the moral ones) and subsequent articulations in the language, including literary and informal ones, as well as the languages of other humanities, where reflection manages and develops such intuitions in the framework of their own methodological assumptions and research approaches.

Bringing the abovementioned plots together we see the following picture: on the one hand, there is a more common melancholic perspective of *lamus* and *lapidarium*, which of both stem from weariness of richness of classic ethical theories and moral directives. Even if we are not ready to unequivocally subscribe to the view of epigonic nature of ethical narrative, we should somehow refer to the seductive intuition of ethics-*lamus*, because it is widely manifested in the form of all kinds of reductionisms, exchanging the philosophically grounded ethical reflection with the sociological or psychological approach. On the other hand, however, a few present day nostalgics would like to save some pieces of this fleeting richness. However, if someone plays with those pieces, they inevitably end up in *lapidarium* that may be enjoyed only by eccentric collectors and curators. The one who can potentially overcome such a difficulty would be only a handyman-ethicist operating in a specifically understood *laboratory*, who courageously reaches for

remains of stone tablets or chipped fragments of codices, but not to gather them in a museum, but to apply them to seemingly not adequate contexts, including the most up-to-date ones, and try them make fit and "work over" again and again. Language remains the original place of that "work" in accordance with Taylor's perspective adopted here. Equipped with such presuppositions, we may begin tinkering with the terms that, although much of them may not stem from the tradition of philosophical ethics, they can, without any doubt, contribute to it.

3. THREE HANDY NOTIONS

3.1. MORAL VERTIGO

The first notion that I want to put under "tinkering" perfectly, at first glance, fits into the crisis related set of problems, including the migration crisis. For, it – just like "crisis" – simultaneously annunciates difficulty, conflict, ambiguity, helplessness, and at the same time – as very voluminous and vague it leaves vast room for re-articulation; and, in consequence, adaptation to various contexts and phenomena. It is the term "moral vertigo."

It is difficult to point at the precursor of using the term, but it undoubtedly appears at the beginning of the 20th century in writings of Fernand Pessoa. This Portuguese writer, still hiding behind the masks of many identities, diagnosed the following dramatic psychological state:

"At the end of it I felt again one of those symptoms which grow clearer and ever more horrible in me: a moral vertigo. In physical vertigo, there is a whirling of the external world about us; in moral vertigo, of the interior world. I seemed for a moment to lose the sense of the true relations of things, to lose comprehension, to fall into an abyss of mental abeyance. It is a horrible sensation, one that prompts inordinate fear. These feelings are becoming common, they seem to pave my way to a new mental life, which shall of course be madness" (Pessoa 2001).

Moral vertigo, comprehended in this way, occurs itself as a sign of the fall or total decomposition of moral agency. In this radical form, the term seems not very convenient, because it is pertinent to broader situations. This is why, in broader consciousness and maybe independently from its literary source, it may take root only when it is used as a part of a diagnosis of certain backwardness of the ethical language towards the advances of science and medicine. Such a diagnosis was formulated and disseminated by Michael Sandel, who evokes the category of moral vertigo in the first paragraph of his renowned article *The Case against Perfection* (Sandel, 2014) (and later on does it again in a book based on that article):

"When science moves faster than moral understanding, as it does today, men and women struggle to articulate their unease. In liberal societies, they reach first for the language of autonomy, fairness, and individual rights. But this part of our moral vocabulary is ill equipped to address the hardest questions posed by genetic engineering. The genomic revolution has induced a kind of moral vertigo" (Sandel 2007, 9).

Moral vertigo in its mitigated version – as a diagnosis of a certain confusion a moral agent can sense towards swiftly altering social reality, which traditional forms of naming and evaluating human actions do not keep up with or keep up with a substantial effort seems a quite handy tool. It could be used, for example, to describe the state of mind of the young Alasdair MacIntyre, who during his studies experienced deep discomposure caused by the contradiction of the narrations surrounding him: Catholic – interwoven with the tradition of the Gaelic language he grew up in, liberal – developed at the university, and Marxian – popular among the academic youth of Western universities in the mid-20th century (Boradori 2008, 139-140). This diagnosis cannot be belittled, because according to MacIntyre himself, it provided the grounds for the plan of cracking down the moral culture of modernity and eventually resulted in his important book *After Virtue* and others that were its continuations (MacIntyre 1991).

The main problem with the "moral vertigo" category is that the notion remains a wide-ranging tool only in the domain of the description of the agent's starting position – it enables us to diagnose the crisis and on that account, undertake reflection on whether the actions actually lead to overcoming it. However, in no way this provides the direction for such reflections or actions. Squandering with this notion is additionally laced with a certain conservative or anti-progressive approach that may have either a political significance or at least disclose certain presuppositions and pre-judgements of the researcher diagnosing the state of the contemporary moral culture. Finally, the tempting power of moral "confusion" evokes doubts similar to the ones that can be referred to the notion of "crisis" – both these categories are easily abused, and in consequence, they can undergo a certain inflation of the meaning and lose their explanatory power.

3.2. MORAL PANIC

In the framework described above, where a general, wide-ranging, but difficult to develop metaphor of "moral vertigo" dominates, there are two other notions that fit better. They are, what is important, coined not by ethicists, but by sociologists and psychologists. The first of them is "moral panic."

The author of the notion "moral panic" is Stanley Cohen, the author of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Cohen 1972), who was supposed to be inspired by an idea of his university colleague Jack Young in 1971. At the beginning, it served as a tool to describe the phenomenon of using drugs among the youth, for whom the category of "folk devils" was formulated. In time, the notion of "moral panic" has become canonical in social sciences and many various researchers referred to it: Erich Goode, Nachman Ben-Yehuda, (*Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* 1994, 2009), Kenneth Thomson (*Moral Panics* 1999), and recently, quite successfully, in a book of a Polish author Iwona Zielińska, where the category of moral panic was used to examine the presence of homosexuality in the media (Zielińska 2015).

In the most general grasp, where differences or evolution of this category are not considered, it is worth noticing a few elements that seem to be useful for the current migration crisis. The first one of them is a structure of the dynamics of the moral panic phenomenon, which consists of the following phases: concern, fear, hostility, consensus or agreement regarding the universal nature of the chosen phenomenon, its negative evaluation and, what appears to be especially interesting, unpredictability that accompanies panic. It may refer to both an unpredicted occurrence of panic that breaks out unexpectedly, supported by sudden appearances of fear in various periods of the recent history like AIDS, threats related to prostitution, computer games, increase in crime, and in the Polish context – the dangers related to religious sects, the increase of diagnoses of demonic possession, the crisis pertinent to 'legal highs,' and finally the newest problem – the migration crisis. What is interesting, however, is that this unpredictability manifests itself also in the lack of signs heralding the subsiding of the panic, which quite often happens spontaneously. It becomes particularly striking when we put together the panic phenomena and note how trifling they seem today. This distance towards future cases of panic bears a great potential for developing in oneself a distance towards fears currently haunting us; and, in consequence, creating foundations for factual reflection and discussion about real problems and ways of solving them.

3.3. MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

The second notion that stems from a non-philosophical context – this time from the domain of social psychology – is moral disengagement. The creator of the term is a Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura (Bandura et al. 1996), who in the 1990s described the phenomenon of the agent disabling their moral engagement or in other words, a progressive process of displacing responsibility, either by delegating it outside, or by the manipulation of its subject. The process of that moral disabling consists of the following elements: displacement and diffusion of

responsibility, euphemistic labelling, dehumanization others (the ones the responsibility was directed to), manipulation of the description language: advantageous comparisons, and general disregard and distortion of responsibility. With time, the category has gained a wide context of research, just like moral panic in social sciences, it has settled in in social psychology for good.

The category of moral disengagement is distinguished here because it has been already used in analyses of the phenomena connected with the migration crisis in Europe. The analyses have demonstrated a significant usefulness of that form of diagnosis of social phenomena about the reports on that crisis in the Czech press (Motal 2015). It is of importance also in the context of the above formulated description of moral panic, because in the two described phenomena, the role of the media has become key for the development of negative massive moral phenomena.

4. CONCLUSION

The attempt drafted here of adaptation of the category of moral vertigo and the other two non-ethical ones – because coined in the framework of social sciences – moral panic and moral disengagement is merely a fitting for completing a vocabulary of handy notional tools that may be used in a diagnosis of the migration crisis in Europe. While moral vertigo, the only strictly philosophical category, has turned out to be non-developmental already at the stage of its clarification, due to its ambiguity and fuzziness, the two other ones seem to be charged with a certain level of usefulness, and one of them (moral disengagement) has already been employed in analyses of the signalized crisis issue.

The handiness and usefulness of the notions presented here, even if merely signalized in a very introductory and sketchy way and still requiring deepened analysis allows to draw a few issues of more general nature.

Firstly, the notions stemming from the context of social sciences seem to be more useful and reflecting the nature of the described phenomena in a more subtle and precise way than philosophical ones. It is not yet a premise for a thesis that the discourse of traditional ethics loses the battle over the explanatory functionality to moral sociology or social psychology (but also, in a wider perspective, pedagogy or economics). There are no doubts, however, that it is a good basis for reflection on the interferences between moral philosophy and those disciplines, and an incentive for a broader opening for cooperation with them.

The second problem is the fact that the disciplines described as the sources of new notions are social sciences. It is an important signal about the subordination of attention of the current humanistic discourse to non-individual phenomena and related ways of describing those phenomena. The emergence of sociology as a separate discipline and its later rapid development was a true hallmark of this process. It could be that the most important, in this context, challenge for ethics is reorienting its classical approach to the individual agent and their relations with the other towards collective categories 'we' or 'you (all),' instead of fostering solely the traditions of lonely dreamers, egotistic, self-perfecting perfectionists, or even the ethical relation defined only in the 'I – you' categories.

While the thread described above is obviously not new, because it is deeply rooted in the history of social sciences and their relation with philosophy, they took their beginning in the 19th century, the last issue is the one that to the greatest extent gets closer to the challenges of modernity. Let us notice that for both, moral panic and moral disengagement, one of the key constitutive elements is the media, perhaps also including the ones of the new generation – the social media, where the dynamics of expansion of the emotional formulas is even bigger than in the traditional media. It is especially clear in reference to the category of moral panic because the authors mention the media context in the titles of their books (Zielińska 2015), or treat it as a starting point for their analyses (Thompson 1999, 2-7).

Making social sciences, including the media sciences, more sensitive to these processes could undoubtedly be applied also to ethics and would salvage a moral philosopher, from being 'wise after the event,' (like the Hegelian Minerva's owl) and unable to take a clear stand during the crisis, including the migration one, or directly linked to it the problem of Brexit that is taking place before their eyes.

The last but not least issue that has to be indicated here is connected with a serious difficulty permanently fixed together with the relation of ethics to other disciplines examining moral phenomena. It is about the translation of the descriptive language into a normative message, which ethics does not want and cannot resign from. Indeed, it is possible that on account of the measures described in the article, we gain the tools for describing moral and para-moral phenomena far more precisely than if we take them directly out of philosophers' thoughts. However, the work consisting in the articulation of a precise response not strictly related to the question "what are we doing?" but rather "what should we be doing?" still awaits 'figuring out.' A modest consolation may be the fact that a diagnosis, especially in ourselves, of symptoms of moral panic or moral disengagement could be a good introduction to a deepened ethical reflection.

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