
Ethics in postmodernism

by Raúl Kerbs

The postmodern ethic is shaky in its foundation, cynical in its claims.

Modernism held sway over Western thought over centuries. It stripped morality of its transcendent religious frame of reference. Away with God, was its cry. Even when it tried to shape a world without any reference to restraints, constraints, traditions, and above all religion, modernism did attempt to retain such values as work, saving, and the postponement of immediate satisfaction in order to attain a long-term benefit. What it did try to retain may owe their origin to a reference outside of the individual, but that was no immediate concern to modernism. Subjective self-expression was its goal. But when modernism reached its critical point, when the emphasis on subjectivism destroyed the need for objectivism, it eventually led to an almost "lawless" status in human history. Consequently, a new morality emerged. This new morality was pleasure-seeking, playful, individualistic, and geared to the present moment, denying the need to look to the past or gaze into the future. *Now* became its new mantra. As a result, there arose a stand against all efforts to place limits on individual freedom and fulfillment.

This new morality is at the core of postmodern ethics.

Postmodern ethics

At the foundation of postmodern ethics is an authority crisis.¹ The crisis involves traditional institutions (family, school, church, state, justice, police) through which modernism sought to organize a rational and progressive society. The crisis manifests itself in several ways: A society that worships youth,

and panders to their whims and fancies.² A culture where wealth is the sign of success and happiness. A consumer economy where "to be" is to buy, consume, use, and throw away. An identity marked by market acquisitions and not by ideologies.³ Gilles Lipovetsky, a contemporary French philosopher, has observed that in postmodernity "imaging" dominates reality. To be somebody is to be on screen or on a web site.⁴ What is seen defines what is; almost nobody cares anymore about what "really" is: the public image is the object of worship.⁵

Our postmodern culture has lost its love for the truth.

In contrast to modernism's work ethic and individual saving, today's ethic affirms the values of consumer spending,⁶ free time, and idleness.⁷ But this could not function without the exaltation of individualism, a devaluation of charitable causes, and indifference toward the public good.⁸ The pursuit of gratification, pleasure, and private fulfillment is the supreme ideal. The worship of personal independence and diversity of lifestyle become important. Pluralism provides a multiplicity of values, with individual options, but none with authenticity. Differences in ideology or religion are treated as fashions and superficial.⁹ The culture of personal freedom, relaxation, the natural, the humorous, sincerity, and freedom of expression emerge as something sacred.¹⁰ The irrational is legitimized through affections, intuitions, feelings, carnality, sensuality, and creativity.¹¹ All these take place within the framework of an axiom respected by nearly all: Minimize austerity and maximize desire, mini-

mize discipline and maximize understanding.¹²

At the same time, the media of mass communication and information, determine public opinion, the standards of consumer spending and behavior.¹³ The media replace religious interpretation and ethics with punctual, instant, direct, and objective information. They value what seems real now above concepts of good and evil.¹⁴ Paradoxically, the influence of the media grows in the midst of a crisis of communication. People talk only of themselves. They want to be heard but do not want to listen. They want communication without commitment. Hence the search for connection at a distance, invisible friends, hotlines and e-mail chat rooms, and friendships.¹⁵

A new shape to morality

What shape does morality take in the epistemological-social-cultural context of postmodernism?

According to Lipovetsky, with the dawn of postmodernism in the mid-20th century, an age of post-duty has come to be. This age renounces absolute duty in the field of ethics.¹⁶ An ethic has taken shape that proclaims the individual right to autonomy, to happiness, and to individual fulfillment. Postmodernism is a post-morality age because it disregards higher, unconditional values such as service to others and self-denial.

Nevertheless, our society does not exclude repressive and virtuous legislation (against drugs, abortion, corruption, evasion, death penalty, censure, protection of children, hygiene, and healthy diet).¹⁷ Postmodernism does not propose moral chaos but rather redirects ethical concerns through a weak, ephemeral, painless commitment to values that do not interfere with individual freedom: It is not so much hedonistic as neo-hedonistic. This blend of duty and denial of duty in postmodern ethic becomes necessary because absolute individualism would destroy the conditions

needed to facilitate the search for pleasure and individual fulfillment. An ethic is needed that prescribes some duties to control individualism without proscribing the same. The postmodern moral concern does not express values, but rather indignation against limitations on freedom. The object is not virtue but rather the earning of respect.¹⁸ There is an effort to forbid everything that could limit individual rights. That is why the new morality can co-exist with consumer spending, pleasure, the individual search for private fulfillment. It's a painless, *lite* morality where anything goes, but where unconditional duty and sacrifice are dead. Postmodern has left behind both moralism and anti-moralism.¹⁹

But such a course results in an ambiguous morality. On the one hand we have an individualism without rules, manifested in family indebtedness, families without parents, parents without families, illiteracy, the homeless, ghettos, refugees, marginal people, drugs, violence, delinquency, exploitation, white-collar crimes, political and economic corruption, the unscrupulous grasping of power, genetic engineering, experimentation on human beings, etc. On the other hand there floats over society a spirit of hyper-moralistic vigilance ready to denounce all attempts against human liberty and the right to individualistic autonomy: an ethical concern for human rights; apologies for errors of the past; environmentalism; campaigns for saying No to drugs, tobacco, pornography, abortion, sexual harassment, corruption, and discrimination; ethical tribunals; silent marches; protection against child abuse; movements to rescue refugees, the poor, etc.²⁰

In this context, the neo-hedonistic morality of postmodern life translates into demands that pull in opposite directions. On the one hand, we have standards: You must eat healthfully, keep your figure, fight wrinkles, keep trim, value the spiritual, relax, be in-

involved in sports, succeed, excel, control violent behavior, etc. On the other hand, we find the promotion of pleasure and the easy life, the exoneration from moral responsibility, exaltation of consumer spending and image-making, valuing the body to the neglect of the spiritual. As a result, there is depression, emptiness, loneliness, stress, corruption, violence, pushing to one side, cynicism, etc.²¹

Postmodern morality in everyday life

To understand how much postmodern morality has affected life around us, consider two typical lists that postmodernism projects: a list of moral "duties" and a list of moral "permissions":

List 1: Typical "moral" duties in postmodern "ethics":

- Don't discriminate against any kind of lifestyle.
- Attend benefit concerts for charitable causes.
- Dial a number to make a donation.
- Paste an anti-racism logo on your windshield.
- Walk in a march against perceived injustice.
- Run in a marathon for a healthy life.
- Use condoms.
- Prohibit prohibition (everybody should be free to run his or her own life).
- Wear a ribbon to protest discrimination against homosexuals.
- Be an environmentalist.
- Donate your body organs.
- Regulate the workplace to prevent sexual harassment.
- Be faithful (as long as love lasts, but afterward ...).
- Condemn every kind of violence.
- Don't try to convert someone else to another religion.

List 2: Typical "moral" permissions:

- Provide sexual freedom, but no harassment, and watch out for AIDS.
- Corruption is better than being considered stupid.
- Smoke, but not in the non-smoking section.
- Have no commitments to rules, people, or causes that interfere with personal fulfillment.
- Prostitution is OK, but only in the red-light district.
- Lying is OK, but not during a political campaign.
- Divorce is OK, but only to attain personal fulfillment.
- Infidelity is OK, but only when love has vanished.
- Abortion is OK, but only to further family planning.
- Try anything in the pursuit of self-exploration, in search of personal fulfillment.
- Adapt religion to the commitment one wants to make.
- Drink, but not to excess.
- Collect success, fame, and money, at the expense of whomever.
- Have a good time; don't worry about the future.

"Conscience code" of a post-moralist

Postmodern ethics does not stop with such ludicrous lists. Postmodernism's spirit of ultimate freedom produces its own code of conscience. In an atmosphere of neo-individualism, a new type of ideological, social-cultural and ethical elements coalesce to gel a new kind of postmodern conscience. Its particulars would look something like this:

- I must not discriminate because I must have an open look and there are no absolute truths.
- I must donate money to charitable causes because I'm turned off looking at hungry children.
- I must walk in a march against impunity so that criminals will not

get off easy.

- I must live healthfully because my body is my tool to acquire success and pleasure.
- I should take an interest in some kind of religion because it might energize me.
- I should show a concern for serious topics so I won't look like a cheap materialist and copycat.
- I shouldn't criticize any lifestyle because anything goes and nothing works.

Critical evaluation: A cynical morality

Having said all this, some may point out that postmodernist ethics is not all bad. Yes, there are some positive contributions made by postmodern concern for problems that threaten human life today. Healthful lifestyle, care for the environment, and the struggle against violence and discrimination are all commendable. Furthermore, postmodernism points out the theoretical and practical ethical failures of the past. But let us not be deceived. At its core, postmodern ethic does not have a moral motivation. In reality, it pursues the individualistic search for personal fulfillment and autonomy. While the motive behind all authentic ethics is to overcome evil with good, postmodernism is devoid of moral inspiration. It wants only to combat the excesses of evil *but does not want to eradicate evil*. It struggles against certain manifestations of evil without recognizing the root of evil. Its goal is the achievement of selfish autonomy—something against which the biblical portrayal of sin speaks so much.

How then can a moral system struggle against evil if its very foundation is the pursuit of self, which is, biblically speaking, the source of evil? Is it possible to achieve happiness within this kind of morality that postmodernism advocates? If happiness is the search for autonomy, personal fulfillment, the satisfaction of immediate desire, the con-

trol of excessive individual freedom without a true opening of the soul to one's neighbor and to God, then in this morality the search for happiness is a perpetuation of things as they always have been. More of the same: a mixture of life and death, pleasure and pain, success and failure, happiness and sadness. But this ignores what's behind the human search for happiness: the desire for something else, something 'different, something that will do away with these antithetical clashes. That "something else" is missing in the postmodern search for happiness. Its ethics settles for a trifle, for a lower goal; it argues that because traditional moralities, including Christian ethic, have not changed us for the better, it's time to set a lower goal and accept people as they are.

However, this attitude of resignation assumes that Christianity has truly been applied and failed, and on that basis we must judge the potential of Christianity to make a contribution as nil. But this assumption contradicts the postmodern maxim that there is no absolute truth. There is no truth, says postmodernism, on the one hand. However, it presumes, on the other hand, that traditional morality has run its course, that the human today cannot be improved on, that a radical change is impossible, and that we should resign ourselves to that. Who can know that, and how can it be known? It would appear that postmodernism has somehow managed to know for sure a few things about human nature and about the future, a knowledge which it denies to all the ideologies and religions of the past. That's why we consider that it is a cynical posture, affirming (implicitly) on the one hand what it denies (explicitly) on the other.

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