Postmodern Ethics: A Buddhist Response

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First published in 1993, Zygmunt Bauman's Postmodern Ethics[1] attempts an ambitious critique of European moral philosophy since the Enlightenment. The book tries to address what Bauman sees as the major failings of moral philosophy in the modern (that is, post-Enlightenment) period – it is his response to these perceived failings for which Bauman reserves the term 'post-modern ethics'. For those wishing to deepen their understanding of the problem of ethics the book offers a number of useful insights. A major theme running through the work, for example, is the emphasis on morality conceived of as responsibility to others, as opposed to the conception of morality as obedience to moral rules. In making such a distinction Bauman makes it clear that our moral responsibility is infinite and cannot be reduced to the fulfilment of a limited set of rules. Another major theme is in the argument that morality cannot be ultimately 'proven' or grounded in rational argument, but that morality can only be grounded in that which ultimately precedes any attempt at reasoning, which Bauman terms the 'moral impulse'.

In this paper I will attempt to outline sympathetically the major elements of Bauman's position and then I will elaborate on and modify Bauman's 'post-modern ethics' by taking into account a Buddhist understanding of ethics. Whilst in general agreement with Bauman in relation to his critique of rules in ethics, for example, I will argue that there is a need for a clear distinction between rules and ethical principles. Ethical principles are distinct from rules in that, while they are guides to our moral conduct, principles are open ended, infinite in their demand upon us and do not serve in any way to limit our natural moral impulse. Following the Buddhist tradition in ethics, I will argue that we can turn to our underlying mental states and motivational dispositions in assessing the morality of any actions. Again following the Buddhist tradition, I will argue that the arising of what Bauman terms the 'moral impulse' cannot be separated from a clear vision or understanding of the human existential situation. Morality may not be able to be 'proven'; it can however appeal to our deepest needs that arise from our inescapable existential situation.

Because the term 'post-modernism' is often equated with relativism it should be made clear from the outset that the postmodern position outlined by Bauman does not reject the idea of a universal basis to ethics. Bauman makes it clear, in his introduction to Postmodern Ethics, that when he states 'Morality is not universalizable'[2] he is not stating the popularly held view that morality is a relative phenomenon that has no universal basis. He explains: 'This statement does not necessarily endorse moral relativism, expressed in the frequently voiced and apparently similar proposition, that any morality is but a local (and temporary) custom, that what is believed to be moral in one place and time is certain to be frowned upon in another, and so all kinds of moral conduct practised so far happen to be relative to the time and place, affected by vagaries of local

or tribal histories and cultural inventions; that proposition is more often than not correlated with an injunction against all comparisons between moralities, and above all against all exploration of other than purely accidental and contingent sources of morality. I will argue against this overtly relativistic and in the end nihilistic view of morality.'[3] Bauman's assertion that 'Morality is not universalizable' is rather meant as a statement against '… the substitution of heteronomous, enforced-from-outside, ethical rules for the autonomous responsibility of the moral self'[4]

In other words, Bauman does not wish to reject a universal basis to morality, which he sees as ultimately residing in the 'moral impulse' of the autonomous subject. Rather, it is the view that this moral impulse can be neatly expressed in (or even replaced by) a set of rational rules which apply to all situations that Bauman rejects.

The main task of Postmodern Ethics then, is not to reject a universal basis for morality, but to offer a detailed critique of what Bauman characterizes as the 'modern' ethical philosophy and what Alasdair MacIntyre, in After Virtue,[5] calls 'The Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality'.[6] For both Bauman and MacIntyre the 'modern' outlook on ethics is fundamentally wrong in many of its central tenets.

What then is this 'modern' ethical philosophy? Bauman and MacIntyre argue that the modern perspective in ethics has been essentially a search for justification and certainty in the grounding of ethics. The implicit or sometimes explicit goal of the search has been to discover a universally valid set of ethical rules that may be applied to any social situation with scientific precision. According to Bauman, social cohesion and social order provide the underlying raison d'être for this project, which served social and political goals as much as it did purely philosophical ones. [7]

MacIntyre suggests it is no accident that the birth of modern ethics occurred when medieval Christianity began its decline.[8] According to this perspective, the modern world view arose in the void left by the decline in the primacy of Christian theism, suggesting that the need for certainty and order is deeply rooted in the Western psyche. But with the gradual undermining of God and the Holy Bible as the ultimate reference points for moral truth, there began a search for a new understanding of ethics. In MacIntyre's and Bauman's admittedly rather sweeping interpretation of the history of ideas, the modern philosophers, from Diderot through Hume and Kant and ending in Kierkegā rd, despite their disparate views and philosophies, share a common concern to uphold a Christian morality without recourse to traditional Christian/Aristotelian teleology and theology.[9]

Thus Bauman and MacIntyre suggest that the modern outlook on ethics can be understood not only as a response to philosophical problems, but also in the light of the need for a new basis for

social cohesion, following the decline of medieval Christianity and the appearance of what MacIntyre calls the 'autonomous individual', evident in the rise of a new class of merchants, scientists and artists. In this view, the modern epoch can be characterized as an era in which believing Christians can no longer turn to their own religion for truth, either in the natural sciences or in matters of morality. Modernism is thus seen as a response to both a philosophical and a social crisis.

In this interpretation of the post-Enlightenment period, the chief purpose of morality was no longer to support man in his reaching for a transcendent telos (that is, man's quest for a higher state of being – according to MacIntyre, this had been the mainstream tradition since Aristotle and throughout the Christian Middle Ages), but rather the negative purpose of preventing man from acting on his immoral inclinations. Characteristically, Kant's concern was to ensure that the voice of duty is heard, even when one's inclinations may be to act immorally.[10] Kant even went so far as to assume that this is the essence of morality, rather than to achieve a state in which one's inclinations are already moral. Thus Kant's conception of duty implies that acting morally may mean secretly wishing that one could act otherwise – this is the very opposite of what Bauman calls the 'moral impulse', which is characterized by a feeling that one could not act in any other way. As MacIntyre explains in comparing the Aristotelian conception of virtue with Kant's conception of duty, 'Virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways. To act virtuously is not, as Kant was later to think, to act against inclination; it is to act from inclination formed by cultivation of the virtues. Moral education is an "education sentimentale".'[11]

Bauman further argues that the very fragility of this negative conception of morality, exemplified by Kant, lends itself to the state taking on the role of moral educator and enforcer. The state becomes the upholder of morality and reason, through the legal and judicial process. It also enables the justification of its imperial ambitions as being that of imposing a universally valid set of moral standards. A major part of Bauman's thesis in Postmodern Ethics is the unmasking of this use of state power as being in the interests of certain classes and groups within society.

For Bauman, 'postmodernism' represents a new acceptance of what the 'modern' world has sought to escape. Thus rather than being dismayed, Bauman celebrates the idea that morality is non-rational, that the moral agent cannot be controlled or coerced into being moral and that morality remains mysterious, unexplainable and unable to be reduced to universal rules. Bauman points out that 'postmodern' does not mean 'post' in the chronological sense. 'Postmodernism' does not occur after modernism, but is a response to it, that is, a negation or 'disbelief' in the modern outlook. In many ways we still live in a 'modern' society, not a postmodern' one.

Bauman's advocacy of the postmodern position is informed by what he sees as the inevitable failures of modernism. He argues that, contrary to the modern prescription, moral phenomena are ultimately non-rational and cannot be neatly summed up in universally valid ethical rules: 'morality is endemically and irredeemably non-rational – in the sense of not being calculable, hence not being presentable as following impersonal rules, hence not being describable as following rules that are in principle universalizable.'[12]

Bauman's principal objection to an ethics based on any kind of rules is his insight that rules lead to a limiting of ethical responsibility. 'Rules would tell me what to do and when; rules would tell me where my duty starts and when it ends; rules would allow me to say, at some point, that I may rest now as everything that had to be done has been done'[13]

It is important for my argument in support of a Buddhist ethical framework that we note Bauman's principle objection to ethical rules: he sees them as severely limiting the moral impulse and therefore achieving the opposite of what they set out to achieve, making us less rather than more moral. I will later analyse this type of rule-based ethics as being a system of 'closed' ethics, as opposed to 'open' ethics, which do not constrain, but inform and guide our moral impulse. I will argue that the principles of ethics outlined in the Buddhist tradition are open ended and therefore escape Bauman's critique. Morality is not a matter of obedience to rules, but this does not mean that the moral impulse does not need cultivation and training.

But for now we can note the power of Bauman's argument against a rule-based ethics – to the extent that an ethical system prescribes a limited set of rules which may be successfully and finally fulfilled – to that extent it acts as a constraint to our moral impulse. While a limited set of rules may be enforced, our moral impulse cannot be coerced or controlled, but neither can it be limited – it is open ended, even infinite, in its scope. But if ethics does not reside in fulfilling a set of ethical rules or duties, what alternative vision of morality is Bauman proposing? What does Bauman mean when he talks of our moral impulse?[14]

In presenting his own basis for ethics Bauman draws heavily on the French philosopher Levinas, who describes the moral stance as one of 'being for the Other'. This is actually an elaboration of Kant's dictum to treat the other always as an end and never as a means.[15] 'Being for the Other' means recognizing the other not as a limited object to be appropriated for my own ends, but as an 'infinite' subjectivity, as a 'freedom'. In contrast to a limited set of duties, my moral responsibility in 'being for the Other' is infinite, unconditional and not dependent on the Other reciprocating by acting in a like manner towards me. It is the very opposite of contractual obligation. In Levinas' own words, moral responsibility is: 'A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the

Other, or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself.'[16]

In Levinas' rather poetic language, morality arises in response to the 'face' of the Other, which calls to me in its need. The Other 'summons' me to 'self-sacrifice', but this 'summons' is the 'summons' of an 'authority', not a force. Morality thus arises from an almost instinctual, primordial level of experience which can be termed the 'moral proximity' that I experience in my relationships with other people.

Bauman and Levinas are contrasting two radically different types of human relationship. The first is 'being with the other' which is a relationship defined by reciprocation, contractual rules and obligations and relies on fear of punishment or self interest for its ultimate effectiveness. (In other words, it is a relationship ultimately based on power.) This is contrasted with 'being for the Other' which is a relationship of open ended responsibility and a response to the needs of the other. It is not a relationship that can be enforced or coerced into existence and cannot be justified in purely rational terms (in other words, it is a relationship based on love in its deepest possible meaning.)

It should be becoming clearer why Bauman's (and Levinas's) idea of morality is 'beyond rationality'. Bauman is pointing to the fact that ultimately moral choice seems to be made without any recourse to reasoned argument. There seems to be a point beyond reasoning at which we make our deepest moral commitments. It is the moral impulse that precedes any later reasoning that Bauman is describing. Rational argument must inevitably speak the language of reasons and purposes, but 'being for the Other' needs no further justification or reason. Morality, defined as 'being for the Other', is its own end; it is not a means to an end, at least where that end is thought of in terms such as self-interest or social harmony.

But does such a view of morality lead inevitably to moral relativism and 'emotivism'? MacIntyre notes that modern moral debates have an 'interminability' about them, because no ground for morality is sufficiently agreed or sufficiently persuasive to act as an agreed starting basis. He therefore claims that emotivism is the most characteristic moral philosophy of the modern age, with its insistence that moral 'statements' are essentially only expressions of personal preference. According to emotivism, ultimately all moral debates, even if couched in the language of reason, must boil down to personal preference, therefore I must use every devious means available (and not necessarily pure rationality) to win any argument. MacIntyre argues that the attempt of modern philosophy to ground morality, firstly in human passions and desires (Hume), then in human reason (Kant), then finally in criterionless choice (Kierkegaard) failed ultimately to give us any persuasive reason to act morally. For MacIntyre, it is the failure of modern ethical philosophy that has inevitably led us to emotivism. [17]

But the question needs to be asked whether the 'postmodern' insights into the nature of ethics are leading us to a similar conclusion. If there is to be no reasoned basis to morality and if morality is a matter of individual choice or commitment can the individual seeking moral guidance be helped? If we accept the postmodern critique of rationality and rule-guided ethics are we inevitably on our own in adopting a particular moral stance? How are we to judge the value of one moral stance above another? We have come full circle to the age-old problem of finding a firm grounding for ethics.

Many contemporary philosophers follow Kierkegaard in claiming that ultimately we are faced with a criterionless choice in adopting a moral stance. Stan Van Hooft, for example, in his book Caring: An Essay in the Philosophy of Ethics[18] seeks to explain why we cannot avoid being moral. He explains morality as being a set of commitments or choices which are expressions of our 'deep caring', which is our fundamental and inescapable relationship with the world and our place in it. It is because we are ontologically both a 'self-project' and a 'caring about others' (that is, we exist as beings who create themselves in time and who must relate in some way to the world outside ourselves) that we must have moral commitments. But Van Hooft cannot tell us which commitments to make – it is only the act of choosing that resolves my ethical dilemmas.[19] Of course, moral choice does not occur in a vacuum, but in a particular cultural context, but Van Hooft refuses to offer us any universal criteria for ethics that stand outside of culture.[20]

It seems to me that there is a way out of the quandary presented to us in contemporary moral philosophy, and this is partly pointed to in Levinas' characterization of morality. For Levinas, morality is characterized as 'being for the Other'. This mode of being somehow transcends our natural self-centred inclinations. It is first and foremost in my 'being for the Other' that I transcend my own narrow ego-based self and reach for a new way of being, a way that could ultimately even be characterized as 'saintliness'.[21] Levinas' philosophy points the way to a conception of morality that can be found in the Bible and in classical thought – to a morality that is not to be justified in 'human nature', but rather in what humanity may become. It is this 'new humanity' or transcendent mode of being that is brought into being to the extent that we are able to put aside our own narrow self-interested point of view and be for the Other. We can talk of 'man as he could be' in a number of ways: as man who has 'well-being' in Aristotle's conception, as 'saintliness' in the Christian tradition or as enlightened consciousness in the Buddhist tradition. But all these conceptions share a similar triadic structure MacIntyre has characterized as 'untutored human nature, man as he could be if he realized his telos and the moral precepts which enable him to pass from one state to the other'.[22] The main point of these differing traditions is clear: in Nietzsche's famous dictum 'man is something that should be overcome'.[23] Morality derives its meaning from whether or not it is successful in achieving its telos, namely the bringing into existence of the 'new man'.

The human (defined as that part of us that remains bound by a narrow conception of self-interest) is not an end in itself, rather it is a promise (or perhaps more accurately, an opportunity) of something higher. It is in this sense of self-transcendence that the word 'transcendental' could be used to characterize any such philosophy of life, not to connote any metaphysical entity. The modern outlook on human existence and its consequential moral failure is to attempt to live without such a transcendental possibility. Let me emphasize again that such a transcendence does not necessarily imply any particular metaphysical transcendence (such as the transcendence of God), rather it is meant to connote a transcendence of the existential quandary of the human condition, a transcendence of the narrow confines of self interested, 'ego based' existence. Such a conception of what it means to be human is pointed to in all the universal religions and also in the Greek classical tradition.

So, to summarize the moral position characterized by Levinas, the moral can be seen as a new way of being which has as its essence 'being for the Other' and a going beyond my own narrow self interests. This is hardly a new conception of morality, yet, perhaps surprisingly, it does not contradict any of the main tenets of the postmodern position. We can see that this 'new man' or new 'way of being' which is pointed to cannot be justified by reasoned argument alone – it cannot be 'proven'. However, as I will later explain in my brief discussion of the Buddhist ethical outlook, this conception of morality does begin to appeal to us when we start to develop some degree of insight into the extent to which narrow self-interest causes ourselves and others a great deal of suffering. Its 'appeal' is one that is of the heart as much as the head.

I have used Levinas' poetic philosophy of 'being for the Other' as my chief metaphor for morality. But many other concepts and images could be put in its place. From the Buddhist tradition we can take the concepts of mettā   (loving-kindness) and karuṇā   (compassion) to describe a similar experience. Perhaps we can even use a term from modern psychology – empathy – or perhaps Van Hooft's 'Deep Caring' can be extended to describe such an experience.

  Once we accept 'being for the Other' as our key moral experience, a number of simple ethical principles follow quite naturally. It is critical to see, as Bauman and Levinas have clearly argued, that the ethical impulse needs no secondary justification. The principles I will outline are not justifications for morality, but elaborations or implications that derive from this primary experience. Ethics, as Levinas puts it, is 'first philosophy'. We can only derive our moral principles from our primary moral experience or 'impulse'. It is only because we are not always guided by this impulse that we have a need for moral principles. I will turn to the Buddhist tradition as my source for these principles, although being universal principles they may be found within other traditions also.

The most fundamental ethical principle (or precept, or 'training rule') in Buddhism is to avoid harming

living beings, or to put it more positively, to act with deeds of loving kindness towards others. From this great principle all other principles follow.[24] It should immediately be clear that this principle or ideal is not a 'rule' in the sense of prescribing a narrow set of duties that can be finally fulfilled. It is of the nature of a 'principle' or 'ideal' that it opens us to the infinity of our responsibility towards others. If such a principle were to degenerate into a collection of 'rules' imposed on us by an external authority (whether that authority be God or the state), we would act only out of fear of consequences to ourselves and not out of any motivation towards self-transcendence. Of course, a great deal of what goes under the name of morality is of this type, including a great part of the dominant Judeo-Christian tradition.

A system of rules that is held together or receives its ultimate authority externally to the moral agent may offer us a mirage of security. Such a system of 'closed' ethics serves to remove our underlying moral and even existential anxiety by providing us with 'safe' and 'secure' answers to life's dilemmas. But as soon as the authority is undermined (for example, through the demise of the Church or the state) such an ethics reveals its deep fragility. An 'authoritarian' ethics cannot finally provide us with the ethical society it promises. The man who does not steal because his hands are tied behind his back, or out of fear of being caught, is hardly acting ethically. The criminal justice system and other methods of controlling human behaviour by means of power is a last resort option at best and can clearly not be the foundation stone of a civilized society.

To act with deeds of loving kindness towards others is to adopt a certain kind of attitude, even one may say a certain kind of emotional stance. The characteristic emotional attitude is of course that of love (in the sense of a deep friendliness and empathetic attitude). The Buddhist term here is 'mettā ', which has a meaning much broader and deeper than that conveyed by the modern understanding of the word 'love'. Such a love in its perfected form is characterized by being inclusive of all living beings, but it has as its basis the love that we feel for ourselves and those closest to us.

The basic emotional attitude of mettā can be elaborated further as the Four Brahma-vihāras or Sublime abodes. Mettā is the first of the Brahma-vihāras and the basis of the other three abodes, karuṇā or compassion, muditā or sympathetic joy and upekkhā or equanimity. Thus when faced by the suffering of others 'mettā ' is expressed as karu.nā or compassion. When faced with the happiness of living beings 'mettā ' is expressed as muditā or sympathetic joy. Finally, when faced by the suffering and happiness of others in the light of the conditions that caused that suffering or happiness, mettā is expressed as upekkhā or equanimity or tranquillity.[25] By tranquillity is meant not a cold indifference, but a tranquillity that arises from the insight that any state of existence is impermanent and can therefore change into something better and higher.

It is characteristic of Buddhist ethics that it is expressed in terms of the emotions as much as it is in any

conceptual formulation. Emotions have an appeal where cold and reasoned calculation may not. An action motivated by love is naturally appealing to the moral agent without any recourse to secondary reasons. It is also significant that from a Buddhist perspective an action whose underlying motivation is love is as beneficial to the moral agent as it is to the receiver of that love. Paradoxically, the deepest 'self-interest' is served by 'being for the Other' and acting from a basis of love. Even Kant, with his emphasis on the disinterestedness and self-sacrificing nature of ethical duty, must admit that a certain 'contentment' does arise in acting morally.[26] This 'contentment' is well understood when we see that our 'telos' is to be attained through 'being for the Other'.

It is also characteristic of Buddhist ethics that it turns to our motivations for an assessment of the morality of an action. Wholesome actions follow from wholesome motivations. Without a positive emotional/motivational basis good cannot arise. This is not to say that we should not act intelligently and circumspectly as the situation may warrant – but it does point to the fundamental importance of our emotional dispositions in moral action.[27] It follows from this that awareness of our emotional/mental states is a good guide to the morality of our actions. If one was aware, for example, that one was acting from a basis of hatred or ill will (the opposite of love) it would follow that our actions would not be moral. Such a criterion is open to the criticism of being too vague to be of much use in any critical situation. But this vagueness can be lessened by developing mindful awareness, particularly through concentrative exercises such as meditation practice. Thus meditation in the Buddhist tradition has as its initial goals the cultivation of awareness of one's underlying mental states and of cultivating and developing one's positive emotions, such as 'mettā' (loving kindness). In a further stage, meditation is aimed at direct Insight into the nature of reality itself. Such Insight is said to be characterized by wisdom and compassion. Morality and self-awareness or mindfulness are thus mutually reinforcing.

One more characteristic of Buddhist ethics can be noted here: Buddhist ethics is naturalistic rather than theistic. Buddhism turns to our own psychology, to our own experience, rather than to an external source such as God or the Holy Bible for its ultimate source of moral understanding. Buddhist ethics could be described as empirical, in the sense that our own experience is the ultimate reference point for moral truth. Buddhist ethics seeks to appeal to our own experience in any attempts at persuasion. Awareness and self-reflection are therefore crucial elements in any Buddhist ethics[28]

Thus the ultimate reference point for all doctrinal formulations of Buddhism, including its ethical formulations, is an insight or experience of human existence which is open to all human beings to the extent to which they are able to reflect on their own existential situation. One may say that our conception of what it means to be a human being is derived ultimately from the reality of our existential situation, a reality which is true, in its principal elements, for all human beings. The truth that the Buddha understood is not a philosophy or a doctrine, but a direct insight into the nature of

reality. The claim of Buddhism is that such a direct insight into the true nature of reality is possible for every human being.

In the end, the only claim to truth that the Buddhist vision of reality can make is that derived through our own experience – by examining one's own experience the truths to which the doctrinal formulas of Buddhism point will become self-evident. This is why the Buddhist tradition has an unbroken tradition of dialogue and reflective discourse – one does not take on the Buddhist doctrines on blind faith, but through a process of confirming their truth for oneself. It must be remembered that the word 'Buddha' essentially means 'the awakened one'; the Buddhist tradition holds that this awakening is possible for all human beings, to the extent that they make the necessary effort.

The Buddhist vision of reality has many different doctrinal formulations and is a huge topic beyond the scope of this essay. I will therefore pick up only a few themes which are most clearly relevant to the issue of morality. The Buddha taught that worldly existence is 'dukkha', which can be translated as suffering, but perhaps more accurately unsatisfactoriness. The metaphor used is that of an ill-fitting chariot wheel. This of course does not mean that there is no pleasure to be had from life, or even that these pleasures are worthless, but only that they are ultimately impermanent (anicca) and transitory. However, we refuse to recognize this simple fact. We act as though experiences and objects are permanent and substantial, when in reality they are not. We even believe our own self to be permanent, fixed and substantial when in reality it is nothing more or less than a flow of constantly changing experience. We are in reality 'no-self' (anattā   ), that is, we exist in relation to everything else and are dependent upon a constantly changing flow of conditions.

But we do not see this reality clearly. Through our false conception of worldly reality as satisfactory, permanent and substantial, we cling to experiences that are pleasant and reject those that are unpleasant. In other words, in dependence on ignorance (failing to see conditioned existence for what it is) we develop craving and hatred. (Ignorance, craving and hatred are to be found at the centre of the so-called 'Tibetan Wheel of Life' symbolized by a pig, a cock, and a snake – they are also known as the 'three root poisons'.) Note here the fundamental place of ignorance, defined as a lack of clear vision of reality. With craving and hatred we have the psychological basis of immorality. Of course craving and hatred have a very large range of psychological manifestations, from mild dislike to an obsessive hatred, but they are all based in a desperate attempt by the ego to cling to what is perceived as pleasant and reject what is perceived as unpleasant. These negative emotional dispositions ultimately serve to reinforce this sense of 'I' or 'ego' as something which I must protect and nurture. Yet this battle of the ego is doomed to failure, with the resulting sense of unsatisfactoriness and disillusionment.

Our deepest existential need is to escape from this sense of deep anxiety and unsatisfactoriness. As Gunapala Dharmasiri puts it, 'the Buddha's central problem was how to get out of this unsatisfying Saṃsāra ('worldly' existence, that is, existence experienced through greed, hatred and ignorance) and achieve a permanent kind of happiness.'[29] But this cannot be done until we begin to operate from a radically different basis. It is this new basis for being that is signified by the 'teleology' of transcendence, of the 'new man' or 'enlightened being'.

The only permanent solution to the crisis of the embattled ego is to transcend the ego altogether and move to a mode of being that recognizes our fundamental interdependence with others and indeed all phenomena. It is this underlying 'purpose' or 'meaning' that gives ultimate justification to the moral task. Morality, defined as a sense of responsibility for others based in the positive emotional state of mettā (loving kindness), is the foundation of our attempt to live in the light of our clearest vision of reality. In being moral man moves from a false, inauthentic and unsatisfactory mode of existence to one which is authentic and ultimately satisfying. But in order to achieve such an authentic mode of being one must be able to see clearly the drawbacks of worldly existence. Thus man's higher purpose is not one 'given' by a creator God, but is derived by reflection on the limitations and possibilities of his existential situation. Without this self-awareness of one's existential situation one will continue to live a life based on a delusory notion of self-interest.

The 'postmodern ethics' outlined by Bauman is an attempt to develop a persuasive critique of post-Enlightenment ethical philosophy as being obsessed with rules, rationality and coercion. As an historical critique it suffers from being too sweeping and all inclusive, and comes dangerously close at times to misrepresenting the complexity of post-Enlightenment ethical philosophy. Yet its usefulness lies in its clear critique of a major tendency in ethical debate. It also sets out an alternative ethics, an ethics of infinite responsibility, pointed to in Levinas' philosophy of 'being for the Other'. Buddhist ethics is similarly open ended rather than rule bound and hence serves as a useful elaboration of this trend in ethical theory. It should be clear that an ethics based on Buddhist principles could never be an ethics of 'coercion', in which obedience to authority (whether that be God or the state) has become the raison d'être of morality. Rather it speaks to the individual in his existential predicament and invites the individual to try out a new way of being – a way of being that ultimately transcends any narrow preoccupation with self-interest. Particularly useful for Westerners searching for a new basis to moral conduct is the Buddhist understanding of the centrality of emotional dispositions as a basis of morality and the importance of mindful awareness in the cultivation of positive emotional states. The Buddhist tradition also shows us that we have nothing to fear from broad ethical principles which help guide us in our attempts to move from an unsatisfactory state of greed, hatred and ignorance to one of compassionate wisdom and freedom.

Notes

[1]. Bauman, Zygmunt, Postmodern Ethics, Blackwell, Oxford 1993.

[2]. Ibid., p.12.

[3]. Ibid., p.12.

[4]. Ibid., p.12.

[5]. MacIntyre, Alasdair, After Virtue, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame Indiana 1981.

[6]. Ibid, ch.5.

[7]. Bauman, op.cit., p.14.

[8]. MacIntyre, op.cit.

[9]. Ibid., p.51.

[10]. See Kant, Immanuel, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, trans. H.J. Paton, Harper Torchbooks, New York 1964.

[11]. MacIntyre, op.cit. p.149.

[12]. Bauman, op.cit., p.60.

[13]. Ibid., p.60.

[14]. While attempting to follow Bauman's argument, it is worth noting a degree of confusion with Bauman's use of Kantian terms. Bauman tends to use the terms 'rules' and 'duties' interchangeably, but Kant's use of the term duty does not deny the autonomous working of the individual conscience, so Kant may be closer to Bauman than is at first obvious. The term 'duty', in Kant, may actually be closer to 'moral impulse' than Bauman's interpretation makes clear.

[15]. Kant, op.cit., p.63–7. Once more, Bauman may actually be closer to Kant than is at first obvious.

[16]. 'Ethics as First Philosophy' in Levinas, Emmanuel, The Levinas Reader, ed. Hand, Shawn, Blackwell, Oxford 1989, p.83.

[17]. MacIntyre, op. cit. ch.3.

[18]. Van Hooft, Stan, Caring: An Essay in the Philosophy of Ethics, University Press of Colorado, Niwot Colorado 1995.

[19]. Ibid., p.186.

[20]. Ibid., p.114.

[21]. 'The Paradox of Morality: an interview with Emmanuel Levinas' in The Provocation of Levinas, Bernasconi, Robert and Wood, David, Routledge, London 1988, p.172.

[22]. MacIntyre, op. cit., p.54.

[23]. Nietzsche, Friedrich, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. Hollingdale, R. J. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1969, p.41.

[24]. Other important moral principles are an elaboration of this primary principle. For example, in the area of communication such a principle would be to use speech that is kindly and promotes harmony. The practice of generosity would be another example. For a full elaboration of the ethical 'precepts' of Buddhism see Sangharakshita, The Ten Pillars of Buddhism, Windhorse Publications, Birmingham 1999.

[25]. Sangharakshita, Vision and Transformation, Windhorse, Glasgow 1990, ch.2.

[26]. Kant, op. cit., p.64.

[27]. Sangharakshita, op. cit., ch.4.

[28]. See Dharmasiri, Gunapala, Fundamentals of Buddhist Ethics, Golden Leaves, Antioch California, p.2.

[29]. Dharmasiri, op. cit., p.11.