



MORALS AND MORALITY IN BERLIN ZOLTÁN BALÁZS

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On a chilly November afternoon, I was about to cross the Bismarckallee with my two children. The lights were red, but the road was narrow and there was not a single car moving around. I remembered the old wisdom: “Don’t worry about the lights, *they* won’t hit you”. So I ignored the red and we crossed the *Allee*. All of a sudden, an elderly lady appeared at the corner. Had she said nothing, I already have felt ashamed.

That’s Berlin. Morality is palpable. Kant is watching you. During a few months I heard and read more than once (some version of) the famous Kantian principle: Whenever you act, act as if you were making a universal law. I never felt so intensely that universality can be a particular feature of a particular culture.

Another example. I went to mass to St. Hedwig’s Cathedral on the 8th of December, which is the feast of the Immaculate Conception, a distinctively Catholic feast. As it turned out, that was a traditional annual joint mass of various ethnic communities within the

Catholic Church in Berlin. St. Hedwig's is a highly spirited, contemplative, austere, and reserved church, which, though Catholic, stands in striking contrast to the mercilessly triumphal and uncompromisingly decorated Protestant Berliner Dom. (To be sure, the latter testifies to the taste of Emperor Wilhelm I, not to the spirit of Prussian Protestantism.) The participants were doing faithfully what the Roman liturgy prescribes and patiently listening to all sorts of languages that were being used during the mass and that they could not understand. But when the *offertorium*, the offering of the gifts, began, they had to wake up. To their embarrassment, the gifts were being carried in procession to the altar by a group of black men, women, children, (plus a baby), who sang a very strange chant, without any musical assistance, moving back and forth, in a common rhythm, slowly approaching the altar. Their embarrassment – and also mine – was easy to understand: smiling is forbidden, since something sacred is happening, in a sacred and very serious place, *more-over*, it would be impolite; but the usual devoted and pious look is inapplicable, since *that* requires a traditional – a *particular* – context. But then I began to see: this was just the point. Universality requires particularity to show itself. And I started to admire the people in the procession: what courage they have to go around this cathedral, so stern and imposing, and to sing loudly, relying only on their voices, to conquer those heavy and gloomy Prussian hearts! And this they could do precisely because what they were doing and singing was *not* simply their traditional, culture-dependent, *particular* rite, but the unmistakable expression of the primordial, the most sincere and ever-valid *universal* human attitude of being attracted to, but also being in awe of the transcendent God. This is just the other point: to make a serious difference, particularity requires something universal.

I felt elevated and edified, more than I expected.

The world comes in particulars. The first thing a human being learns, in normal circumstances, is that he or she has *a* mother. Or rather, that there is *the* mother in the world. Mother is a person unlike all others. She is special. Later, of course, we all discover that all human beings have (had) mothers, and that what other mothers do and look like is not particularly different from what ours does and looks like. And we begin to compare mothers and their performances, make universal statements and claims, and arrive at a concept of motherhood. Does all this make mothers interchangeable?

Of course it does not. But there is need of explanation how particularity and universality merge, how it is possible that each and every mother is special, but in quite the same way. In my view, an adequate and convincing explanation will have to focus on the *relationship* that links up mother and son, father and daughter and in general, you and me.

I have long been fascinated by the relational aspect of the human condition. Relations like love, power, authority, trust, cooperation, and the like are the most powerful concepts in sociology, political science, economics, as well as social theory and even theology. They are universals, but of a peculiar kind: they cannot be instantiated by isolated particulars. They require particulars that relate themselves to one another and make themselves special to one another.

I am already using the strange terminology of ontology, a much feared field of philosophy whose major question is this: what exists and how? Moral philosophers have been concerned with various aspects of love, trust, authority, and the like, but they have failed to ask the fundamental question: how does love, for instance, exist? How is it possible that we can compare two instances of love (e.g. our love for our friend and our love for our spouse), but we cannot even imagine exchanging these relationships?

On the other hand, many moral philosophers since Kant, Fichte, and Hegel have been at pains to show that each and every human being has a special relationship to all other human beings and that this relationship is the basis of morality. They usually point out features of humanity or, to use ontological terms again, properties that all human beings share. Then they argue that human beings will realize that they have much in common, that they are deeply connected with one another, and that therefore they must respect one another. But similarity is a very weak relation, ontology tells us, one that lacks any particular content. In moral terms: the mere fact that another person shares many things with me, may make me either like or dislike that person. There is nothing that would substantiate the claim that I should respect that person. An ontological look at the foundations of Kantian moral philosophy discovers how shaky and weak they in fact are.

Ontology thus has much to say about how particulars and universals are related to one another. And without a clear notion of what a relation(ship) consists in, our understanding of morally relevant relationships (including natural ones like kinship relations and social ones like marriage, love and trust) is seriously impoverished and potentially false. But since the ontology of relations itself is a contested subfield with many paradoxes and problems, the close study of moral and morally relevant relations may shed new light on them, too. There is an interesting possibility of ontology and moral philosophy conversing with one another, thereby mutually enriching themselves.

This was the project I wished to start and work on in Berlin. Since the circumstances were extraordinarily favorable and stimulating, I accomplished more than I hoped. After

having returned home, I needed only two more months to finish the first version of a rather lengthy paper titled – quite unsurprisingly – “The Ontology of Moral Relations”.

Three months are a short period of time, one that I wished I could extend. But three months can be a long period of time, especially if the work one has finished during it is substantial. This indeed was the case, and I am indebted to the truly unique combination of efficiency, hospitality, cordiality, and respect the Wissenschaftskolleg and its staff represented and offered to me. I was particularly impressed by the love and generosity of the staff towards the many children, including mine, that the community “took” this year to the Kolleg. Also, since German was my first spoken foreign language, one I have in the past years had very few opportunities to practice, I was extremely happy that I could again speak and converse in German.

I was relatively young in the community of scholars and researchers, but I felt the full measure of respect and attentiveness on the part of the older colleagues. The erudition and culture they brought to the Kolleg and to me was astounding and impressive. I am grateful to them, too.

Berlin surely has a special guardian angel. Not the one standing on the famous column *en route* to Brandenburger Tor, but a more real and effective one whose presence one sometimes feels very keenly. Maybe she was the old lady on the Bismarckallee, warning and protecting me and my children...