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Dehumanization of refugees in media as a case of moral disengagement

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Abstract

Through an analysis of selected articles, the study demonstrates dehumanization as a discursive strategy which may lead to moral disengagement. The presented analysis shows how particular discursive strategies in analysed texts support the process of moral disengagement in society and potentially may lead to a justification of reprehensible conduct and mass aggression against refugees. Subsequently, this is ethically evaluated through perspectives of deontological and consequential theories and some recommendations are offered. The study follows the idea of media being a tool for the development of democratic values, such as the humanization of refugees and their personalization in individual stories which would present their lives and suffering to media recipients.

Keywords: news, media, refugees, migration, dehumanization, animalisation, moral disengagement, media ethics

Introduction

The summer of 2015 brought a new challenge for the European Union. Facing a humanitarian crisis influenced by hundreds of thousands of refugees arriving to Europe had also become a difficult and unexpected experience for post-communist countries. Despite the fact that countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, or Hungary had themselves gone through an enormous migration of people and had hosted a large number of asylum seekers in the past, the complexity and the completely novel character of the refugee crisis in 2015 has brought the Visegrad 4 countries to the brink of a crisis they have not had to deal with before.

This study presents a small contribution to the question on how this problem is faced by Czech society. The analysis of selected articles from Czech media from the summer of 2015 shows the active strategy of dehumanization as a strategy leading to moral disengagement and analytically explores the mechanisms of this disengagement based on discursive strategies of media representations of refugees. The analysis is interpreted and ethically evaluated from the perspectives of deontological and consequential moral theories and it offers several suggestions. With the help of concepts from social psychology, the study tries to expand discussions on media ethics and theoretical frameworks in it and it demonstrates their application to a concrete, empirical material.

Dehumanization

Dehumanization is a theoretical concept widely used in social psychology which refers to “[...] denying humanness to others, introducing an asymmetry between people who have human qualities and people who are perceived as lacking these qualities” (Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015, p. 31). Its most common form is described by the term “barbarians“, which is a

term used in the classical world and is used to differentiate groups which we are a part of (in-group) from strangers who are members of another community (out-group). A barbarian is a non-civilized, violent type dangerous to those who are civilized (cultured). This concept was used during the times of colonialism, too, when it depicted a savage who was an unsophisticated being inclined to violence, aggression, sex, and criminality (Haslam, 2006, p. 252).

Dehumanization spreads from the depersonalisation of the out-group members and is rooted in a uniform perception of the individuals of these groups (Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015, p. 31). They are not considered to be individual, authentic beings, but only as elements of the out-group. Intergroup relationships do not have to be necessarily driven by malignance but rather by indifference. Dehumanization is then understood as “[...] general indifference or apathy to others' mental states and experience based on an inference about diminished mental capacities [...] People may be willing to harm dehumanized others not simply because of emotional hatred, but also – perhaps primarily – because of a cognitive indifference to them” (Waytz & Epley, 2012, p. 75).

Nevertheless, dehumanization is often connected with an increase in violence¹ and harm-justifying attitudes towards members of the out-group. This leads to worsening intergroup relationships, reducing the willingness to help and support, and excusing violence (even in the form of mass murders). Genocide and the idea of eliminating allegedly dangerous out-groups is often the consequence of dehumanization which allows the members of the in-group to justify their actions.

For example, a weaker form of dehumanization (infra-humanization) may function as a strategy to restore the psychological balance after a violent act by in-group member towards the out-group. As illustrated by a series of experiments (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006), in-group members infra-humanise victims of mass murder more if committed by another member of their in-group. This creates a feeling of shared responsibility within the in-group and psychological disengagement from it through the strategy of infra-humanization. News headlines about the first of these experiments had three possible forms: firstly, the death of the out-group was considered to be an accident, secondly, it was an accident for which someone from the in-group was responsible, and thirdly, the act was considered homicide. Attribution of human emotions to the out-group consistently and significantly decreased in the second and the third case. Further experiments varied this model and showed that the more the feeling of guilt was increased, the more it was accompanied by infra-humanization (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006).

As shown in another study, dehumanization is a strategy more commonly used by people with power. Because of their status, they face situations in which they have to make decision causing the suffering of others. The strategy of dehumanization can reduce the psychological stress these leaders experience. As illustrated by Lammers and Stapel (2011), members of the in-group (who have the power) dehumanize the out-group more, especially after a tough decision has been made with negative consequences towards the out-group. But dehumanization does not have to cause only direct damage and suffering. An experiment led by Jason D. Gwinn and his research team shows that power itself creates sufficient conditions for the dehumanization of others. The relationship between power and the dehumanization is obvious - which is proven by other research, too. For example, the link between power and infidelity correlates positively (Lammers et al., 2011).

On the other hand, Ariely and Mann warn us about the vulgarization of the relationship between morality and social class (the ruling, powerful class). It is not sufficient to interpret it in its simplified way (one social class is less moral *en bloc*). Nevertheless, the above mentioned research shows that dehumanization is based on the *power* relationship (not only belonging to a particular social class). They show that the strategy is used when the in-group has significant power over the out-group. The strategy is used to reduce mental distress arising from unnecessary decisions, which is also relevant to the subject matter of the presented study.

The extent of dehumanization is affected by how low the out-group is perceived. Homeless people, drug addicts, immigrants: they all are potential objects of dehumanization. Harris and Fiske (2006), while using neural evidence, demonstrate that we tend to dehumanize low and extreme out-groups. As can be seen, dehumanization is not directed to each out-group but to specific out-groups perceived by the in-group as low-low. Most significantly, this goes beyond verbal reports. It supports an understanding of the physiological aspects of dehumanization. Their work explains that dehumanization is associated with disgust (*insula*) and fear (*amygdala*). It is not only indifference but also a type of emotional resistance. Different research shows that people are willing to sacrifice members of low-low out-groups (in the classic trolley dilemma) for the sake of others and justify it in almost 84 percent of cases. “We propose that participants are actively overriding their moral aversion to using another person as a means to an end when they have the opportunity to save in-group members by sacrificing extreme outgroup members” (Cikara et al., 2010, p. 412).

One of the key factors in the use of dehumanization strategy towards another group is also the extent to which a person is connected with other people from his/her social circle; how strong their social ties are. Social cohesion strengthens differentiation from other groups: “[...] the most tightly-knit groups – from military units to athletic teams – may also be the

¹ It is not only real, physical violence but mediated violence, too. For example, the research team of Broch Bastian.

most likely to treat their adversaries as subhuman animals" (Waytz & Epley, 2012, p. 75).

There are several models of dehumanization strategy (Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015). For the purpose of this article, the wide-spread distinction formulated by Nick Haslam (2006) will be used. He defines dehumanization as a denial of the full humanness of others. Humanness can have two meanings:

- *uniquely human* (UH) which refers to what distinguishes human being from animals (civility, refinement, moral sensibility, rationality/logic, maturity);
- *human nature* (HN) represents what is biologically given. This distinguishes human being from machines (emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth, cognitive openness, agency/individuality, depth) (Haslam, 2006, pp. 256–257).

Dehumanization then happens between these two distinctive features of humanness, UH and HN, creating a wide scale of possible combinations. They differ from each other in various ways of applying dehumanization. However, two main forms of dehumanization can be distinguished: animalistic dehumanization and mechanistic dehumanization. While the first one refers to a vertical comparison of people (others understood as sub-human, lower) and to a denial of their UH properties, the second form shows the horizontal comparison (non-humans) and the denial of HN: "[...] social groups [...] may be subtly dehumanized in two distinct ways, unrefined IMPLICITLY likened to animals or soulless machines" (Haslam, 2006, p. 258).

The dehumanization mechanism of refugees in media has an impact on how refugees are perceived by media recipients. Research (Esses et al., 2008) shows that informing people of the immorality of the out-group promotes dehumanization of this group, "[...] suggesting that such depictions in the media may also serve as legitimizing myths for those who are members of dominant groups in society" (Esses et al., 2008, p. 22). Dehumanization leads to contempt towards refugees and to a lack of concern and sympathy towards their life stories and future fate. Therefore, the study of discursive methods in media is important to understand the semiotic strategies used in public discourse as they may be misused to activate mechanisms of aggression and violence among the in-group. In this study, the focus will be put on both discursive strategies of dehumanization and on how they overlap with mechanisms of moral disengagement. This shows that, in the highly discursive structure of media, specific tools for moral justification of reprehensible conduct of members of the in-group are rooted. The media can thus expand the process of moral disengagement.

Refugees in Czech media

Research Method and Sample

For research purposes, articles from the Czech press published in the period of 1.6.2015 – 1.9.2015 have been selected. They are representative cases. The selection process was established using the database *Atropress*, through which individual entries corresponding with the key word "migrant" were pre-selected. The key word was chosen because of its more general meaning in comparison with the more adequate term "refugee". It was later realized that these two terms were used in the selected articles as synonymous expressions.

The database query was limited to Czech national print media. After the initial evaluation of generated articles, ten articles were chosen for analysis from the following print media: MF DNES (4), Právo (4) and Blesk (2). For clarity, individual articles are quoted in the study as follows; M1-4, P1-4, and B1-2.²

In these articles, discursive techniques are detected and analysed. They are evaluated on how (with the help of language and visual methods) the identity of others was constructed in them. Implicit "us" is understood as the "in-group", while refugees (in articles often called migrants) are members of the out-group. The study examines which strategies are used in these articles for the purpose of dehumanization.³ Individual segments of the Nick Haslam concept are used as a basic methodology.

Analysis

The articles depict refugees as agents (NH/agency). They are presented as beings that can "get angry", "rebellious", or "provoked". Their actions are aggressive. They try "to vigorously get their freedom", and "do not wait till the authorities, following legal standards, release them" (M1). Refugees, because of their impatience, stand opposite to the legal system, police, and orderly life. They are maladjusted people who often violate order and rules. One of the articles is even entitled "Bring us rather prisoners than refugees", which refers to the public attitude of the citizens of Vyšň Lhota, where a refugee camp was planned to be built, towards refugees (M2). Refugees are thus considered to be even worse than prisoners, criminals. Their presence is a threat to the public (UH/amorality, lack of self-restraint) as they are linked to their chance to "move freely around the village" and their unknown and potentially dangerous activities (NH/agency). Locals have mobilized

² M1 (Janouš, 2015a), M2 (Janouš, 2015b), M3 (Palata, Bělka, 2015), M4 (Rambousková, 2015), P1 (ivi, ČTK, 2015), P2 (Plavecký, 2015), P3 (Adamíčková, Königová, 2015), P4 (Zpěváčková, 2015), B1 (Prokešová, 2015), B2 (Mihalik, 2015).

³ The concept of dehumanization of refugees was already used in the past, for example in an analysis of media artefacts (Bleiker et al., 2013) or an analysis of governmental politics (McDougall, Fletcher, 2002). But methodologically, the studies were different to this study as the concept is enriched with the theory of moral disengagement.

themselves against this and have drafted a petition. The conflict between the in-group and out-group is very sharply drawn here.

Article M3 starts with an initial sentence evoking the beginning of a dramatic story: "On the roadside, a man, wearing a blue hoodie, stands up and throws a large rock on the road. A truck driver, who is just passing by, manages to avoid it". The refugee is depicted as a coarse (UH/coarseness), uncivilized (UH/lack of culture) person who throws rocks and sticks at drivers and who targets cars in the darkness without considering what action can cause (UH/amorality, UH/childlikeness). The victims of the situations are thus drivers. The article implicitly presents them as humans with their own values, representatives of humanity. The message also contains one strong, binary opposition: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland refuse to accept mandatory quotas for the distribution of refugees between individual EU states, opposing the "childish" (i. e. reckless) EU policy, which is very similar to the childish morals of immigrants in its irresponsibility (UH/childlikeness).

The savageness of refugees is also presented in article P1: "about one hundred migrants (in the Hungarian town of Debrecen) threw stones at cars and battered them with sticks. A special unit (police) was finally able to push refugees back to the camp. "Refugees are described as an uncontrollable mass that needs to be carefully separated from the in-group. Reasons for this are again stated as coarseness (UH/coarseness), instinctive behaviour (UH/instinct), and lack of culture (UH/lack of culture). They are depicted as emotional (HN/emotional responsiveness) and agentive (HN/agency) who stick together (HN/interpersonal warmth). Because of these characteristics (as they are common for refugees as representatives of the out-group), the press emphasizes that it was only a question of time before the first conflict occurred.

Article B1 directly uses the term "hordes of invaders" which accentuates the barbarism and savagery of refugees as well as their uniformity and loss of individuality. On top of this, the title of the article, "They also molest Czechs!", presents the out-group as something that is endowed with super-natural powers to intrude on the in-group. This might not be primarily considered as a dehumanization method (in Haslam's understanding), but together with the animalization method (in Haslam's understanding), but dehumanization methods (Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015, pp. 31–32).

The refugees are not only dangerous because of their actions but also because they transmit diseases as shown in article P2. Personnel in the Bela pod Bezdězem refugee camp are, according to the report, confronted with threats such as "beheading", "rape" or "all sorts of diseases". The image of the barbarian rapist is a complex metaphor of a dangerous animal which, besides being violent, comes to defile us. Rape is an implicit expression of defiling the cultural superiority of the in-group. Only such a brutal act can challenge this superiority (UH/amorality; UH/coarseness; UH/instinct;

UH/lack of culture). Refugees being carriers of diseases, is another rhetoric figure. It is based on the biological strategy – a strategy which shows individual beings as viruses, germs, cancer, dirt, or contamination which need to be eliminated. The in-group must be disinfected against them (Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015, pp. 31–32). In the past, this strategy of "scientific racism" was, in different forms, part of Nazi propaganda or the post-Enlightenment notion of demons.

Article P2 emphasizes another issue: it claims that most members of the out-group in refugee camps are men. Man is a symbol of power and conquest. Contrary to female refugees (with children), the male refugee stands for a symbol of brutal power and a recharging, symbol of man, who takes what he wants – the women, wealth, and health of the in-group members.

P3 informs readers about the potential number of out-group members with which (because of EU obligations) they will have to deal with in the future. The EU is here presented as an accomplice and blamed for this situation (UH/childlikeness). Ten thousand refugees (and even more in the following years) are depicted as an uncontrollable, uniformed mass of people (similarly as in B2, refugees are believed to have large families that will follow them here – which will become unmanageable). Because of this strategy, the out-group is seen as radically uniformed with a lack of personal dimension, individuality.

In article P4, a report on a parliamentary debate about the anti-refugee petition is presented. The opposing arguments (of the supporters of refugees) are stated only at the end of the article. The title – "Thunder in the Deputy Chambers: We do not want immigrants. Islam is a threat", together with first paragraphs support the idea that refugees are just a uniform mass which is *de facto* Islamic, violent, and follows terrorist ideologies. A similar strategy of criminalization of Islam as used in Great Britain during the war on terror period is used here. The media promotes moral panic in relation to the issue of asylum seekers, race, crime, drugs, and even paedophilia and child abuse. Similarly, as in the UK, Muslims are here depicted as members of the out-group of folk evils (Frost, 2008, pp. 564–578).

Article M4 describes the fear of the citizens of Kostelec nad Orlicí, where a facility for asylum seeker is placed. Refugees, according to the press, "hassle them during the night", "play fruit machines", and steal alcohol in supermarkets. It presents them as alcoholics, gamblers, and night owls. This strongly supports the idea of their amorality (UH) driving a parallel with common characteristics of other low-low groups (such as drug addicts or homeless people).

Conclusion

The selected articles have showed that media dehumanize refugees, which is performed mostly in relation to their UH. A horizontal comparison has not

been activated – conversely, some HN characteristics are empowered (agency, emotional responsiveness). All of the UH features defined by Haslam have been detected in the articles: lack of culture, coarseness, amorality, irrationality, childlikeness. It can be thus said that the selected articles animalize refugees (they are displayed as animals) and, in this way, it supports the strategy of dehumanization. The intrinsic value of humanity is decreased in the out-group (from the perspective of members of the in-group). On the other hand, the in-group is perceived as a fully humane community, characterized by civility, refinement, moral sensibility, rationality and maturity. Animalization “[...] reduces the target to subhuman levels, by denying the qualities that define human primacy over other living beings” (Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015, p. 31). This method is well known from the colonial context, too. But, as has been shown in the analysis, it has been enriched with elements of demonization (supernatural powers, monsters) and by characteristics connected primarily with low-low groups (drug addicts, homeless people).

In general, the analyzed media articles present refugees as dehumanized, animal beings which (despite their human nature) do not have the character of human uniqueness. The demonizing element allows an enhancing of the image of the situation and the relationship between the in-group and the out-group as a zero-sum game. This, as showed later in the study, is the main feature of the media representation, a picture based on the irrecoverable conflict relationship between the in-group and the out-group. The only resolution to it is a violent confrontation with the victory of only one of the groups. It is a clash between humanity and sub-humanity, when man needs to cultivate the sub-human (which, due to its demonic character, may not be possible) or to kill it off. From the nature of this relationship, the failure in this task would lead to the end of the in-group.

Limits of the research

It is important to note, that the research is not representative and it is rather a qualitative and interpretative analysis. In this sense, it is not possible to generalize its conclusions. They are the basis for formulating a hypothesis which could be possibly verified by wider content analysis. Similarly, the application of socio-psychological theoretical concepts to media texts has rather an experimental character and, thereafter, should be understood as an effort to explore the possibility of using such concepts to enrich the list of instruments for analysis of media discursivity. A deeper, critical evaluation of this method is not a goal of the study, as it is more focused on an ethical evaluation of the analysed text than on theoretical and methodological goals.

Moral disengagement

The theory of moral disengagement was developed by Albert Bandura (2002) and it is based on a socio-cognitive theory of the moral self (moral

agent). Bandura understands the moral agent as an interactive being. Moral action is determined by the moral agent's perception of the world in the context of mechanisms of self-sanctions. However, it is not entirely an intrapsychic process. In opposition to rationalistic theories, socio-cognitive theory emphasizes the interactionist perspective when moral actions are “[...] the product of reciprocal interplay of cognitive, affective and social influences” (Bandura, 2002, p. 102). Moral disengagement is then defined as a selective disengagement of self-sanctions which is carried out by several different mechanisms: moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequence, and dehumanization (Bandura, 2002, pp. 103–108). For the purpose of this study, attention will be paid primarily to those mechanisms which can be identified in analysed text materials. The goal is to describe the discursive strategy which corresponds with such mental states and processes.

Outside the problem of dehumanization, which has been already introduced in the study, there is an implicit moral justification to be found in the analyzed texts. This is based on depicting refugees as dangerous and therefore dehumanized. Violence against them (from the perspective of in-group members) is morally justifiable because of the in-group's interests (its preservation and protection). Basically, it is the same mechanism which is used in political and religious ideology to justify the killing of their enemies.

Another visible tool of discursive strategy, used in the selected articles, is euphemistic labelling which is rather a more subtle instrument. In the analyzed texts, this refers to the use of technical language while presenting actions towards the refugee and immigration crisis: e.g. “protection of borders”, “border closure” (M3), refugees needs to be “separated from the rest of society” (P3), “willingness to accept refugees” (P4). On the one hand, the decisions of public administration are presented with the help of administrative language. On the other, the actions of refugees are depicted using dramatic and fear-inducing language. Also, the articles do not reflect the consequences of public administration and political decisions on the lives of refugees. For example, closing borders was presented in a neutral way as a fact arising from legal standards. It is fully ignored that this may cause a wide group of refugees in need who are trapped at border crossings.

A very powerful mechanism, which has been tracked during the analysis of media texts, is advantageous comparison. All the articles used a dehumanized image of refugees as a dangerous mass of thugs. This implies a parallel with the demand/desire for immoral behavior towards refugees which (compared to moral actions towards them) would be able to stop immigration to our country. This is also related to a diffusion of responsibility. News sources often discuss the duty of the state, police, and public administration, and about their conflict with some other EU member states. The refugee crisis is presented as a problem for politicians (whose

humanity – a topic of each citizen. In this way, there is a possibility for activity (non-activity) as it is “not their business”. For the consequences of their indifference and passivity they do not feel any responsibility. This leads to a mechanism of disregard or distortion of consequences.

The mechanism of moral disengagement describes processes related to the behavior of individuals. With respect to this, their involvement and participation in the media articles need to be necessarily considered. One of the study's goals is to describe discursive mechanisms in the analyzed media texts, which also follow the equivalent strategies of an individual's moral depictions. The risk lies in the fact that these discursive mechanisms may be internalized by their recipients. Newspaper articles may, in this way, awaken and support activation of such mechanisms in an individual's behavior.

Ethical considerations

From the ethical point of view, the image of refugees in the Czech media creates a risk of strengthening mechanisms of moral disengagement and justification of cruel and aggressive behaviour and actions against humanity. This supports a conflicting understanding of the situation in the sense of a zero-sum game. In the words of Roger Scruton, it is a mechanism of totalitarian ideology where two participants stand in confronting opposition: the in-group and the out-group. Only one of them can hold the status of winner (Scruton, 2010, pp. 80–97). For this purpose, one group must win – the other one has to give up. Similarly to the other mentioned strategies, it can be seen as another proof of discursive strategy which can be historically recognized in regimes committing genocide and mass violence (Nazism, Stalinism, etc.).

From the deontological perspective, media fails to fulfil their main role in society which is to promote of democratic values and the harmonization of conflict (to seek consensus in society) (Parliamentary Assembly, 1993). As was pointed out by Larry Siedentop in his book *Democracy in Europe* (2001), the deliberation of consensus based on shared democratic values is the key aspect to the functionality of the democratic environment in the EU. In a consequential understanding, the analyzed articles may support the rise in totalitarian thinking, the justification of reprehensible actions towards individuals and entire ethnic groups, and an increase in extremism in society.

What are the suggestions? Researchers agree that dismissing lehumanization from media is not enough as it is also necessary to promote umanization of those to whom the media refers. A neutral image itself cannot reduce the moral disengagement towards refugees nor does it help to increase tension and the danger of violence and aggression among people

(Bandura, Underwood & Fromson, 1975). Research shows that if people encounter the suffering of others it may result in the reduction of moral disengagement. The more distant a person is from the personal suffering of others, the more there is a tendency for her/his aggression and disengagement (Bandura, 2002, p. 108).

There is also a demand for obeying the construction of their uniform image. Media needs to bring out personalized, human narrations and to allow their percipient to recognize an individual human's destiny. This has been proven by experiments and research in the field. Some of the experiments show that participants who were exposed a radio soap opera promoting tolerance were able to reflect on the stories of suffering in a more humane way (Paluck, 2009). The outcome of the experiment shows that distributing these types of information among members of the in-group helps them to link with the out-group (Sagu et al., 2015). Intergroup relations between Israeli-Jews and Palestinians improved by being more perceptive to both Palestinians and Israelis in a more humane and personalized way.

Another potential outcome of such media activities may be efforts to mediate contact with refugees who have already become a part of the in-group community. Gaining direct experience with people in ethnically diverse communities improves intergroup relations (Hewstone & Schmid, 2014). Another method, which implies success in reducing intergroup tension and moral disengagement, is support of critical thinking (Bustamante & Chau, 2014). As Bustamante and Chau point out, the role of media in this field may be limited. Therefore, media should rather put more emphasis on teaching and educational goals.

Conclusion

The goal of the study was to highlight the process of dehumanization as a discursive strategy in reflecting on refugees in selected articles published during the summer of 2015. The purpose was to link these strategies with mechanisms of moral disengagement and to show that these media texts contain features of justification of reprehensible and violent actions. The paper critically evaluated the ethical implication of such tendencies and focused attention on deontological aspects of violation of universal moral values (significant for media in European contexts). The analysis also formulates a consequential argument showing the danger of supporting aggression and totalitarian thoughts via media. Later, several suggestions were offered which can reduce these risks and can cultivate public discourse on refugees.

The study was an attempt to apply theoretical concepts of social psychology to media ethics while fully considering the paradigmatic problems which might arise from it. Therefore, it is necessary not to perceive it as a conclusion but rather as an experiment which seeks to

enhance the analytical and theoretical framework of media ethics with new concepts and tools. A broader debate on such evaluation is needed, but that is beyond the aim of this work. The study primarily drew attention to the problem of dehumanization of refugees in Czech media and its ethical reflections. Conclusions of the study should therefore be treated with caution, knowing the impossibility of their generalization.

(translated from Czech by Katarína Komenská)

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Consequentialism, humankind and dignity: From Renaissance moral philosophy to Gluchman's ethics of social consequences

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Abstract

Ethics of social consequences is a contemporary and versatile theory which offers tools to deal with the daily moral challenges from life and science. In this paper I claim that the versatility of Gluchman's theory has an antecedent in the way Renaissance philosophers thought about morals and humankind. Here I analyse two representative examples: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's discourse on human dignity and Machiavelli's State and glory-based principles. Despite the obvious temporal differences, I claim that the common ground for the three thinkers is not only the consequentialist view of morals but also their unified anthropological conception. Dignity is a condition of every human on Earth; however, its rating depends on the deeds we choose to perform.

Keywords: dignity, life, Renaissance, consequentialism, freedom

Introduction

The main goal of this paper is to show the relationship between the conception of moral guidelines in Vasil Gluchman's theory and other earlier consequentialist perspectives from the Renaissance period. In order to do this I have chosen two clear exponents of Italian Renaissance philosophy. On the one hand, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola who represents explicitly human-centred ethics based on the dignity of humankind. On the other hand, more controversially, Niccolò Machiavelli's proto-utilitarian morals grounded on the pursuit of glory by the prince and the result of the common well-fare of the principedom.

Both perspectives, the Renaissance one – Pico and Machiavelli, and the contemporary – Gluchman, share the characteristic of supporting consequentialist moral doctrines. These doctrines are sustained by moral values and guidelines aiming at increasing and respecting human dignity meanwhile they retrieve the complexity of human life *via* a less fixed anthropological conception.

The Slovak philosopher Vasil Gluchman has developed a consequentialist non-utilitarian ethical theory. In his research he considered his ethics of social consequences needed a complement of moral values. For this reason he carried out an in-depth analysis of the concept of dignity (Gluchman, 2006; 2007; 2014). On the basis of this concept he was able to adapt his ethical theory of the contemporary requirements of moral agency, but without losing the inheritance of the Modern Era. It is no accident that he started his paper on dignity by quoting *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources* a book written by one of the most remarkable specialists in Renaissance philosophy: Paul Oskar Kristeller (Gluchman, 2007, p. 159).

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