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**ACTIVE APPROACH TO PUBLIC LIFE
(IN ETHICS OF SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES)**

**AKTYWNE PODEJŚCIE
DO ŻYCIA PUBLICZNEGO
(W ETYCE KONSEKWENCJI SPOŁECZNYCH)**

ABSTRACT

The presented study has two main goals, firstly to introduced public sphere as a moral space which is nowadays in a sort of moral crisis and apathy. Secondly, the study critically introduces three questions which author considers as problematic in the contemporary ethical discourse on public life: who is the subject of public life, who carries the responsibility for the decisions made in public discourse, and how subject appears in it. All these questions will be reflected through the perspective of ethics of social consequences, a non-utilitarian consequential ethical theory developed in Slovak academic environment.

Keywords: public, public discourse, moral agent, responsibility, activity

ABSTRAKT

Studium zaprezentowane poniżej ma dwa główne cele; po pierwsze ukazuje ono sferę publiczną jako obszar etyki, który znajduje się obecne w głębokim kryzysie i apatii. Po wtóre, niniejsze studium krytycznie przedstawia trzy kwestie, które autor traktuje jako problematyczny we współczesnym dyskursie etycznym na temat życia publicznego. Kto ma być jego podmiotem, na kim spoczywa odpowiedzialność za decyzje podejmowane w dyskursie publicznym i jak w nim jawi się podmiot. Wszystkie te kwestie znajdują swoje odbicie poprzez perspektywę etyki konsekwencji społecznych, w teorii etyki nie związanej z filozofią utylitarną. Teoria ta rozwinęła się w środowisku akademickim Słowacji.

Słowa kluczowe: publiczny, dyskurs publiczny, czynnik moralny, odpowiedzialność, działanie

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary societies, public discourse is often wrongly understood as a discourse of representatives of the state, industry, and/or science. Other individual members of the society frequently do not even realize their own role within it. Therefore, they feel indifferent to it and become its listless, passive participants. This might become a problem. There is a vigorous need for a functioning mechanisms for regulating public life not only on the legal, but on the moral level, too. However, the ethical reflexions of the public life and discourse cannot be based merely on institutionalized (moral) norms. It should also arise from the general consent of the society.

To establish such discourse, members of the society need to realize they are also subjects of public life. Subjects with their own free will, moral consciousness, and responsibility; subjects who are capable to participate on the ethical decision making processes of the society as a whole. Following these thoughts, the paper shows the demand for revitalization of the debate on subjects of public life as moral agents. This might effectively lead to activation of their approach to public life and discourse.

PUBLIC LIFE AS MORAL SPACE AND ITS CURRENT CRISIS

Public, in its most general meaning, is defined as something what/who is oppose to private or individual. It also stands for “what is common for all and what all together participates at”¹. Public is understood as an immanent part of the civic society, its processes and decision makings. It is a space where citizens can confront politicians and stimulate new ways on how to reflect on social, cultural, and/or moral problems and issues. Together with other actors of social and political life, public² helps to create a normative framework of the society. Its task is then to reflect on the ethos and moral, social, political, and economic values in public and political discourse, while reconsidering their shared moral goals. Nevertheless, public has a potential to remind other subjects of public (politicians, institutions) about their responsibility for the common good, about not to overstep their competences, and about not to enforce their own interests at the expenses of public welfare.

For this reason, public should be also understood as a moral space where responsibilities of its subjects are shared while following their common goal. For this purpose, discursive strategies are used in public discourse. Despite some of authors believe that discourse in public life is institutional tool for gaining power³ the presented paper will refer to a wider understanding of public discourse.

In my opinion, public discourse should not be directed only from institutions and politicians towards citizens. This orientation may

¹ V. Gluchman, a kol., *Etika verejnej správy*. Prešov FF PU 2010, p. 131.

² Public in the sense of individual members of the society (citizens), in other words, actors of the public life.

³ I. Dubelová, Politický diskurz ako objekt lingvistického výskumu [*Political discourse as an object of linguistic research*]. In: *Jazyk a kultúra [Language and culture]*, 2012, 3(9). Published online [retrieved on 25.01.2016]: <http://www.ff.unipo.sk/jak/cislo9.html>.

become rather problematic, because such political or institutional understanding of discourse focuses itself only, as have been already mentioned, on gaining power and not on other, common goals of the society⁴. One-sided discourse is not able to follow the understanding of public emphasizing its moral aspects and goals. Therefore, all subjects of public must participate at the public discourse. Only this type of public discourse can guarantee confrontation, re-evaluation, confirmation/denial of moral values and the ethos of the society. Public discourse, in this meaning, is capable to create a dialog between moral values and goals of all subjects of public and reach an agreement on societal and global issues. It is also a necessary part of politics. It helps to seek and formulate compromises in cases of conflicts between individual subjects of public⁵.

To summarize, there is an immanent moral importance of both public and of its vivid discourse. First of all, public is a space where, in the process of discourse, common (shared) good can be identified. Secondly, this space is important to confront, re-evaluate, modify, and/or confirm/deny moral values of individuals and of the society as a whole. Thirdly, public is also a space of compromises which, besides its political importance, have its moral function. Nevertheless, as has been already indicated, contemporary societies often are not able to fulfil these moral criteria of public and public discourse (e.g. the above mentioned narrow understanding of public discourse). Some of them will be presented in this study from the perspective of theoretical ethics, namely the ethics of social consequences,⁶ and will be presented on the

⁴ Ibidem, p. 120.

⁵ V. Gluchman. a kol., *Etika verejnej správy*, Prešov FF PU 2010, p. 131–137.

⁶ The ethical theory which is presented as a non-utilitarian consequentialism. It is an original ethical theory developed by Slovak authors such as V. Gluchman, *Etika a reflexie morálky [Ethics and reflections of morality]*, Prešov FF PU, 2008, p. 122; tenže, V. Gluchman, *Človek a morálka [Man and Morality]*. Prešov LIM, 2005,

background of three conceptual questions: who is the subject of public life, who carries the responsibility for the decisions made in public discourse, and how subject appears in it.

ETHICS OF SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES AND PUBLIC LIFE

The first question is *who is the subject of public life?* If public discourse is seen as a moral space in which members of the society meet with other subjects and actors (politicians, institutions) to confront their values (while focusing on shared common goals), there is a need to clearly identify who has a right to take part in public life and to be its agent. Who is allowed to act on the behalf of public? Who should be the public voice and its value-carrier? From the perspective of ethical theories, I consider the use of the term moral agent to be relevant in such discussions. The importance of understanding subjects of public life as moral agents arises from the understanding the public as a moral space. Within this community, its subjects play a specific and, even more importantly, moral role. Therefore, subjects of public life should fulfil the criteria of moral agency. In ethics of social consequences, these are characterized as the

p. 131, J. Kalajtzidis, *Etika sociálnych dôsledkov a hospodárska etika (so zameraním na finančný sektor [Ethics of Social Consequences and Business Ethics (with Focus on Financial Sector)]*, Brno Tribun EU, 2012; L Švaňa, *“Etika” vojny a terorizmu [“Ethics” on war and terorism]*. Bratislava Veda, 2016; A. Lešková Blahová, *Bioetika v kontextoch etiky sociálnych dôsledkov (aplikácia zvolenej paradigmy na vybrané bioetické problémy) [Bioethics in the Context of Ethics of Social Consequences (Applications of Chosen Paradigm on Selected Bioethical Issues)]*, Prešov FF PU, 2010, J. Klembarová, *Etické a morálne aspekty mentálneho postihnutia [Ethical and Moral Aspects of Mental Impairment]*, Prešov FF PU, 2015.

Most recent publication which introduced the methodological approach of ethics of social consequences is offered by a collective monograph edited by V. Gluchman (ed.), *Ethics of Social Consequences: Philosophical, Applied and Professional Challenges*, Newcastle Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.

ability to recognize and understand the existing state of morality (criteria of moral consciousness), are able to act freely/willingly (criteria of freedom), and they are able to accept their responsibility for their actions (criteria of responsibility)⁷. In this sense, I agree with other authors of ethics of social consequences, who claim that being a moral agent is rather an intellectual and cognitive characteristic than an axiological or biological category⁸. This position allows us to understand the subject of public life and discourse. First of all, the moral agent is not limited to be an individual subject of public life: it is not necessarily only a leader of the community, politician, scientist, or any other community “role model”. The idea of public discourse has long ago overstepped its elitism, in which state and social matters are decisions of the chosen ones. The same criteria of moral agency can be (and necessarily are) ascribed to collective moral agents⁹. In defining who is the subject of public life, this will allow us to include for example political parties, state institutions, or other communities. This will allow us to demand their responsibility in regards their involvement in public life.

The second problem connected to the current crisis of public life follows on the previous thoughts. It can be formulated as a question *who carries the responsibility for the decisions made in public discourse?* If the responsibility in public life is delimited only through institutional norms (or in other words by laws and other regulations), it will be pretty

⁷ J. Kalajtšidis, *Etika sociálnych dôsledkov a hospodárska etika (so zameraním na finančný sektor [Ethics of Social Consequences and Business Ethics (with Focus on Financial Sector)]*, Brno Tribun EU, 2012, p. 20.

⁸ V. Gluchman, *Etika sociálnych dôsledkov v kontextoch jej kritiky [Ethics of social consequences in the contexts of its criticism]*, Prešov LIM, 1999, p. 39, zob. takže: J. Klembarová, J., *Etické a morálne aspekty mentálneho postihnutia [Ethical and Moral Aspects of Mental Impairment]*, Prešov FF PU, 2015.

⁹ J. Kalajtšidis, *Etika sociálnych dôsledkov a hospodárska etika (so zameraním na finančný sektor [Ethics of Social Consequences and Business Ethics (with Focus on Financial Sector)]*, Brno Tribun EU, 2012, p. 22–24.

problematic to react on contemporary moral issues and problems in the community, which open up vividly and rapidly. Therefore, debates on responsibility in public discourse should also involve a bottom-up approach on being responsible; an approach, which will link each individual member of the society (as moral agents) to their responsibility for the moral good of the whole community, whole public. In an essay on ethics in science, Viera Bilasová calls such moral perspective of responsibility as *collective responsibility*¹⁰. She claims that responsibility in science cannot refer only to institutional norms (in the case of science in the form of professional codes of conduct) or on scientists' character and consciousness. The phenomenon of collective responsibility needs to be included, too, with one of its aspects being a general consent.

The general consent is a moral minimum of each member of the community actively involved in the public discourse¹¹. Thereafter, the level of the responsibility in the community increases with the increase of the moral minimum of its active members. To empower such public discourse and the responsibility of its members, it is important to raise the awareness and the knowledge of other members of the community on the given societal or moral issues, to develop their moral and ethical skills (to detect ethical dilemmas, to analyze them, make decisions, and built arguments).

Ethics of social consequences offers a complex and multi-layered explanation of responsibility, too. It is not only understood as a moral value but, more importantly, it is a criterion ascribed to moral agent (either individual or collective). In such sense, ethics of social consequences recognizes three aspects of responsibility: *disponibilita*, *duty*, and *guaranty*. *Disponibilita* is the ability of a moral agent to accept his/her responsibility (as a criterion for ascribing moral agency to

¹⁰ V. Bilasová, On the Role of Moral Theory in (Bio)Ethics Education. In: *Ethics & Bioethics (in Central Europe)*, 2(1-2) 2012, pp. 9-15.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 9-15.

someone). *Duty* is a normative aspect which established moral agent's duty towards her/his moral objects of moral action. *Guaranty* depicts the consequential perspective of responsibility (retrospective), to be responsible for the consequences of moral agent's actions¹².

In my opinion, responsibility of public needs to develop all of these aspects. Regarding the first aspect of responsibility, the public can be only as responsible as responsible (and if?) are its members, how involved they are, and how they consider their role within their community. The second aspect of responsibility, the duty of being responsible for the moral good of the community, emphasizes the acceptance of public moral goals in moral agents' own value orientation. And thirdly, the consequential aspect of responsibility in public life links the general public and all its members to consequences (present or future) of actions and decisions made by the community. Such consequential responsibility might be, in this sense, an important ethical tool in regards to the moral obligations based on the non-reciprocal relationships in the community (disasters, humanitarian crisis outside of the given community, etc.).¹³

The final, conceptual question to be critically introduced in this study is the question of *how the subject of public appears in it?* The problem of participation on public life is something that Silverstone in his complex analysis of contemporary *mediapolis* calls "appearance" (Silverstone, 2007). He describes appearance of modern community as

¹² J. Kalajtzidis, *Etika sociálnych dôsledkov a hospodárska etika (so zameraním na finančný sektor [Ethics of Social Consequences and Business Ethics (with Focus on Financial Sector)]*, Brno Tribun EU, 2012, p. 22–26.

¹³ More on the responsibility in such situations in the study *Moral community, its relationships and responsibility as a methodological basis for disaster ethics*. In: K. Komenská, K., *Moral community, its relationships and responsibility as a methodological basis for disaster ethics*. In: Gluchman, V. (ed.): *Etické myslenie minulosti a súčasnosti (ETPP 2016/16): Etika súčasnosti – 16. medzinárodná konferencia. Ethical thinking – past & present (ETPP 2016/16): Contemporary Ethics – 16th international conference*, Prešov FF PU, 2015, p. 135-144.

a mere passivity and apathy towards the polis, towards its moral goals. Polis (used as an Aristotelian concept) requires „the active participation of human beings as thinkers, listeners, speakers and actors. Appearance has to be created [...] a practice in which producers, subjects and audiences, take part, and take part together“ (Silverstone, 2007, p. 38).

To find an answer for this question in ethics of social consequences, it needs to be reminded that this ethical theory defines good as something that fulfils man's life with safety, confidence, and contentment. This is necessarily condition connected with the activity of moral agents, because only through concrete actions the *goodness* can acquire its real form and its content. The *goodness* and actions leading to it, should therefore be understood as a moral goal of moral agents' life.

This might be a good starting point for a discussion on the active approach towards public life. Despite ethics of social consequences, complex anthropological concept of moral agency has yet to be developed, its authors proclaim in this matter their inspiration by the philosophical and ethical works of authors such as Baruch Spinoza and Erich Fromm. Recently, this has got into a research focus of Michaela Petrufová Joppová (2018) or Ján Kalajtzidis & Katarína Komenská (2013).

CONCLUSION

The study has showed the possibility to understand subject of public life as a moral agent, who is able to accept his/her responsibility for the moral good of public. Also, the study has expressed that there is also a need to formulate how the moral agent realizes his/her role and obligation to participate in activities leading to the common good. During search for answers to the three stated questions: who is the subject of public life, who carries the responsibility for the decisions made in public discourse, and how subject appears in it, I directly applied one of

the contemporary ethical theories with a potential to enrich this debate on ethics of social consequences.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the good of public is inevitably connected with the activity of moral agents (as subjects of public life). Public sphere can only through such activity become a moral sphere (in the sense of how I have described it earlier in the article), in which normative goals and values can acquire their real form and content.

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