

# Regarding the Pain of the Others. Do We Need Teleethics?

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I borrow part of the title of my paper from Susan Sontag. In 2003, a year before her death, Susan Sontag published an essay entitled *Regarding the Pain of Others*. There she takes up the subject of the moral significance of presenting the views of war, violent human death exposed to the lenses of cameras. Her approach to the contemporary issue of mediatisation through the image of the sight of human suffering provokes a question: Do we need teleethics today, the ethics of remote moral relations? Using the method of comparative analysis in the area of cultural determinants of ethics, I draw attention to the contemporary challenges that the culture of late modernity imposes on the morality of everyday life. My thesis is this: The images of human suffering provided by the media reveal the imperfection of our morality. As moral subjects, we are not prepared to respond to the suffering of human beings absent from face-to-face relationships. So, we need teleethics. The paper is devoted to this issue.

**Keywords:** teleethics, Susan Sontag, Witold Gombrowicz, mediation, image, experience, suffering

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## INTRODUCTION

The Cartesian moment in the history of philosophy was a significant event not only because of the elevation of subjectivity to the rank of the foundation of knowledge but also because of the separation of two orders of values – cognitive and moral. After several centuries of philosophical obviousness of this gesture, its resolution returns in contemporary culture as a problem. This problem results from such a location in the culture of cognitive and communicative activity that they have not only cognitive but also moral consequences. Remoteness and symbolic mediation as ways by which we are given the suffering of others in images are everyday situations of modern man. Nevertheless, ‘to see’ and ‘to know’ in the modern world often mean taking responsibility for one’s own and others’ actions, or one’s own and others’ omissions. Hence the question: Does the condition of modern man require a modification of our ethics, since our cognitive situation has completely changed? Do we need teleethics, ethics of remote moral relations?

## GOMBROWICZ'S ENTOMOLOGY

Here is the moral problem: how to behave when we are confronted with so many whose presence in front of us suddenly happens, thus destroying the beaten paths of everyday life? How can we take into account in our own moral actions the fact that, even when these others are inaccessible vis-à-vis, they intervene with their actions in the order of human affairs which we are trying to establish? How can this insistent and often silent absence be given meaning to an interaction, an exchange that will make it more human?

I find a prefiguration of this problem in W. Gombrowicz's *Diary*. There, the author tells a seemingly banal story: Lazy on a sunny day, relaxing on the beach, he sees a beetle helplessly lying upside down trying to regain its normal position. Further, the situation develops towards an unsolvable moral problem. It turns out that subsequent beetles with the helplessness of their lying on their backs demand rescue. There are – just raise your head slightly – there are countless of them. Bravely saving more insects, Gombrowicz finally comes to a dilemma: to finish this rescue or to continue it. This is – as Gombrowicz noticed – where 'humanity vomits' ... But finally, like many, he thinks: 'Well, time to go back', and left (Gombrowicz 2012: 322–323).

But let us note that there is also the other side, another actor of this relationship at a distance – these are collective entities, corporations and states, for which we exist only in large masses, transformed into large numbers, *big data*, easily manipulated and providing knowledge about ourselves, which we, as individuals, would never be able to extract from our own experience.

Thus doubled by epistemic and moral uncertainty, the definite situation of 'intrusion of distant events into the sphere of everyday consciousness' (Giddens 1991: 27) creates a completely new metric of the space of human interactions.

As a result, we move into the space of existential and epistemic deficits caused by the process of breaking down the ability of thought and action to meet the requirements imposed by this situation. By this term I mean a space of experience in which two processes embracing Western culture take place.

The first is the process of defamiliarisation of the world, that is, the process of radical narrowing of the territory of what is given in the living environment as unproblematic, which guarantees what A. Giddens called 'ontological security' (Giddens 1991: 35–69). It is therefore a situation in which the obviousness of our being in the world, the ontological background of our activities, begins to lose its basic character and transforms into an often dangerous figure, but invisible in its entirety from the perspectives that we can cast in our own situation. Narrowing this non-problematic field of being in the world significantly limits people's ability to interpret everything that happens to us. *Lebenswelt*, a term that in Husserl (Husserl 1970: 103–191), a philosophical radical of twentieth-century intellectual culture, was to play a key role in source analyses of the subjectivity of the foundations of the modern world, eventually shrinks in its meanings also in the field of philosophy. The philosophy of the second half of the 20th century reacts to this state of affairs by becoming either the art of suspicions, which expresses distrust of all foundations or, as is the case, for example, in ethnomethodology radically narrows this area to what is nearby. Literature similarly reciprocates the experience of the 20th century with the works of Franz Kafka and Bruno Schulz.

The second process at issue here is a concurrent process with the first. I. Calvino, an Italian writer who is exceptionally sensitive to modernity, defines his eminent feature as lightness (Calvino 1988: 3–30). This term is applied to cultural phenomena and describes their

increased ability to move relative to each other and thus acquire unexpected and at the same time ad hoc meanings. Clifford Geertz treats this phenomenon in the intellectual culture of the late 20th century as the emergence of 'blurred species,' i.e. statements that combine forms that previously belonged to different genres. Philosophy meets reportage, parable takes the form of an ethnographic research report, etc.

Similarly, M. Kundera applies the same term to the lack of determination of the trajectory of human destinies (Kundera 1999).

From both of these insights into 20th-century culture, I draw a certain complication in which thinking and acting today are entangled. What was once merely a literary fiction of 'man without qualities' (Musil 1996) in the face of the loss of ontological security becomes the reality of contemporary subjectivity. The loss of ontological security results in the impossibility of calculating one's own life moves based on the future, for which one can take responsibility, and on the account of the past, towards which one can make the right decisions in intention. In this way, the freedom in designing oneself, giving lightness to existence, becomes a reasonable strategy of being in the world. Transgressions of subjectivity, which until recently were critical events in the lives of individuals, are transforming into domains of stylisation of ways of being. They are haunted by triviality. In this way, culture provides light, mobile means to the calculations of life, which can always be loosened without great losses by means of other, equally easily interchangeable, and compatible with the whole resource. They introduce the fiction of the continuity of self-narration into the interior of subjectivity. In fact, a man without qualities is indefinitely open to shaping his own being, but in the tightening or even in the prison of what is actual.

There is something in our culture that allows us not to notice the problem of Gombrowicz. This is a far-reaching obviousness of the remoteness of relations with the world in which modern man enters. This obviousness is imposed by the cultural status of images – their ubiquity and their ability to implement fiction in the everyday life of each of us.

## **ON THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF IMAGE AND IMAGERY**

The concept of the image functioning in the intersecting areas of art history, theology, epistemology, aesthetics, and other traditionally defined disciplines has exploded in its meanings under the influence of the processes that we witness and participate in. These processes, as we know, are mainly the result of the media revolution multiplying the scale of image impact in a way previously unknown. Electronically produced images, because their production and dissemination facilitate the influence on people's minds, direct the attention of observers of this process towards its moral aspects. It is no longer a question of what and how images represent, but of how they act on those who participate in their production, dissemination and viewing. In this regard, comments come to the fore in which the moral meaning of images that depict human suffering is discussed. Especially those that are controversial, which depict acts of suffering caused by people, not as a result of natural phenomena. Published in 2003, Susan Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others* is an expression of moral and intellectual vigilance in the face of the above-mentioned processes. For me, it is an inspiration for dialogue with her and a reason for submitting my comments.

My point of view on these issues motivates the title question of the paper: Do we need teleethics? What is teleethics? It is ethics that defines the desired reference to others in relationships that are remote. By this I mean not so much remoteness resulting from spatial relations but resulting from the mediation of the relationship. The mediation of interpersonal

relations, also in the sphere of morality, is the result of the social process of separating time and space described by A. Giddens. The unity and coherence of time and space no longer impose on us, the people of the era of high modernity, the necessity of cooperation in direct relations. Therefore, an image produced mechanically or electronically and disseminated through various communication channels, I understand, is an important participant in the indicated process of giving remoteness to relations between people. The image can be a mediator or inhibitor of moral relations.

This statement is at odds with both the idea of the immediacy of moral experience (face to face) and the idea of the a-moral meaning of the image. Modern culture has already accepted itself in the mediation of cognition at the very beginning of its inception. Kepler, Galileo and Descartes showed the epistemological way of accepting mediation in scientific cognition. What is physically or culturally distant arouses the cognitive interest of modern man, remoteness in moral relations often causes fear, reluctance, or simply indifference. Modern morality is still in the wilderness of mediation. Sontag describes the reaction, 'A citizen of Sarajevo, a woman of impeccable adherence to the Yugoslav ideal, whom I met soon after arriving in the city the first time in April 1993, told me: "In October 1991 I was here in my nice apartment in peaceful Sarajevo when the Serbs invaded Croatia, and I remember when the evening news showed footage of the destruction of Vukovar, just a couple of hundred miles away, I thought to myself, 'Oh, how horrible,' and switched the channel. So how can I be indignant if someone in France or Italy or Germany sees the killing taking place here day after day on their evening news and says, 'Oh, how horrible,' and looks for another program. It's normal. It's human." Wherever people feel safe—this was her bitter, self-accusing point—they will be indifferent' (Sontag 2004: 78).

This is normal, says a resident of Sarajevo. Today we accept both her opinion and its negation. This is normal because it is normalised by how we experience ourselves in the face of the horror of seeing human suffering when we know that it is real. It is not normal, because we expect gestures of solidarity with those who suffer. But in order to overcome the moral barrier of mediation, it may be necessary to deal with all modernity – its concepts of subject, world, and what is normal.

The difficulty with shifting attention that takes place in contemporary intellectual culture, the shift consisting in focusing on the moral meaning of image and imagery without the cognitive effects of its impact is the result of processes that arose in modern culture.

First of all, this difficulty is the effect of separating the order of moral values from the order of cognitive values. The ambivalence of assessments of the moral significance of the sights of human suffering is to a large extent a consequence of this modern cultural gesture. On the one hand, we have attitudes of approval for the display of such images motivated by the desire to evoke sympathy, moral shock or guilt in those who watch, and on the other hand, frugality is practiced in showing the view of someone else's suffering. As a result, we have image selection, anonymisation of victims, discreet facial shading, etc. treatments.

### **ON THE ETHICAL AND ONTIC MEANING OF THE CONCEPT OF EXPERIENCE**

The view of someone else's suffering is a situation that limits the moral sense of the human relations in three aspects.

Firstly, it is the impossibility of fulfilling the bonds of solidarity in acts of communication. This view is silent. Not because of the lack of a form of expression, or the lack of expressiveness. On the contrary. Suffering manifests itself very clearly in the human body. It is about

something else. Violence inflicted on the body or soul of man objectifies – as Simone Weil aptly states quoted by Sontag. Objectification, reduction to object, is the goal of violence, but suffering enclosed in the image does not cease to be objectification for the viewer. In a way, the viewer's gaze participates in this objectification. This is evidenced by the other side of this objectification or desubjectivisation, which is investigated by the question asked by Sontag: Whose deaths are not shown?

Secondly, it is the phenomenological aspect of the asymmetry in the way of giving one's own suffering and the suffering of others. One's own suffering is not seen as an image. Only the suffering of others is available through the image. The gap between the experience of one's suffering and the image of another person's suffering given in the image is filled by emptiness. The image-mediator becomes an obstacle.

Thirdly, the sight of someone else's suffering breaks communities, makes them doubtful, and disturbs the previously given 'we-they' relationship. Sontag comments on this aspect of the problem briefly: 'No "we" should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain' (Sontag 2004: 8).

This has negative consequences for the possibilities of teleethics, the ethics of remote relations, because it defines the character of the moral subject as a cogito: as a punctual self, an isolated being.

Firstly, it preserves the irreducible duality of the subject-object relationship. Secondly, it perpetuates the self-reflective model of subjectivity. Thirdly, it undermines the moral identity of the community.

Everything happens almost the same as in Sartre's descriptions of the loneliness of the cogito. 'Hell is – other people' (Sartre 1976: 45). The difference is that what was once philosophism, a philosophical concept, is now part of contemporary visual practices. The paradox of the subject of seeing someone else's suffering is that these practices reproduce in us the subject as a cogito devoid of moral sense.

But if philosophy were to deal with this paradox, it would only be to transcend the epistemocentric point of view that is imposed both in these practices and even in Susan Sontag's commentaries on them.

I think that a good starting point for teleethics can be found in the Hegel's formula of experience, which shifts the focus from the epistemocentric to the ontic point of view. Here is what Hegel says about an experience: 'The principle of experience contains the infinitely important determination that, for a content to be accepted and held to be true, man must himself be actively involved with it, more precisely, that the must find any such content to be at one and in unity with the certainty of his own self. He must himself be involved with it, whether only with his external senses or with his deeper spirit, with his essential consciousness of self as well. This is the same principle that is today called faith, immediate knowing, revelation in the outer [world], and above all in one's own inner [world]' (Hegel 2010: 35).

Hegel wants to convince us that experience is a bond with the world in which both the sense of the reality of what it makes available and the sense of the reality of one's own existence are perpetuated. To experience is to be there and at the same time. Thus, we see that the 'cogitating' reduction of experience to what is the content of the image in it has its consequences – its ontic and ethical components disappear. To be a moral subject, one must recognise oneself as real and recognise the reality of the world in which real people exist. And yet we have to confront the fact that fiction is a part of the world in which images actually affect people.

## CONCLUSIONS

So we can think that our morality is good and that our practices of using images are wrong. It is therefore possible to reinforce the conviction that these practices must be placed under the burden of a moral obligation to examine them honestly. But the image will always remain only itself. Its requirement is distance and disengagement. But it can also be considered that our morality is wrong because it is marked by the primitivism of direct relations. The question ‘Do we need teleethics?’ refers to the ways in which we lend space in our world to fiction, but also to the need to control the consequences that the presence of fiction brings to our world.

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## Apie kitų skausmą – ar mums reikia teleetikos?

### *Santrauka*

Dalis straipsnio pavadinimo – iš Susan Sontag esė „Apie kitų skausmą“, kuri buvo paskelbta 2003 m., likus metams iki filosofės mirties. Joje ji imasi temos apie moralinę svarbą, pateikdama požiūrį į karą, smurtinę žmogaus mirtį, apšviestą fotoaparatu objektyvais. Jos požiūris į šiuolaikinę medijavimo problemą per žmogaus kančios vaizdą kelia klausimą – ar mums šiandien reikalinga teleetika, nutolusių moralinių santykių etika? Taikant lyginamosios analizės metodą kultūrinių etikos determinantų srityje, atkreipiu dėmesį į šiuolaikinius iššūkius, kuriuos vėlyvojo modernizmo kultūra kelia kasdienio gyvenimo moralei. Mano tezė tokia: žiniasklaidos pateikiami žmogaus kančios vaizdai atskleidžia mūsų moralės netobulumą. Būdami moralės subjektai, nesame pasirengę reaguoti į žmonių kančias, kurios nėra tiesioginiai santykiai. Taigi mums reikia teleetikos. Straipsnis būtent ir skirtas šiam klausimui.

**Raktažodžiai:** teleetika, Susan Sontag, Witold Gombrowicz, mediacija, įvaizdis, patirtis, kančia