The End of Ethics? Interface between Ethics and Postmodernism

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Abstract: The word 'postmodern' came into popular currency with Lyotard's famous book, *The Postmodern Condition.* The term was probably first employed by Toynbee to designate the period following modernism. However, postmodernism cannot be restricted to a historical epoch; rather it should be understood as an attitude, and as such it can be shown to have existed even before modernism. Postmodernism defies all attempts at a precise definition. It is both "fashionable and elusive". It is an emerging consciousness adopting a reactionary attitude to modernism and all its dogmatic claims. Some of these dogmatic claims are the centrality of the human person, the supremacy of reason, the objectivity and certainty of knowledge and the existence of universally valid truths. Today postmodernism exerts a lot of influence on all areas of knowledge. In this paper I shall deal with its impact on ethics.

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The End of Ethics?
Interface between Ethics and Postmodernism

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The word 'postmodern' came into popular currency with Lyotard's famous book, *The Postmodern Condition*. The term was probably first employed by Toynbee to designate the period following modernism. However, postmodernism cannot be restricted to a historical epoch; rather it should be understood as an attitude, and as such it can be shown to have existed even before modernism. Postmodernism defies all attempts at a precise definition. It is both "fashionable and elusive" (Sarup 1993: 129). It is an emerging consciousness adopting a reactionary attitude to modernism and all its dogmatic claims. Some of these dogmatic claims are the centrality of the human person, the supremacy of reason, the objectivity and certainty of knowledge and the existence of universally valid truths. Today postmodernism exerts a lot of influence on all areas of knowledge. In this paper I shall deal with its impact on ethics.

Ethics or Moral Philosophy has been a matter of great concern from the dawn of human civilization. The history of western thought bears testimony to the systematic treatment of ethics already in the pre-Socratic period. All schools of moral philosophy have taught a well-defined set of moral values. But there is hardly any agreement among these schools concerning the final end of moral life. Put it in brief: there is an ultimate goal to be achieved by adhering to moral values and precepts, but what that ultimate goal is is a matter of controversy. However, all moral philosophers agree that ethics is built on certain foundations. The challenges posed by postmodernism to ethics is quite serious. By calling into question anything that is foundational, the continued existence of ethics becomes almost impossible. Hence, our need to respond to the question arising out of this: Is ethics viable in a postmodern age?

This paper is divided into three unequal parts: The first part focuses on the metaphysical foundation of ethics and the crisis of ethics emerging from the end of western metaphysical tradition. The second part, which is the central part of the paper attempts to radically re-vision ethics with the help of some postmodern thinkers; and the fi-

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nal part seeks to respond to some of the challenges posed to such a re-visioning of ethics.

1. The Ethics of Modernism

Ethics, as traditionally understood, has developed down the ages. The growth of ethics as a philosophical discipline cannot be understood without its dependence on metaphysics. Ethics thrived on such a metaphysical tradition, grounding morality on the metaphysical principles of universality and ultimacy. Universality became the hallmark of modern philosophy that served as a fertile soil for the growth of ethics. Kant is the chief proponent of universality in the field of morals. He recommends universalizable moral principles, that is, principles that can be accepted by all irrespective of social identities, and discards all non-universalizable principles. Kantian universalism, therefore, seeks to anchor ethical justification in a more formal fundamental universal principle, which he calls the 'supreme principle of morality' or the 'categorical imperative.' His formulation of the categorical imperative runs thus: "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

1.1 The Crisis of Ethics

Ethics has been founded on the metaphysical principle of universality and the epistemological principles of truth and certitude. Such metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions are crucial to ethics. It is precisely such categories as universality, truth and certitude that postmodernism suspects. The crisis of ethics is the crisis of its meta-physical and epistemological presuppositions. The seeds of this postmodern tendency already prefigured in the masters of suspicion, Freud, Marx and Nietzsche. Nietzsche himself applies the hermeneutic of suspicion in the field of morals at least to some extent.

1.2 'The Death of God'

According to Nietzsche, God is the symbol of all that the West stands for. By announcing the death of God, Nietzsche denounces the western metaphysical tradition. Nietzsche speaks of three stages in the history of western philosophy – decadence, nihilism and the vision of tragic life. He characterizes the three periods allegorically – camel, lion and child. Morality belongs to the period of decadence, which he depicts by using the analogy of camel. The human person is enslaved by morality and carries the burden silently. Nihilism is a period of reaction, refusing like a lion to be a camel, a defiant no. The defiant no to the enslaving burden of morals is also an affirmative yes to life – the tragic vision of life portrayed by the analogy of a child – the symbol of spontaneity and freedom. Nietzsche characterizes the human person as a tightrope walker. The human person cannot be stagnant; he/she must always be on the move. Thus, his superman is not just a dethroning of God and enthroning of the human person but a constant invitation to transcend limitations. By calling into question the metaphysical tradition that has become stagnant and static, and by critiquing the enslaving morality arising from the staticity of metaphysics, Nietzsche calls for a transvaluation of values. Nietzsche's

philosophy is a call to transition – from being a suffocating beast to becoming a child, from the ultimate man, the man of decadent modernity, to the superman (Puthenpurackal 2000: 106).

1.3 The Forgottenness of Being

The decisive and more explicit critique of western metaphysics came from Martin Heidegger. The philosophy of Heidegger has been a breakthrough in the tradition of western philosophy. His vital concern is to retrieve the forgotten question about the meaning of Being. Being (Sein) in the western metaphysics came to be identified with beings (Seiendes), that is, from the perspective of thinghood. Thus Western philosophy, according to him, deviated from the fundamental ontology, which was really a concern of the early Greek philosophers. In his book, *Identity and Difference*, Heidegger shows how metaphysics has been onto-theo-logical. Metaphysical tradition began with Plato and Aristotle, reached its apex in German idealism and began to decline rapidly with Friedrich Nietzsche. Heidegger regards the advent of such a philosophy as the end of real philosophy. The preoccupation of metaphysics was to consider every entity either in abstract universal traits or in the ultimate grounding. In so far as every entity shares the commonality in the abstract universal trait of 'beingness,' it is ontology, and in so far as every entity is considered to be grounded in the ultimate being, God, it is theology. Hence, metaphysics has been onto-theo-logic. The forgottenness of Being challenges Heidegger to restate the question of Being. Restating the question of Being is to shatter the metaphysical tra-

dition that has been onto-theo-logic. Hence the crisis of traditional ethics which was built on the onto-theo-logical metaphysical tradition.

2. Re-visioning of Ethics

Now that the metaphysical foundation on which ethics was built has collapsed, do we witness an amoral situation in the age of postmodernism? Are we left without ethics? Can we look for an ethics emerging from the debris of the collapse? After all, postmodernism is described as "a desire, a mood which looks to the future to redeem the present" (Docherty 1993: 2). We shall discuss now the contribution to ethics made by Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida.

2.1 'Original Ethics' of Heidegger

Heidegger is considered to be one of those philosophers who initiated the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Hence, it seems paradoxical to speak of an ethics of Heidegger for two reasons. Firstly, he is responsible for the collapse of ethical systems in as much as he has rejected the western metaphysical tradition. Secondly, Levinas has made a series of accusations against Heidegger for ignoring ethics due to his preoccupation with ontology. It is true that Heidegger's concern was to inquire into the meaning of Being, not to develop a system of philosophy, much less a moral philosophy. Yet, Levinas' Semitic prejudice might have played a role in his criticism against Heidegger. Luk Bouckaert holds that Levinas adopts an attitude of a per-

secuted Jew in World War II towards the German Heidegger (1970: 402).

Heidegger no longer views ethics and ontology as two philosophical disciplines. He argues from the etymological meaning of ethics as deriving from the Greek *ethos* meaning abode, that it ponders over the abode of human person. Thus, ethics and ontology are brought together in a radically new way in so far as ontology is concerned with the truth of Being, and ethics, with the dwelling of the human person in the truth of Being (Bernasconi 1987: 122). "Heidegger interprets *ethos* as abode, or dwelling place (*Ethos bedeutet Aufenthalt, Ort des Wohnens*); and thus the foundational meaning of ethics is thought of in terms of the abode of man - that is, the familiar and everyday place where the human being dwells and comes to stand out, to ek-sist, in the unfamiliar truth of Being (*die Wahrheit des Seins*) (Critchley 1992: 15). In fact, when requested by Beufret to write on ethics, Heidegger wrote his *Letters on Humanism*. "To demand an ethics which will provide rules and directives no doubt misunderstands what it means to live in a fitting manner... It is by refusing the demand for an ethics that Heidegger ensures that he does not deny the person who demanded it. To follow rules is to uproot oneself from dwelling. To provide ethical directives is to condemn to the everyday the person who adopts them" (Bernasconi 1987: 134). The Being-question for Heidegger is so basic that an all-tragic form of life stems from its forgottenness. Therefore, it needs reformulation. Only the retrieval of the meaning of Being, according to Heidegger, will pave the way for an original ethics. "Original ethics is a mode of *Seinsdenken*," (Caputo 1971: 133), that is thinking committed to Being. Heidegger in no way has closed the possibility of ethics as an ontic science that deals with prohibitions and injunctions, but "beyond the problem of how men ought to conduct themselves in their mutual dealings with one another is the very manifestation of the human community and the human world" (Caputo 1971: 133). A hermeneutical reading of Heidegger offers a tremendous possibility to develop what might be called original ethics, which in my opinion is truly postmodern.

2.2 Stylization of the 'madman'

Foucault was a French philosopher of history. His major works are *Madness and Civilization*, *The Order of Things*, *Discipline and Punish*, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The History of Sexuality*. It is necessary to explore the concepts of power, knowledge and truth to get into the heart of Foucault's philosophy. Truth, for Foucault, is not a universal *a priori*, but a social product. "It [Truth] presents itself, rather as the product of discursive practices – or, more precisely, of the component of discursive practices which we may call practices of *veridiction*" (Pasquino 1993: 41). Truth is the monopoly of the powerful. He reverses the old adage 'Knowledge is Power' as 'Power is Knowledge'. There is no truth outside the network of power-relations (Rouse 1994: 99). Power, for Foucault, is not mere domination or intervention but is inclusive of what he calls 'normalization' through 'governmentality'. Normalization is a

mechanism of a socialization process often employed in liberal democracies whereby every individual is made to conform to what the State projects as a value (Gane and Johnson 1993: 9). Normalization aims at the obedience of the citizen that guarantees the legitimacy of power in the modern state. Those who are labeled mad and criminals are in fact those who offer a strong resistance to normalization. Governmentality stands for the techniques and methods used in normalization. It is a new tool of domination that includes "the construction of new deviancy control systems, the institutional expression of which were the 'austere' and 'rational' bureaucratic organizations created for the classification and segregation of the poor, the criminal, the mad, the sick, the young, etc" (Johnson, 1993: 143).

Thus, the modern political arena is characterized by privileging the dominant perspective. The dominant perspective occupies the privileged centre by violently pushing other perspectives to the periphery. What really exist in knowledge are only perspectives. This explains why Foucault conceives of ethics as 'self-government'. Ethics is the "process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form part of the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve and transform himself" (Bernauer and Mahon 1994: 143-144). In spelling out his ethics, Foucault is at pains to distance himself from a moral code of conduct lest he may fall under the spell of

authority – the dominant perspective. In so doing he presents the history of ethics "as a reconstruction of the forms of self-reflection of behaviour which are at the origin of the modes of conduct of life, considered here in the perspective of 'self-government' rather than as 'disciplines'" (Pasquino 1993: 41).

Foucault thus radically re-visions ethics as stylization – a way of being that is made possible through the revolt of "a madman" who "can no longer accept confinement and the forfeiture of his rights"; a people who "refuses the regime which oppresses it" (Bernauer and Mahon 1994: 153). It is a pursuit of freedom transgressing the limits set by the powerful, a movement from the periphery to the centre. This does not mean that Foucault subscribes to an aggressive self-aggrandizement to escape self-annihilation. Rudi Visker argues that Foucault views his own philosophical task as a 'double-bind' – attack on individualization and totalization (1995: 99-105). In an interview that appeared in an edited work by Bernauer and Rasmussen entitled *The Final Foucault*, Foucault has said: "care for the self is ethical in itself, but it implies complex relations with others, in the measure that this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others" (Norris 1994: 161). In his own lifetime he was himself committed to the emancipation of the deprived sections of society both in his philosophy and praxis. Foucault, therefore, subscribes neither to anarchy nor to tyranny.

2.3 The Face of the Other

Emmanuel Levinas, a Jew by birth and French by nationality, is a moral

philosopher. He calls ethics 'the first philosophy.' His major works are *Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise than Being*, and *Ethics as the First Philosophy*. He cautions us that the clamour for objectivity and universality is nothing but violence. He highlights how the history of human thought with its strong adherence to objectivity and universality has reduced the alterity (otherness) of the other to the sameness of the self. "The ontological event that defines and dominates the philosophical tradition from Parmenides to Heidegger, for Levinas, consists in suppressing or reducing all forms of otherness by transmuting their alterity into the Same. Philosophy qua ontology is the reduction of the other to the Same, where the other is assimilated like so much food or drink - 'O digestive philosophy!' as Sartre exclaimed against French neo-Kantianism" (Critchley 1992: 6). The other is seen always from the privileged point of view of the self. The other has a place but not as the other in its nakedness but as the other as reduced to the sameness of the self. In fact, when Levinas asserts "Ethics as First Philosophy," he does not refer to a set of rules or a moral code. Levinas makes it clear: 'my task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to seek its meaning" (Levinas 1985: 90). He does not concern himself with constructing an ethical system though he does not denounce one; rather he probes into the primordial experience of ethical relation. "Thus, rather than ethics being understood as a traditional and regional component of philosophical thinking, built upon the ground of an ontological or logocentric metaphysics, Levinasian ethics is a 'first philosophy'

that disrupts ontology or logocentrism" (Critchley 1992: 7). His ethics is an "ethics of ethics" (Derrida 1978: 111). The ethical relation is a transcendental move of the self to the other without ever returning to the self. The other (*autrui*) cannot be reduced to a concept or totalized in a category. The other escapes all forms of conceptualization and totalization. Levinasian Ethics can be said to fall outside the non-metaphysical and non-logocentric forms of traditional ethics (Robbins, 1995: 178).

The ethical is therefore the location of a point of alterity, or what Levinas also calls exteriority (exteriorite), that cannot be reduced to the Same. Thus... moral consciousness is not an experience of values, 'but an access to exterior being'. This exterior being is named 'face' (visage) by Levinas, and is defined as 'the way in which the other [*l'Autre*] presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me'. In the language of transcendental philosophy, the face is the condition of possibility for ethics. For Levinas, then, the ethical relation – and ethics is simply and entirely the event of this relation - is one in which I am related to the face of the Other (*le visage d'autrui*), where the French word '*autrui*' refers to the other human being, whom I cannot evade, comprehend, or kill and before whom I am called to justice to justify myself (Critchley 1992: 5).

The face of the other challenges the self to be responsible. Face is the most tangible expression of the other. To understand and appreciate Levinas better, a distinction must be made between responsibility for the other and responsibility to the other. Responsibil-

ity for the other is to account for the words and the deeds of the other, whereas responsibility to the other is to give adherence to the general laws of social life. Traditional ethics has been confined to the latter but Levinas pleads for the former, that is, responsibility for the other. It precedes any metaphysical principle, even before reflexive consciousness. It is analogous to Heidegger's concept of care, in which "I am able to substitute myself for the other or to precede him in his own possibilities" (Waldenfels 1995: 43). Levinas makes a radical shift from the conception of ethics as a well-demarcated frame of instruction to a primordial self-transcendence to the other.

2.4 Enthronement of 'Little Narratives'

Jean-François Lyotard was a French philosopher. He became famous with the publication of his major work, The *Postmodern Condition*. His other important works are *The Différend* and *Just Gaming*. From everyday experience of human life we know that two persons do not view an event in the same way. This is because all understanding is governed by preunderstanding. There is no so such thing as presuppositionless understanding, pure and simple. Prejudices play a vital role in the process of understanding an event, and prejudices are socio-cultural products formed by the tradition to which one belongs. This being the case, there cannot be a value neutral approach to ethics. The criteria for the moral judgment of an action are dictated by the paradigm of values evolved from within every tradition. Ignoring this hermeneutical parameter

leads to the formation and stabilization of what Lyotard calls metanarrative. The essence of postmodernism, according to Lyotard, is "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). In his much celebrated work *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard directs his arguments against the naïve presumption that "philosophy can restore unity to learning and develop universally valid knowledge for humanity" (Sarup 1993: 132). With Lyotard postmodernism "became identified with the critique of universal knowledge and foundationalism" (Sarup 1993: 132). Lyotard transports Wittgenstein's analogy of language games from the field of linguistics to the social reality. Just as each game is governed by a specific set of rules and criteria, different literary forms in a discourse involve different language games with specific sets of rules and criteria. Applying the criteria of interpreting one literary form to another is as foolish as judging one game by the criteria of another. Human societies are characterized by heterogeneity. As a result, there is a "lack of any common ground for judgement between the various 'phrase-regimes', 'discourses' or 'language games' involved" (Sarup 1993: 151). Lyotard introduces the concept *différend*, which stands for an irreducible conflict of interests. Resolving a dispute between two persons with *différend* by applying a rule would not reflect a sense of justice, as both do not subscribe to the same rule (Sarup 1993: 152).

2.5 Ethics of Deconstruction

Deconstruction is the key term in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, a

post-structuralist French philosopher. Some of his major works are *Writing and Difference*, *Of Grammatology* and *Speech and Phenomena*. If deconstruction attempts to deconstruct metaphysical foundations on which ethics is built, "what could deconstruction possibly have to do with ethics, apart from radically putting into question the possibility of the latter?" (Critchley 1992: 2) But within the Levinasian understanding of ethics deconstruction can be shown to be an ethical demand. "Derridian deconstruction can, and indeed should, be understood as an ethical demand, provided that ethics is understood in the particular sense given to it in the work of Emmanuel Levinas" (Critchley 1992: xi).

Deconstruction is an oft-used term in current debate and discussion, a term which is often misunderstood. The prefix 'de' is not to be taken in the negative sense of demolition and destruction. Criticisms against deconstructionism are directed against the misunderstanding of deconstruction as paving the way for nihilism. Derrida has borrowed the term from Heidegger who calls for a *Destruktion* (destruction) of western metaphysics. The destruction of metaphysics does not mean doing away with metaphysics, but to retrieve the original meaning of Being that has been lost in the history of metaphysics. Heidegger aims at 'destructing' the metaphysical tradition that has deviated from its origins to land in totalizing Being as an abstract universal trait. Derrida employs the term 'deconstruction' in the context of reading a text. A deconstructive reading is one that breaks through the text to show that the text inscribes within it

a set of binary opposites like masculine/feminine, true/false, central/peripheral etc., and privileges the first term. In uncovering the privileging of the first term, deconstruction brings out its dependency on the subordinate term and shows "that primacy belongs to the subordinate term instead" (Sarup 1993: 51). In a metaphysical discourse there is a violent hierarchy of terms and what deconstruction attempts is the conquering of hierarchy. Deconstruction, therefore, strives "to locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive level of the signifier, to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle it in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed" (Derrida 1976: xxvii).

What is it that makes the privileged term privileged? It is the 'metaphysics of presence'. Derrida contends that many philosophers based themselves on what is present which they believed to provide certainty. Phonocentrism or the privilege of speech over writing belongs to the metaphysics of presence, because speech implies immediacy, and voice is the most fitting evidence of self-presence. Derrida links phonocentrism with logocentrism. He uses the term logocentrism as a substitute for metaphysics, and it refers to the foundations on which philosophical systems are built. Thus, the metaphysics of presence hinges on phonocentrism and logocentrism (Sarup 1993: 34-38). The quest for 'centring the privileged' finds expression in hierarchized oppositions within the texture of social fabric. Derrida here shows a resemblance to Heidegger who holds the western meta-

physics of the past responsible for the domination exercised over both human and non-human realities in the technological present. Deconstruction in the socio-ethical context would then mean de-centring the privileged, the powerful, who impose their norms of morality and encapsulate others within their ethical structure. The universal moral principles generally held sacrosanct can be shown from the deconstructive point of view as the principles of the powerful. While destabilizing such universal abstractions, deconstruction announces the existence of legitimate differences in morality and calls for the celebration of difference.

3. Challenges and Possible Responses

The re-visioning of ethics has not left us with definitive values or norms. It is only an invitation not to subsume the other in the self and to celebrate difference. Though it may be theoretically viable, how far is this practically possible? Serious objections to such a postmodern approach would inevitably emerge that are to be addressed.

3.1 The Quest for Uniformity

The most important objection emerges from the context of globalization. It is commonly held that we are part of the global village. It is a clear articulation of human interrelatedness and an affirmation of a common space. This gives rise to an increasing tendency to search for a global ethic. If differences are central to postmodernism and if they are to be recognized, promoted, encouraged and celebrated, how can we

meaningfully conceive a global ethic? Would this not become a metanarrative? Is our affirmation of a common space then obsolete? The same objection can be raised agianst the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Some sociologists today point out that human rights do not have a universal meaning. The concept of human rights in an elite society has as its axis the interests and preferences of the elite. Obviously, the people of the periphery have different if not contrary interests and preferences, and as a result human rights take on a different meaning. There are also other factors such as ethnic and gender differences that further intensify the differences of the meaning of human rights. The continued insistence on one religion, one language and one culture often paraphrased in a catchy slogan, 'Hindu, Hindi and Hindutva,' popularised in recent decades by some fundamentalist Hindus, meets with resistance and that is keeping in line with the postmodern intuition. Authentic pluralism and the celebration of legitimate differences are constitutive of postmodernism. Perhaps the persistent demand for political autonomy in Kashmir and the North Eastern states can find its justification within the strands of postmodernism. Within the Catholic Church, the existence of different liturgical rites is no longer seen as a threat but can be accepted as meaningful. This is indicative of a major shift in the self-understanding of the Church and is reflective of postmodern sensibilities. All these meaningful differences, elucidated above, can be critiqued as nothing other than justifying fragmentary existence. The concern raised above about the pos-

sibility of a common space remains as yet unanswered.

3.2 Impossiblity of Moral Commitments

To make the situation worse, there have been reports of murders of young boys and girls born in different caste communities for falling in love in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The Star News on August 22, 2001, reported the case of a Dalit girl by name Neha and a high caste boy taking refuge in the police station. Since Neha was only 16 years old, the police handed her over to her parents after getting a written assurance from them for the security of her life. Yet Neha was scared that her own parents might kill her. The villagers demanded that she be killed. They operate from a specific moral perspective. They are neither mad nor pathological but believe that her death alone can restore honour to their village, which was disgraced by what they characterize as her 'anti-social' act, and can ensure that the morality of their village remains untransgressed. If there can be no metanarrative against the backdrop of which the act can be looked upon as immoral, we can only remain silent over this issue. Many more murders will have to be passively witnessed. The crux of the problem is this: Does not postmodernism obstruct us from making moral judgments by its rejection of metanarratives which alone are capable of ascertaining the moral worth of an action?

This complex problem has to be addressed at two levels. First, though the crisis seems to be emerging from a 'little narrative,' that is, from a moral para-digm of a particular society at a given period of time, it does operate as a metanarrative. The caste discrimination based on the principle of purity and pollution is surely a metanarrative that guides the thoughts and deeds of a casteist society. Though it is a construction of the dominant caste people, eventually the so-called low caste people have internalized this and allow their own lives to be controlled by this metanarrative. Secondly, the problem cannot be solved by traditional ethics without giving rise to other problems. Traditional schools of ethics make the assumption that there are certain fundamental values that are common to all humans cutting across differences of caste, colour, creed and gender. Preservation and promotion of life is one such fundamental value, which cannot be compromised at any cost in any situation. But then problematic questions emerge! To what extent can I really stand for the value of preservation of life? Can I kill someone in self-defence, to preserve my own life? Should a girl who has been sexually assaulted carry the child conceived in this tragic incident? If she aborts the fetus, does she go against the fundamental value of preservation of life? Traditional ethics, though it has tried to offer some solutions, has not been satisfactory. These ethical dilemmas challenge us to rethink the values we consider absolute. Love has been characterized as the fundamental value in Christian ethics. But only when we begin to spell out the nuances involved in love and its different dimensions do we realize that the word itself is open to many interpretations, and the inability to decide which interpretation

is to be taken as fundamental and absolute only leads to further complications. Thus, traditional ethics, despite its promise to offer clear solutions to all problems, only betrays its insufficiency and inadequacy. But this does not say anything positive about a postmodern approach to ethics unless it is capable of offering an effective alternative for an authentic common space.

3.3   In Search of a Common Space

How does postmodernism leave room for a common space? The spontaneous and creative response to this question can be summed up in a key word: dialogue. Heidegger's philosophy offers a sound philosophical basis for dialogue. He uses the term *Ereignis* which refers to both an event and its appropriation. Combing both the meanings, Heidegger uses it to denote the 'event of appropriation'. The event of appropriation shows itself in such a manner that Being as giving and human person as receiving belong together, but there is a difference between Being and entities. The difference is the process of coming-to-be of the entities. It is the same as the process of 'un-concealment', or still better, the holding together of concealment and 'revealment.' From this perspective, truth, for Heidegger, is not opposed to falsity but a process of coming-to-be. Fundamental speaking comes from Being, and we at best give voice to the voiceless speaking reality, and thus language is not a finished product, but is, as he calls it, a languaging of language – a lighting process, a coming-to-be. This offers a model for dialogue. In its etymological sense dialogue has the character of *legein*, letting the meaning emerge and not arbitrarily imposing one's views on others in trying to convince them.

Different paradigms can and should interact and intersect in a spirit of openness to learn from and to enrich one another. This dialogical process involves two main presuppositions: (1) differences exist; and (2) differences can be celebrated in the form of mutual education and enrichment. There is no single paradigm which is absolutely right or wrong. This is already a significant deviation and discontinuity from the traditional mode of ethics that prefers to remain a cohesive system forbidding any toleration of difference. From the traditional point of view, if difference exists, it has to be either harmoniously blended or artificially fused. It is worth recalling Habermas' theory of communicative action that attempts to bring about consensus in the event of communication. Habermas, though he adheres to Lyotard's incredulity to metanarratives, breaks away from him by proposing an alternative. "He is profoundly aware that there is a potential inequality in a system which claims reason for itself, and stigmatises all those with whom it will communicate as being inherently unreasonable... The counter to this lies in a 'theory of communicative action'; but here Habermas and Lyotard diverge once more" (Docherty 1993: 25). The reason why Lyotard is not comfortable with consensus is because he believes that "there is a 'soft imperialism, 'a conversational imperialism' at work in the drive to establish consensus between participants in a dialogue" (Docherty 1993: 25). Hence, the essence of the postmodern

approach consists in primarily recognizing the difference as genuine and eventually celebrating it as meaningful. The point of departure obviously then is to acknowledge different paradigms, each of them as confined to time and space. These paradigms are incomparable because there is no objective and standard criteria against which they can be compared and evaluated. Each in its own right is meaningful. Nevertheless, there is a broad scope for different paradigms to encounter and enhance one another. It is no longer an attempt to reduce the otherness of the other to the sameness of the self but to extend oneself to the other.

Each paradigm is a little narrative and has the potential to function as a metanarrative. As a little narrative, every paradigm becomes normative for a particular group of people at a particular time. Postmodernism, therefore, does not cancel out criteria for moral judgment but is only suspicious of its universal and objective nature. If the little narrative does not offer criteria for moral evaluation, then commitment to justice and option for the unprivileged section of the society are impossible. It is quite interesting to note that postmodernism does not totally abandon ethics but creatively makes way for ethics from subaltern perspectives or from the underside of history. The paradigms of the periphery assume equal prominence to that of the privileged centre. To put it in concrete terms, it allows room for the emergence of Dalit ethics, Tribal ethics, Feminist ethics etc. that can challenge the Brahminical ethics and the elitist ethics that appear in the disguise of objectivity and universalizability. The task of postmodernism can be seen as subverting the supremacy of the ethics of the privileged and extolling the ethics of the people of the periphery.

3.4 Universality of ideals

Historians project some heroic role models as universal. We cannot deny the impact made by some people in the history of humankind. But can we say categorically that these people stand out in prominence as role models for all peoples at all times? For instance, the moral ideals of Gandhiji can be truly inspirational to a particular people in a given context at a certain period of history, but to make them absolute is neither realistic nor justifiable. This is very evident from the resurgence of the Ambedkarian ideals to counter the glorification of the Gandhian ideals. This is in no way to suggest that Gandhian moral ideals are insignificant or meaningless. Rather, the significance and the meaningfulness of the Gandhian ideals can be much appreciated within a specific paradigm, but a hasty extension of the same to different paradigms is not only questionable but also unacceptable. This explains why Lyotard, who in his early phase of scholarly life adhered to Marxism, later began to view it as a metanarrative and abandoned it. The Marxian analysis of economics is undoubtedly powerful, but is not adequate to encompass all peoples. No ideology, no value system, no normative thought pattern can be universalized. Singling out role models serves its purpose within a specific socio-cultural, historico-political context, but not outside this context.

Are we ultimately subscribing to a sophisticated moral relativism? How

is the envisaging of ethics in a postmodern age substantially different from moral relativism? The concept of relativism is itself relative. Relativism presupposes that there is something absolute. The relative-absolute framework does not fit in a postmodern worldview. The postmodern approach to ethics precedes the relative-absolute divide. This can be shown by drawing a parallel from Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Heidegger perceived the glorified status of rationalism in modern philosophy to be responsible for the subject-object dichotomy. Objectification of Being was the greatest mistake of metaphysics, and Heidegger believed that his mission was to undo the harm and to restore ontology to its pristine purity. His hermeneutical approach to fundamental ontology eliminates the subject-object dichotomy. In his project the human person is not a subject as opposed to an object but a being-in-the world which includes being with other persons.

Conclusion

Is it not clear by now that postmodernism does not provide a system of ethics? Postmodernism offers a constant invitation and a persistent demand to be critical of laws and norms that are absolutized and held sacrosanct. Perhaps, it allows the emergence of different ethical paradigms, and makes one aware of their historical contingency. The different paradigms emerging out of the collapse of well-established ethical systems of the past need the accompaniment of postmodern perspectives, lest these little narratives in the long run end up becoing metanarratives. Postmodernism as a genuine partner in dialogue with the little narratives in the field of morals becomes all the more appealing not merely because it is novel but because it is potentially a powerful liberative tool. Thus, no definite ethical paradigm is proposed here because it may itself become a metanarrative "and the possibility of ethics is referred, not to its actuality, but to its impossibility [as a philosophical system]. This does not mean that writing ethical systems is impossible. Only that the attempt to do is a denial of the ethical relation, though one which (fortunately) can never be complete" (Bernasconi 1987: 135). All that is intended here is to show that postmodernism enables a re-visioning of ethics not as a once and for all system but broadening its scope from mere laws to life, thus opening up many possibilities of doing ethics but within a spatio-temporal boundary.

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