**The Imperative of Negativity and Moral Responsibility (on the Problem of the Crisis of Tolerance)**

**Background**

In the text titled "Where to land?" (“Où Atterrir?: Comment S'orienter en Politique”) Bruno Latour correlates three phenomena: deregulation, rising inequality, and climate change denial propaganda. He talks, among other things, about “wicked universality” [Latour] or “negative universality” that has formed today as a result of the fact that all countries of the world, regardless of their level of economic development, faced one common threat: the threat to the survival of the mankind and the preservation of the planet, which, in his opinion, should lead to a collective rethinking of the tasks of the public life.

The idea of ​​"negative universality" [Latour, 2017], which is opposed to economic universality — globalization, articulates one of the most pressing problems of our time: "dissolution, disintegration or shock of the community" [Nancy, 2011], raises a question of the possibility of togetherness, joint action, forced togetherness, and, sometimes, coercion to it. Changed social context: the pandemic, military conflicts, and the accelerated virtualization of the social, encourages us to turn to the topic of coexistence, to reflect on togetherness and community as an openness and communication that are challenged today by distancing and isolation. How is it possible for us to coexist with each other in the changed circumstances? This issue is gaining ground in the times of crisis and transition when, as today, the Other is no longer “my Other”, it is often “the Other opposed to me” from whom a fictitious or real threat comes.

Society and community are inconceivable without an idea of the responsibility of one person to another, and, above all, moral responsibility, which is always the result of communication. The tradition of analytic philosophy is characterized by a certain skepticism in regard to the concept of a "moral responsibility" [see MacIntyre, 2013], and even a doubt about a possibility of its existence [e.g. Strawson, 1994]. As this can be explained by analysts such non-formalizable phenomena as “freedom” and “motive”[[1]](#footnote-1), which are central to the ethical theories of continental and Russian philosophy, are being “phased out” of the ethics.

The phenomenon of a moral responsibility can be defined in two ways. Firstly, moral responsibility can be represented as a measure of what is due in relation to others, as those restrictions that a moral agent places on him/herself, and as those duties that they impose on themselves being members of a certain social group. Moral responsibility unlike, for example, a legal responsibility, cannot arise only because of external coercion; it must also manifest itself as an internal regulator of the permissible and impossible, which individual establish for themselves. Morals do not exist under compulsion, the specificity of the ethical is such that when we force it, it simply disappears. Secondly, moral responsibility “can be imposed from the outside” by the Other who in many cases, as E. Levinas wrote “calls me to responsibility ...<...> Then the freedom restrains itself not because it encounters resistance but because it being timid feels its arbitrariness, its guilt; however, the feeling of guilt raises it to the level of responsibility” [Levinas, 2000]. This shows the normative nature of moral regulation. As a result of moral responsibility imposed from the outside, individuals must be prepared to face various forms of coercion that should "induce them to correct themselves or to warn others against such atrocities" [Loginov, 2020]: from condemnation to forced isolation. In this capacity, morality, like other forms of regulation, acts as an external motivating, coercive force that is based on the norm and contributes to the adjustment of the social.

Without getting into such questions as what ethics is today, whether in the modern situation it comes down to resolving applied problems only, or what to do with the discrepancy between objective moral prescriptions and their inapplicability to real social practices [Guseinov, 2009], questions that are certainly important but related to the field of metaethics, in my study, I want to focus on how the ethical enters the field of the public and political and how the moral responsibility of an individual or communities leads to the adjustment of the social balancing between the poles of the individual’s freedom of choice and external social coercion.

What does it mean to adjust the social? Does this mean bringing all the polyphony of the world, the "polyphony of wills" to a common denominator? Are political campaigns to recognize the rights of certain minorities and to concern about other people in the situation of the covid pandemic, for example, being the campaigns for coercion to coexistence and building a forced community? Is real, not forced, solidarity possible? How is togetherness possible without coercion? How is mutual understanding possible without fascistization, radicalization, and imposed unanimity? All these questions are painful and difficult but, in my opinion, even asking them is an initiation of an important public discussion required for dealing with “social triggers”. Otherwise, instead of a free field of public speech we get censorship, instead of awareness we get suppression, and, ultimately, indifference [Khomyakov, 2003] and escapism as a model of "evasion" from the reality and responsibility.

My moral responsibility in relation to the Other can be built on the basis of the ethics of the duty [rigorism], the ethics of the good [utilitarianism, consequentialism], and the contract [contractivism, neocontractivism][[2]](#footnote-2). But today, ethics is developing into a reactive one, which is expressed in the following: a moral agent in his/her actions in relation to the Other is more likely to be guided by the avoidance of the evil than by the search for the good [Magun, 2022]. Thus, a so called imperative of negativity in ethics and moral responsibility is being formed, a kind of “self-abasement of oneself in the name of the Other” is taking place [Badiou, 2003].

The concept of a negative moral responsibility requires some reflection and refinement. In my opinion, the existing values ​​of negativity in ethics and, in particular, in the problem of responsibility, do not reflect the entire depth of the problem and all possible meanings of the concept. Thus, utilitarians and critics of utilitarianism view negative responsibility as the responsibility of an agent for what he/she could not or did not try to prevent. This is eloquently shown by Peter Singer who in his famous essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", argues for an idea of ​​charity as a moral duty. In this sense, a negative responsibility, as critics of utilitarianism [Williams, 1973] point out, can lead to an alienation of a person from the actions that are based on the person’s own convictions. The second understanding of a negative responsibility can be derived from the understanding of a negative ethics as the ethics of an act, which in this case, is a refusal of an act [Bakhtin; Guseinov]. A negative act is something that the agent does not do due to a moral prohibition; an act out of the totality of those actions that he/she would like to do due to his desires; something he/she does not do following his duty. In this understanding, a negative act, as a way of expressing negative ethics, becomes a theoretical construct that allows saving the idea of ​​moral absolutism in modern conditions [Guseinov, 2009]. The third possible approach to understanding a negative responsibility is related to the understanding of the ethics as a strategy for escapism [Magun; Badiou] mentioned above.

Cultural differences, multiple identities, and diverse communities if they are really recognized and not declared, lead us to the need of recognizing moral pluralism, “multiple “without a single” [Badiou, 2003], “differences without divisions” [Da Silva, 2016]. But is this possible in the reality of social practices? Are we ready to recognize the real difference of the Other without a desire to eliminate the difference? Is tolerance becoming a repression of desires? Is the demand for tolerance giving rise to resistance?

In its classical liberal understanding, tolerance implies a simultaneous acknowledgment of two provisions: 1) an idea or a practice may be erroneous; 2) any ideas and practices have the right to exist. The term "tolerance" is being more and more often replaced by "acceptance" or "approval". While a classical tolerance requires us to defend the right to exist even for those ideas that seem wrong to us, an “acceptance” requires us to recklessly accept the whole spectrum of different life positions and identities. From the point of view of the ideology of “acceptance”, tolerance alone is no longer enough. Tolerance is an unsatisfactory compromise. After all, one can be reluctant to “tolerate” but, according to the new concept, one should accept everything from one’s heart [Skidelsky, 2021]. In fact, a demand for the full acceptance of any identity leads to a new form of intolerance, which is much more radical since it is not perceived as intolerance. If "acceptance" becomes mandatory, then "non-acceptance" should, logically, simply be prohibited. Anyone who has not shown full "acceptance" should be prepared to be ostracized.

In my opinion, the crisis of tolerance lies in the fact that the practice of the social is being forced to change. Such change does not imply the change of the reality but a forced change of our attitude to what is happening. The modern appeal is “if you cannot change what is happening, change your attitude towards it.” This is also happening at the level of the language. Instead of a gradual cultivation of a tolerant attitude towards the Other, we can change a language and words used to describe the reality. “The meaning of a word is its use in the language”, as Wittgenstein supposed. One can escape explaining and trying to understand by inventing a new speak and labelling. Whilst in the past some things could be “inappropriate” now they are “toxic”. A countless family of “-phobes” serve the same purpose — words like “homophobe”, “Islamophobe”, “transphobe”, “Russophobe”, etc. are used today to disarm one’s opponent in an argument, to point out that someone’s reasoning is wrong. Thus, a normal course of discussion is being destroyed as both its subject and its participants are presented in such a way that the “right” conclusion becomes obvious [Skidelsky]. It may be argued that an appeal is not a coercion but an appeal is something that forms a discourse being a socially conditioned system of speech and action [Foucault], which means that it changes the social by an intended and forced change of the language.

The crisis of tolerance brings us back to the problem of the negative responsibility. Why do I behave responsibly towards the Other? The answers to this and related questions are going to be in the center of my research.

**Objectives**

The goal is to explore the concept of a negative moral responsibility in the light of the problem of a coercion to togetherness.

To achieve this goal it is necessary to find answers to the following questions:

1) what are the conditions for substantiating the public discourse of tolerance and responsibility?

2) what kind of responsibility (in the greatest sense) is implied in the formation of a tolerant attitude: political, legal or moral?

3) how are the tolerance and the emergence of radical ideologies related?

4) how does a conservative change of course that has taken place in recent years in various countries, impact the implementation of an idea of ​​solidarity and togetherness?

5) is the political sphere a sphere of moral agreement between different communities? and is it as such in countries with developed democracies, such as, for example, the United States?

6) is tolerance being replaced by indifference?

**Methodology**

The proposed study is of a qualitative nature and involves a library study (desk study) that should be complemented, as far as possible, with getting to know ethics courses as well as technologies and methods of teaching ethic disciplines, which are taught in non-philosophical specialties at US universities.

As a theory and methodology, I will use the discourse and genealogical analysis of M. Foucault. In accordance with the research practice of the French philosopher, a discourse is to be understood as a socially conditioned system of speech and action. In this understanding, culture acts as a set of discourses, a system of practices in which a person creates a space of his own existence [Komkov, 2020]. According to Foucault, the main problem of the culture is what, when and by whom something is said, and I would also add “why it is said”. This “why” turns out to be very important since it is quite consistent with the discursive practice of control being a hallmark of the culture of our time: can everyone be allowed to speak if this creates a multiple discourse, chaos, and uncertainty [Komkov, 2020]? How can we then separate the true from the false, and how can we declare something to be true or false? Or today’s task is precisely to create a multiple discourse that deliberately puts everyone into a state of uncertainty, deprives them from epistemic confidence, and paralyzes the ethical. Here, we can observe the continuation of the above mentioned problem: is tolerance being replaced by indifference or privacy, and is the refusal to make a judgment is replaced by escapism, all of which may signify the current crisis of tolerance.

The methodological basis of the study is Foucault's discovery implying that speech acts can be analyzed from the point of view of their social production. In other words, in a society, there are explicit and implicit rules and practices that precondition speech. Such practices and rules, inseparable from the process of substantiation of the speech (or action), are a discourse. An analysis of such practices makes it possible to identify certain contents that are not present in the terms of linguistic expression [Smirnov, 2011]. The theoretical basis of the study is the inaugural lecture at the College de France delivered by M. Foucault on December 2, 1970 under the title "Orders of Discourse" and his papers dedicated to the development of the concept of "culture of the self", mainly the course of lectures "Hermeneutics of the Subject", read by him at the College de France in 1981−1982.

1. Thus, Elizabeth Anscombe believed that “it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking” [Anscombe,1958]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All these ethical currents proceed from the fact that a moral agent is always a rational agent, which is objected to by Bernard Williams who believed that “thinking rationally does not mean acting rationally” [Williams, 1973] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)