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# ERICH NEUMANNO „NAUJOJI ETIKA“, ARBA PSICHOLOGINĖ PRIEIGA PRIE PAMATINIO ETINIO ŠIUOLAIKYBĖS IŠŠŪKIO

Erich Neumann “New Ethics”, or a Psychological Approach  
to the Fundamental Ethical Challenge of Our Time

## SUMMARY

The paper discusses the concept of a “New Ethics” developed by psychologist Erich Neumann, one of Carl Gustav Jung’s most famous students. According to Neumann, one of the most important problems facing modern man is the problem of evil. The mental situation corresponding to the “old ethics” is characterised by a clearly expressed asymmetrical structure. This asymmetry is the reason for the inability of the “old ethics” to stand up to the outbursts of evil in modern society. According to Neumann, the “old ethics” presupposes that the main moral task of man is to achieve the “overcoming of evil” through the negation of evil as negativity. The paper attempts to show that Neumann’s paradigm of the “new ethics” can be identified no longer as the negation of negativity (evil), but as the negation of the negativity of negativity, where it is not the negative pole of the binary opposition of good vs. evil that is negated, but rather the asymmetry of the polarisation of the negative itself.

## SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje aptariama vieno žymiausių Carlo Gustavo Jungo mokinių psichologo Ericho Neumanno išplėtotą „naujosios etikos“ koncepcija. Anot Neumanno, viena svarbiausių problemų, su kuria susiduria šiuolaikinis žmogaus, yra blogio problema. „Senąją etiką“ atitinkančiai psichikos situacijai būdinga aiškiai išreikšta asimetrinė struktūra. Dėl šios asimetrijos „senoji etika“ nesugeba atsilaikyti prieš blogio proveržius šiuolaikinėje visuomenėje. Pasak Neumanno, „senoji etika“ numato, kad pagrindinė žmogaus moralinė

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užduotis yra siekti „įveikti blogį“, paneigiant blogį kaip negatyvumą. Straipsnyje bandoma parodyti, kad Neumanno „naujosios etikos“ paradigma gali būti identifiukuota nebe kaip neigiamybės (blogio) neigimas, o kaip neigiamybės negatyvumo neigimas, kai neigiama ne binarinės opozicijos „gėris versus blogis“ negatyvūs polius, o pati poliarizacijos asimetrija.

## INTRODUCTION

It is taken for granted that such concepts as freedom and the good as well as their oppositions, necessity and respectively the evil, are part of the conceptual substructure of almost all ethical theories. On the one hand, ethics is conceivable only if not every human action is conditioned by a necessity. On the other hand, it is equally clear that ethical action always presupposes the free choice between two alternative possibilities, which we ultimately identify as good and evil despite the diversity of their concrete manifestations. Thought of in this way, we take it for granted that both freedom vs. necessity and good vs. evil are binary oppositions whose constitutive poles are mutually exclusive. These poles set up asymmetrical pairs, with one pole clearly “positive” and the other definitely “neg-

ative.” It seems self-evident that freedom and the good corresponds to the positive pole, while necessity and evil to the negative. It seems equally self-evident that freedom should always be freedom for the good, and that necessity denying freedom inevitably produces evil.

And yet, the self-evidence is by no means always the unshakable foundation of truth. The aim of my paper is to consider whether the oppositions freedom vs. necessity and good vs. evil should not be better thought of as symmetrical, i.e. as those in which the qualification of the poles forming these oppositions is subject to the principle of indeterminacy.

I would like to consult a thinker to help me discuss this question. It is about Erich Neumann – one of the leading followers of Carl Gustav Jung.

## ERICH NEUMANN'S APPROACH

Because Neumann was a student of C.G. Jung, it is no wonder that his “new ethics” is based on the conception of psychic reality, in which main attention is paid to the unconscious part of the psyche. Since, as mentioned above, Neumann was a student of C.G. Jung, it is no wonder that the “new ethics”, the main features of which are outlined in his 1947 book “Tiefenpsychologie und neue Ethik” (Depth Psychology and New Ethics), is based on Jung's view of

psychic reality, in which special attention is paid to the unconscious part of the psyche. However, one should not lose sight of the fact that Neumann developed his “new ethics” under the impression of the horrors of the Second World War, meaning that the problem of evil was not a purely “theoretical” one for him, but a practical problem arising from direct experience. Almost eighty years have passed and now we have another war close by, where death and the fear

of death have become part of everyday life. So that the following comment is relevant again:

The problem of evil is one of the most central problems of modern man. No appeal to old values and ideals can shield us from the recognition that we live in a world in which evil in man is emerging from the depths on a gigantic scale and confronting us all, without exception, with the question: "How are we to deal with this evil?" The modern age is an epoch in human history in which science and technology are demonstrating beyond doubt the capacity of the conscious mind to deal with physical nature and to master it to a very large extent – at any rate, to a greater degree than in any earlier period in human history. But it is also an epoch in

which man's incapacity to deal with psychic nature, with the human soul, has become more appallingly obvious than ever before. (Neumann 1969: 25)

To better understand this question, Neumann attempts to uncover the psychological underpinnings of what he calls "old ethics." According to Neumann, "old ethics" assumes that a person's main moral task is to strive for good and avoid evil. Various ethical doctrines offer various ways of solving this problem in practice. However, despite the considerable diversity of proposed solutions, they all boil down to the "overcoming of evil" through the "negation of the negative (Negierung des Negativen)." (Neumann 1969: 55)

## SUPPRESSION AND REPRESSION

Neumann sees two "basic methods" that have made possible the implementation of this almost "Hegelian" double negation namely "suppression and repression (die *Unterdrückung* und die *Verdrängung*)" (Neumann 1969: 34) Neumann refers to suppression as the "deliberate elimination by ego-consciousness of all those characteristics and tendencies in the personality which are out of harmony with the ethical value" (Neumann 1969: 34) In this case, the path of moral self-improvement of the individual leads through the negation of all those inclinations that do not correspond to the norms

recognized in a particular society. This negation leads to suffering, which, however, is affirmed and as a result the eliminated contents and personality parts permanently keep a connection to the ego.

In the case of repression, however, the relation of the negated contents to the consciousness system is broken off. That is, the ego knows nothing of their existence. Thus, these contents are withdrawn from the control of the consciousness and lead "lead an active underground life of their own with disastrous results for both the individual and the collective." (Neumann 1969: 35)

## CONSCIENCE

The instance with the help of which the old ethics asserted itself in the individual Neumann calls "conscience"

(Neumann 1969: 35). Here he follows Sigmund Freud, who understood "conscience" as the manifestation of "social

anxiety," that is, the individual's fear that the collective might not approve of one or another of his actions. According to Neumann, "conscience is the representative of the collective norm, and changes as that norm changes its contents and demands. In the Middle Ages, this collective authority demanded total agreement with the Old Testament view of the world, and condemned and sup-

pressed the scientific approach as "heretical"; in the nineteenth century, the same authority required total agreement with the scientific view of the world and condemned and suppressed religious tendencies as "priestly frauds". The same conscience forbids pacifism in the warrior caste and the aggressive instinct in a pacifist group." (Neumann 1969: 36)

## PERSONA AND SHADOW

The result of the activity of the conscience is the differentiation of the psyche. Two psychic systems emerge, which Neumann, following his teacher C.G. Jung, names "persona" and "shadow". It can be said that "persona" is the "mask" that arises because of the individual's efforts to adapt to the demands of the collective and is "only that part of the personality that is tailored to fit the collective" (Neumann 1969: 40). A kind of counterweight to the "persona" is the "shadow", which consists of those elements of the psyche that the individual, obeying the "conscience", perceives as negative, that is, rejected by the collective. It can be said that the shadow is formed by all the qualities, abilities and

tendencies of the psyche that do not agree with the collective values. It is the dark part of the psyche, unrecognized and unacknowledged by the ego, dark part which represents evil. In his book "The Origins and History of Consciousness" Neumann notes the following:

The formation of the shadow goes together with the introjection of the antagonist, a figure we have already encountered when dealing with the psychology of myths. The assimilation of evil and the incorporation of aggressive tendencies always center on the shadow. The "dark brother" is as much a symbol of the shadow side as the bush-soul of primitives. Only by incorporating this dark side does the personality put itself into a posture of defense. (Neumann 1969: 352)

## INFLATION AND DEFLATION

The differentiating activity of the conscience creates the situation in which the ego, which is the center of the conscious realm of the psyche, is forced to react in some way. According to Neumann, "[t]he old ethic admits two reactions to the psychic situation created by

conscience. Both are perilous, but they are so to different degrees and with different results for the individual. The situation which is more common and more familiar to the average man is that in which the ego identifies itself with the ethical values. This identification takes

place by means of an identification of the ego with the persona." (Neumann 1969: 40) The first reaction, which Neumann calls "inflation of the ego", is "an identification of the ego with the persona" (Neumann 1969: 40). By reacting in this way, the ego forgets that there are other sides that oppose the persona. Thus the shadow side is repressed and the ego "lost touch with the dark contents, which are negative and for this reason split off from the conscious sector" (Neumann 1969: 40–41) Although by identifying with the persona the ego acquires the (basically illusory) conviction of having a "good conscience", this identification

is connected with the fact that the ego falls prey to the inflation of consciousness by an unconscious content.

The second type of reaction is what Neumann calls "deflation of the ego". By this he means an identification of the ego with unworthiness, with evil, which manifests itself in an overwhelming awareness of sin. "Man's subjection to evil," says Neumann, "is in this case experienced as so unmitigated that nothing that man can do or be could possibly redress the balance. The only cure is in fact redemption by an act of grace on the part of the Godhead." (Neumann 1969: 46)

## GUILT AND SCAPEGOAT

The effect of conscience manifests itself in a feeling of guilt that *becomes conscious* (when suppressed) and *remains unconscious* (when repressed).

In the old ethics the feeling of guilt is discharged by means of the negation of the negative in the form of the institution known as the "scapegoat". It can be said that the scapegoat is a figure created because of the projection of the shadow to the outside. Through such projection, the shadow is superimposed on the outside and is perceived as the

alien, "fought, punished and eradicated" (Neumann 1969: 50). In other words, the alien is identified with the evil that is outside of us and is perceived as a target of our aggression. The fact that not only evil is perceived as something alien, but that everything alien is perceived as evil, is, according to Neumann, "a leitmotif which can be traced uninterruptedly from the psychology of primitives right down to the policy towards aliens of contemporary, so-called civilized states." (Neumann 1969: 54).

## ASYMMETRY

It is easy to notice that the psychic situation that constitutes the "old ethics" has a strongly marked asymmetrical structure. The fundamental binary oppositions that give structure to psychic reality (such as good vs. evil, per-

sona vs. shadow, the conscious vs. the unconscious) are made up of pairs of elements, each of which is predetermined as either positive or negative. It seems that this very asymmetry is the reason for the impotence of the "old

ethics," its inability to withstand the breakthroughs of evil in modern society. Based on the given opposition of the positive and the negative, the old ethics demands only the external fulfillment of the requirements of the collective.

According to the requirements of the old ethics a person should solve the moral problems by the one-sided negation of the negative, i.e. by the suppression or repression of the qualities evaluated negatively by the collective.

## ERICH NEUMANN'S NEW ETHICS

C.G. Jung once very pointedly remarked that "the greatest and most important problems of life are all fundamentally insoluble. They must be so because they express the necessary polarity inherent in every self-regulating system. They

can never be solved, but only outgrown." (Jung 1983: 15). It is no wonder that as Jung's student, Neumann's "new ethics" is not aimed at solving ethical problems, but at helping us to outgrow those problems and thus reach a new moral level.

## INDIVIDUATION

The basis of Neumann's new ethics is the process that C. G. Jung calls "individuation." Jung describes this process as follows:

Individuation means becoming an 'individual,' and, in so far as 'individuality' embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self. We could therefore translate individuation as "coming to selfhood" or 'self-realization'. (Jung 1972: 238)

Marie-Louise von Franz, a pupil of C.G. Jung, has brilliantly observed that „to bring the individuation process into reality, one must surrender consciously

to the power of the unconscious, instead of thinking in terms of what one should do, or of what is generally thought right, or of what usually happens. One must simply listen, to learn what the inner totality – the Self – wants one to do here and now in a particular situation. (...) The guiding hints or impulses come not from the ego, but from the totality of the psyche: the Self. It is, moreover, useless to cast furtive glances at the way someone else is developing, because each of us has a unique task of self-realization. Although many human problems are similar, they are never identical." (von Franz 1969: 163–164)

## ALTERNATIVE "DIFFERENTIATING INSTANCE": "VOICE" INSTEAD OF "CONSCIENCE"

It is precisely this individual character of human problems that is considered in the "new ethics". The role of the in-

stance that differentiates psychic reality is no longer played by "conscience", but by what Neumann calls "voice". Unlike

the “conscience”, which, as already mentioned, obeys the canon of values established by the collective, the “voice” is a completely individual moral instance. Neumann emphasizes that the “revelation of the Voice to a single person presupposes an individual whose individu-

ality is so strong that he can make himself independent of the collective and its values. All founders of ethics are heretics, since they oppose the revelation of the Voice to the deliverances of conscience as the representative of the old ethic.” (Neumann 1969: 67)

### AMBIVALENCE OF THE PERSONA AND THE SHADOW: OWN AND AT THE SAME TIME ALIEN

When an individual begins to grasp the integrity of his own personality (i.e. also the unconscious part of himself), the old ego-consciousness together with the canon of values inherited from him gets into an ever-deepening crisis, which manifests itself mainly in the fact that the

ambivalence of both the “Persona” and the “Shadow” comes to light. A person begins to realize that the “shadow” is not only something foreign to him (which can be exteriorized as a scapegoat), but at the same time something of his own. The same applies to the “persona”.

### NEW ETHICS: UNIFICATION INSTEAD OF DIVISION

Therefore, it is not surprising that the “new ethics” radically changes the basic structure of the psyche. In this regard, Neumann notes the following:

The ultimate aspiration of the old ethic was partition, differentiation and dichotomy (...) the ideal of the new ethic, on the other hand, is the combination of the opposites in a unitary structure. (...) The aim of the new ethic is the achievement of wholeness, of the totality of the personality. In this wholeness, the inherent contrast between the two systems of the conscious mind and the unconscious

does not fall apart into a condition of splitness, and the purposive directedness of ego-consciousness is not undermined by the opposite tendencies of unconscious contents of which the ego and the conscious mind are entirely unaware. (Neumann 1969: 99–100)

This does not mean, however, that this is a return to an undifferentiated state of psychic reality where the differences between good and evil, person and shadow, the conscious and the unconscious are abolished.

### SYMMETRIZATION OF BINARY OPPOSITIONS

Characteristic of the situation that the new ethics creates is this, that the fundamental binary oppositions take on a *symmetrical* form. However, the new eth-

ics does not aim to reach a “compromise” in which the good and the evil give way to each other, eventually reaching an equilibrium. The fact is that in the

new ethics the “negation of the negative” takes a different form, namely: not the “negative pole” of binary oppositions like “good vs. evil”, “person vs. shadow”, “the conscious vs. the unconscious” is negated, but rather the *asymmetry* of polarization. From this we can see that this is what C.G. Jung meant when he emphasized that “the greatest and most important problems of life (...) can never be solved, but only outgrown”.

One can say that this is about a “symmetrizing negation”, which is by

no means a simple abolition of differences, but the creation of a new relationship between opposites. The opposites form a synthesis in which former contradictions are raised to a new level and abolished.

This relation can be called identity of difference and non-difference. So that the transition from the old to the new ethics can be understood as the replacement of the formula “negation of the negative” by the formula “negation of the negativity of the negative”.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the inability of the old ethics to find an adequate approach to evil probably results from a lack of radicality in understanding the opposition of good and evil. It is easy to see that the “new ethics” developed by Erich Neumann appears as a paradoxical radicalization of the opposition between good and evil. It is about radicalization in the sense that the dialectic of the relationship between the person and the shadow leads us to the sources of ethics that are “beyond good and evil”. This radicalization

is manifested in the fact that one no longer tries *to solve* the insoluble problem of the opposition of good and evil, but “*outgrows*” it. The self reaches a higher level of integrity by “outgrowing” the asymmetry of the opposition of persona and shadow (or good and evil). Thus, we can say that this opposition takes the form of what Mephistopheles (from Goethe’s “Faust”) has in mind when he presents himself as “Part of that Power which would / Do evil constantly, and constantly does good.” (Goethe 1998: 124).

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