

UMBERTO ECO'S REFLECTIONS ON MORALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Introduction

The concept of identity playing a pivotal role in the social sciences since 1960 is a relevant issue (Findor, 2005). According to Barker (2006), the concept is of prime importance in the field of cultural studies. Each identity (individual) embraces several sub-identities: national, cultural, moral, etc. Following this point of view, identity in the area of cultural studies is defined as a cultural construct. In the words of Průcha (2010), identity is the term describing the pertinence of an individual to a community he identifies himself with, its values, norms and rules.

On the one hand, the primordial rudiment of identity is linked with an individual's social existence (family, mother tongue, nation, race, customs and traditions). On the other hand, the instrumental rudiment of identity is linked with an individual's own decision to belong to some community and fully accept it. If primordiality is mostly based on emotions, instrumentality is linked with ratio (Bačová, 1997).

The aim of the paper is to present the term *identity* as a highly flexible construct in many different contexts. According to Jacobs and Maier (1998), identity develops in the three periods of time: past, present and future. Moreover, identity can be defined only on the condition that all these different time periods are taken into account. Borders between identities exist, that depends on an individual and his will (Assmann, 2012). As for a feeling to have several identities in the same time, that depends on personal settings, circumstances and decisions.

The research objectives are built on the assumption that certain doubts have recently arisen in the area of cultural studies whether identity is fixed and firmly defined or is freely acquired. Another question is a link between these two aspects. Although the origin of the word *identity* comes from Latin (*idem – the same*), nowadays it is understood more in its diversity, as linguistic, cultural, national, moral identity, etc.

Identity evolves and changes throughout an individual's life. It is important to understand that each individual is the bearer of identity, represents and embodies it. Following this point of view, it is very difficult to define identity because a certain inconsistency between reality and theory exists.

Cultural identity is feeling oneself a member of a given cultural group and sharing its traditions. That in part overlaps national identity. However, through the prism of values and norms, which make cultural identity, it is close to the moral side of identity. Following Ondrejovič and Krúpa (2009), cultural identity can be defined as being beyond the framework of an individual, expanding oneself and becoming collective.

Research methods: the analysis and synthesis of the literary works of Umberto Eco selected by the authors of this paper and scholarly articles and monographs.

Cultural identity

Cultural identity depends on those values that determine a person's life. As it has been said, identity is primordially linked with the environment a person was born into. To some extent that determines his life, however, in the course of time, the institutional aspect of identity evolves and allows to make a choice and decisions. Values accepted by an individual are closely linked with the culture he was born into and was raised and that affects his all life.

Nowadays it is very important to put emphasis on the values of an individual and society in the context of moral identity. According to Brožík (2007), the term *value* is more like an umbrella rather than a theoretical concept because it does not bear any strictly defined content. Városov (1970) states that "*values are functional qualities*" and stresses their primary feature. From the economic point of view, the main function of values is that they bring benefit. A value can be defined as something very important or precious. Hartl and Hartlová (2000, p. 192) note that "*value is one of the characteristics which is attributed to an object, situation, event or activity by the individual. It is connected with satisfying the individual's needs and interests*". There is a certain paradox in the perception of values – something appears to be of value when we lose what we have taken for granted and considered ordinary or daily. Only when we perceive something as valuable we put greater emphasis on that.

Following Brožík (2007), real objects, events, relationships, etc. as well as ideals, norms can be of

value. Values can be personal and social, both positive and negative. Although there are a lot of scientific classifications and categorizations of values, it is up to every individual to build his own value system depending on preferences. Our perception of value is whether we more or less value various objects and events.

In this context, a very important question of individual values arises. As it is generally known from art, it is precisely in post-war Europe human existence was threatened and inhuman crimes were committed by civilized nations. In his work on ethics Albert Schweitzer refers to respect for life and a will to live. *“We have come to realize that life was given to us as a possibility or a chance and it is only up to us what we create of all those things which we received”* (Křivohlavý, 1994, p. 7).

“The imperative of respect for life is connected with acquisition of certain skills which help us to be able to participate deeply in the fates of different people’s lives. Furthermore, it means to accept our duty to help life, support it and remove or limit all poverty and pain which is around us so we can influence it. We should not avoid such situations or take them lightly by closing our eyes when seeing suffering which is all around and concerns not only humans but also animals” (Plašienková, 2014, p. 1). The value of life is determined by a moral rule to protect life and everyone’s right to exist.

Nowadays European values are emphasised *“It is very dangerous to talk about European values. It is not because we could get into serious arguments hardly solved but also because of danger of inflation – and inflation values count for nothing”* (Sokol, 2003, p. 99). The term *European values* is as flexible as *identity*. European values are promoted in the European Union by the media and the public. But what exactly are they? Are they related to traditional Christian values? Are their roots in the early period of Ancient Rome? There are no straightforward answers to these questions so refer to Umberto Eco’s reflections; on the one hand, he deals with the collapse of human values in WWII, on the other hand, reflects the migration process of the 21st century and related transformations of Europe and its culture.

The link between human values and morality is evident in the following passage: *“Morality can be defined as a summary of moral ideas, values and norms, determining behaviour and activities of people. Morality is always dependent on the character of relevant socio-economic formation, socio-economic and socio-political conditions, world’s view and social system of values which is regarded highly and appreciated by the given society, class or social group”* (Akademická etika, 2011, p. 67). The system of values depends on many factors.

It is said that values are tested by time. Values are not something given “for free”. *“Those things*

which are for free can be acquired without effort and trying, without intensive search and anxious waiting and that is why they do not bring luck and in such a way they cannot be taken as values. It is only their skeleton, bodily cage, a mummy” (Sokol, 2003, p. 102).

As for identity and human values, their roots can be traced in Greek philosophy where a soul is the core of a human being. *“Europe begins with discovery or maybe invention that every man has got a soul which must be constantly catered for in order not to die but to continue in the form of life”* (Sokol, 2003, p. 103). Care for one’s body and soul should lead to a harmonious existence because only then the complexity of the world is openly perceived.

However, taking into account the bloody history of Europe, a European culture, morality and identity has been significantly affected and can completely change depending on a situation. *“But we, Europeans, should, for such a long period of thousands years, be aware of the fact that morality is something else. We should be aware of the fact that certain behaviour or acts should not be done even if they are carried out by majority or all the people because they are considered to be shameful and “unjust”* (Sokol, 2003, p. 125). Moral rules determine the life and functioning of society, the code of behaviour, intercultural relations.

“Moral value is an expression of human activity and its content is always created by relationship of individual with other people and society as a unit. This relationship is demonstrated outwardly in the form of human activity and individual creative work, whereas man is interested in the inner world which is being defined and adapted on the basis of individual’s requirements and needs” (Dzuriaková In *Acta Moralia Tyrnaviensia*, 2006, p. 78). It happens quite often that what is morally right in one culture can be rejected or condemned in another thus causing problems in intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding.

Presently the system of values undergoes transformations. Knowledge (and wisdom) born within the academic and scientific circles is available online and accessible to the public. *“Human wisdom today is built on human interpretation of its language structure. Spiritual space is being substituted by dream and subconscious therapy and there is a possibility created for man to log in all the world’s servers 24 hours a day just in his/her slippers and so to acquire access to the “world database of wisdom”* (Hrašková in *Acta Moralia Tyrnaviensia*, 2006, p. 87). Šmajš (2006) states: *“The life wisdom of average man is declining mainly because of three mentioned factors i.e. loss of contact with nature, emergence of complex information technology and influence of television on human mind together with non-adequate structure of school education”*.

Since we are interested in the roots of morality, we should assume that cultural adaptation of a human

is underpinned by a generically egoistic, territorially limited and short-sighted wish to become a member of a given society. Human morality depends on one's interests and willingness to defend the interests of a particular tribal or regional culture (Šmajš, 2006). It is obvious that moral regulation is as old as culture. The aim of morality is to guide the individual, family, tribe, community and defend local interests. However, this logic has been founded neither verbally nor theoretically.

"It is assumed not only in philosophy but also in other areas of spiritual culture that man as the pinnacle and highest form of natural evolution, as a unique creation made by God, has not only got into touch with culture but also has started to influence, improve and supplement it with own deliberate activities" (Šmajš, 2006, p. 66). Morality is the summary of rules guiding relationships, their system is acquired by each individual as primordial part of cultural identity.

"Morality is reproduced by imitation of binding forms of people's behaviour and by referring to basic do's and don'ts in certain cases. (...) Traditional morality was based on generic selfishness of man and genetically it was predefined by defending adaptive strategy. Therefore, it supported man and given local culture and nature – object was not considered as a moral subject" (Šmajš, 2006, p. 137). As for morality, we see it as the product of human adaptive strategy although rules and norms are constantly changing in Europe and the world depending on specific conditions within a given society.

Following Hume (2008), morality cannot be considered just as the result of our reflections and reasoning. We can see that traditional moral attitudes have become part of material culture of today's modern technical civilization. Speaking about the anthropology of morality, Šmajš (2006, p. 155) states: *"Only the man of today's type as the only one of all the biological species was successful in arousing cultural revolution, so it is obvious that man's uniqueness mostly depends not only on the fact that he/she speaks ethnic language, thinks, behaves morally, learns and believes. Man's uniqueness is aptly depicted in the fact that man succeeded on Earth as the second ontologically creative evolutionary power, as a small god, as a godfather and creator of differently constructed system of culture"*. According to him, ethics should respect human rights and rights of nature.

It is important to note that in the modern age self-identity, individualization, national self-awareness, national identity could not exist without a written form of national language. In the European Union, national identity played a key role in the context of moral identity during WWII, the post-war period and nowadays.

In 1950 the term *national identity* was replaced by *national character, national soul, national spirit*

(Parekh, 2000). Metaphorically, national identity is linked with a particular nation, the acceptance and sharing of particular social and moral rules allow to belong to it. National symbols, legends are also important elements of national identity, sharing them a human being becomes a member of a particular community (Svoráková, 2013).

We can see that cultural, national and moral identity have several common features. All three identities can interrelated.

Values and morality in Umberto Eco's reflections

Drawing on the above, further analysis focuses on the selected pieces of Umberto Eco reflections; he provides his point of view on society and moral identity on the axis of past, present and future. The first topic is related to war. He focuses on war because intellectuals, the silent minority, who should declare clearly that war is not a wise solution to problems, keep silent. Eco (2004) holds that a position on conflicts should be expressed clearly, such situations when people start looking for perpetrators and blaming them should be avoided. *"Intellectual activity is based on critical search for what can be considered as satisfying approximation towards own understanding of the truth"* (Eco, 2004, p. 12).

The intellectual community is unwilling to dwell on war. Of course, if somebody started glorifying war as a "hygiene of the world", he would be condemned by the public for breaking moral norms. Moral attitudes should be supported by deep views and opinions. *"Decision to carry out moral activity is moral decision at the same time as it is the surgeon's decision to operate in order to save patient's life"* (Eco, 2004, p. 13).

"Considering war as such, a conclusion can be drawn that war is opposite to reasoning. The aim of war against others is to conquer enemies and gain some benefit. The term *world war* that appeared in the 20th century suggests that its effect will be felt by Polynesian tribes. Nuclear weapons can destroy our planet. War is not controlled by one state. The media has made conflicts part of our daily life. Earlier information was accepted as true, nowadays people have become sceptical about everything presented and interpreted by the media. Death, enemies have come close to us, they have become our reality. Modern warfare can put our life in danger. Keeping silent about war shows a fear of war.

In his reflections, Eco draws on his personal experience. As a child he went to fascist youth training camp. War was a normal state, and he was not aware of the holocaust. *"Political regimes may be removed and ideology can be subjected to a critique and delegitimized, behind each regime and its ideology there always stands certain way of thinking and feeling, the whole series of cultural habits"* (Eco, 2004, p. 28).

Eco draws a conclusion that moral identity is closely linked with cultural identity. Morality often finds its expression in culture and art; for example, futurism, which focused on speed, risk and violence, was part of fascist youth culture. Eco (2004) highlights the following features of fascist culture:

1. no philosophical basis;
2. no cultural traditions: a mixture of *Fascism Gnosis, The Holy Grail, The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion, Alchemy and Authority of the Holy Roman Empire*;
3. irrationalism: “*Thinking takes away power and decisiveness*” (Eco, 2004, p. 36);
4. betrayed traditional values;
5. disharmony was equalled to betrayal;
6. all different people must be destroyed;
7. nationalism: one nationality is superior to other;
8. life is a permanent war;
9. elitism: “*Every citizen belongs to the best nation in the world, members of the party are the best citizens, (...)*” (Eco, 2004, p. 38);
10. everyone can become a hero at the price of his life.

Eco is sceptical about the defeat of fascism: “*Unfortunately, life is not so easy. Fascism can come back in the most innocent shapes and forms*” (Eco, 2004, p. 41).

The second topic is migration. “*Whether being forced or peaceful, migrations are like natural phenomena: they come and go and nobody can monitor them*” (Eco, 2004, p. 81). Eco holds that the question of migrants changing the culture in the territory they come to is very important. Barbarian peoples invaded the Roman Empire and destroyed it, Europeans migrated to America and brought their culture.

Speaking about “*the period of great mobility*” (Eco, 2004, p. 82) Eco says: “*the third world knocks on the door of Europe and enters even though Europe does not agree*” (Eco, 2004, p. 83). Europe is becoming more colourful and he is asking whether society is prepared for that. “*A child is raised towards tolerance gradually in the same way as it is raised towards respect to what belongs to others*” (Eco, 2004, p. 86). Immigrants face intolerance because they look different.

“*The most dangerous intolerance is the one which emerged from any kind of doctrine as a result of the most primitive stimuli*” (Eco, 2004, p. 88). How do we understand tolerance? Is it intolerance if a Raskolnikov type criminal is condemned and punished? Eco continues: “*Howsoever it is needed to respect opinions, customs, traditions, confessions of the other person, there is something what seems to us intolerable. Accepting the intolerable discredits our own identity*” (Eco, 2004, p. 93).

Conclusions

1. Moral and cultural identities are interrelated, they are important rudiments of each individual's identity. As the analysis of Umberto Eco's reflections shows, the morality of Europeans was greatly undermined by WWII and its consequences. Speaking about war Eco (2004) emphasises that intellectuals prefer keeping silent about morality and values for the sake of mutual understanding. Migration is the main issue of today. Cultural differences and different moral norms are barriers to peaceful co-existence. Even a tolerant man can become intolerant when seeing cultural traditions very different from his own.
2. The burden of the past as well as new challenges are very serious issues in Europe. A crisis of values is a theoretical as well as a practical issue. There are signs of emerging new cultures. People understand that passiveness does not mean progress. Language represents national identity. “*However, modern age civic individualization, national self-awareness and national identity would not be possible without written form of ethnic language*” (Šmajš, 2006, p. 161).
3. “*Initial period of civic society existence which spread in Europe especially after the Great French Revolution was connected with naïve enlightened image about possible synchronization of social and general intellectual progress*” (Šmajš, 2006, p. 162). Technology advancement is evident but has it changed human thinking? Plato's philosophy is dead. Flows of immigrants are changing traditional values. Human values and identity issues are being insufficiently addressed. Intellectuals must take an active stance on many issues.

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Summary

UMBERTO ECO'S REFLECTIONS ON MORALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

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The research paper focuses on the cultural and moral identity in Umberto Eco's reflections. Attention is paid to the selected pieces. Umberto Eco is one of the most famous contemporary writers dealing with the issues of morality in Italian society. His works are devoted to the current perception of identity in the 21st century. The authors are interested in his view on values and identity in the selected chapters of his work. *The aim* of the paper is to analyse the identity issue in Umberto Eco's works.

The research objectives are based on recent doubts in cultural studies whether identity is fixed and firmly defined or acquired by a human being freely. Another question is the link between these two aspects. Although the origin of the word *identity* comes from Latin (*idem - the same*), nowadays it is more understood in its diversity as linguistic, cultural, national, moral identity, etc.

Keywords: Umberto Eco, morality, identity, linguistic diversity.

Santrauka

UMBERTO ECO MORALINIAI PAMĄSTYMAI KULTŪRINIO IDENTITETO KONTEKSTE

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Straipsnyje analizuojamos žymaus šiuolaikinio italų rašytojo ir filosofo Umberto Eco moralinės refleksijos, paskelbtos leidinyje „Penkios esė etikos temomis“ („Cinque scritti morali“, 1997; 2004). Umberto Eco yra laikomas vienu garsiausių šiuolaikinių rašytojų, rašančių moralės temomis Italijoje. Jo darbai yra aktualūs aptariant identiteto sampratą, specifinius XXI amžiaus tapatumo aspektus. Šio autoriaus moraliniai pamąstymai mus daugiausia domino tais klausimais, kurie yra tiesiogiai susiję su jo mintimis apie tapatybę, kadangi pagrindinis šio straipsnio *tikslas* ir yra aptarti tapatybės problemą per Umberto Eco požiūrio prizmę.

Prasminiai žodžiai: Umberto Eco, moralė, tapatumas, lingvistinė įvairovė.

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