

Challenges and critique of efficiency (Autonomy, responsibility & efficiency)

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Dear guests, dear friends and colleagues,

It is my great pleasure and honour to be among you and to have this opportunity to speak about some important challenges and dilemmas concerning our present, post-modern life conditions.

I was mainly asked to speak about three, let me call them, creatures and their relations – about **Autonomy, Responsibility & Efficiency**, with the special emphasis on efficiency. But how to speak about such extremely abstract creatures and notions that at the same time figure as entirely concrete elements of everyday life of everyone among us? Is it possible to seriously think about these highly sophisticated terms and their relations without placing them into a larger frame of understanding? My answer is no. With the larger frame I mean here the context in which the three mentioned creatures would have something we usually call meaning. Shortly, our first question is, what is and where is it possible to find that context, the larger frame of **Autonomy's, Responsibility's & Efficiency's** meaning?

I.

As far as I can see, we could and even should speak about three important contexts in connection with **Autonomy, responsibility & efficiency**:

- a) The first context is something physical, something which could be almost touched with our fingers. It is the context of the beginning of the 21th century, meaning a highly complex, globalised world of post-modernity in the largest sense;
- b) The second context is not at all physical and could definitely not be touched with our fingers. It is a symbolical context, or what we usually call the problem of a dominant discourse, or even “dominant ideas” of our times. How to define that second, symbolical contextual feature of “our” post modern, globalised life? I’m proposing the definition which can be mainly grasped as managerial discourse. In my thinking perspective, it is the managerial discourse itself which forces us to connect the dominant complex of ideas with the meanings of **Autonomy, responsibility & efficiency**. But, and this is a substantial methodological point: if we really want to rethink the possible relations among **Autonomy, responsibility & efficiency** in a nowadays’ context this **must be definitely done in an autonomous way! That means that in order to think of Autonomy, responsibility & efficiency, we should leave the dominant ideas of managerial discourse aside, somehow step outside of them, and try to think the problem from the outside. As well, we should attempt to think them beyond the managerial discourse itself. Otherwise, we are doomed to remain thoughtless. Thoughtlessness in this concrete case would mean that we deny the main tensions, problems and conflicts that exist between autonomy, responsibility and efficiency, which would actually be a blatant lie.**
- c) The third context is even more important. It is fundamentally different from previous two. It is neither about the present time nor about the space. It is rather about the past

and, even more, about the future. It deals with the conflicting situation between two instances: on the one side there is a conception of the life we should or, rather, are forced to live. This appears as the problem of necessity, especially in the light of the social expectations in our concrete societies. On the other side, there are conceptions of the good life, of freedom and autonomy – regardless of what a society and social necessity require from us.

If trying to think seriously about **Autonomy, responsibility & efficiency** one should start exactly from this third, the most demanding state of affairs. Only in the context of the sense and meaning of our lives – regardless of social necessities – we can properly open the related problems and maybe find answers and solutions for them. Thus, let us try to think about the problem within this frame.

II.

We are usually speaking of **Autonomy, responsibility & efficiency as if existing and functioning** at the same level and in the same ways, even as if being the same. This is as if one would want to speak at the same level about so radically different things as are spirit and tanks, rock and water, rock'n'roll and marmalade... All this is, of course, possible, but solely at the level of poetry or of religion. But not so in the serious analytical thinking, or, needless to say, in science.

Let me start with autonomy. Autonomy, if considered conceptually, is a category of radically ancient, Greek origins. As a rather complex label, it points at two important things. Firstly, it is closely connected with *authos*, with someone(s) self (himself, herself), to put it in today's parlance. *Authos* is a Pythagorean notion targeting at an inner quality and qualification of one's self. *Nomos* could be translated as law and/or custom. In other words, autonomy (*authos/nomos*) means something being capable of having/living ones-own laws of being (and not of functioning!). Autonomy is basically aiming at the quality of being as such. Later on (in Aristoteles), it is about the free human being itself. At the level of the word autonomy is also very closely connected with Aristotelian *autarkeia* – connected with the independency of the self, with its self-sufficiency and with the independency and sufficiency as such.

Both, *authos/nomos* and *autarkeia* could be properly grasped only if we understand them in the context of the terms of today's freedom. They are not qualities of a human being regardless of WHAT and WHO that human being but are always something about a free human being. They are not dealing with the level of HOW that being is, how he or she is functioning (or behaving, working... for example...). To put it another way, autonomy is a radically qualitative description of being human, of living a human life in the sense of his being, of its "WHAT-NESS" and "WHO-NESS". Autonomy is labelling nothing more than autonomy itself, since there is nothing more than autonomy – which is the highest and ultimate designation. He or she is either free or not free. Not being free doesn't mean that she or he is less free, but that he or she is slave. There is no quantitative transition from freedom and autonomy to non-autonomy – you are free or autonomous or you are not. In this sense autonomy represents a kind of an absolute feature and is always and only appearing closely connected with a human being.

Shortly, autonomy is very basic and most decisive, ultimate designation and remain what we are – human beings – there is no compromise at that point as then could not speak of

autonomy any more. As well, we could not speak of free human being. One cannot be, for example, 5% or 65 or little more autonomous. One is autonomous or one is not.

What about efficiency? There the point is radically different! If compared with autonomy, efficiency differs from it at least in four various points:

- Firstly, efficiency is in no way to be grasped in terms of quality, since it is typical quantity;
- Secondly, efficiency is not something concerning only human beings;
- Thirdly, efficiency is not concerning humans at the level of their WHAT-NESS AND WHO-NESS;
- Fourthly, efficiency merely tackles the HOW-NESS of the functioning of something, and thus just secondarily concerns human beings, or someone.

Efficiency is about the ways of how somebody/something operates, functions, works and about the quantities and intensity of that operation. It is not about the human being as such but mainly about the quantity of human or of any animal or other kind(s) of work and working. It is thus concerning something as intensity we have higher or lower, bigger or smaller efficiency. For example, efficiency it is also quantity of work of all machines and machineries, robots, or even systems being capable of working.

The crucial thing in this context is that even today it is still not possible to talk about the autonomy of a machine, of a robot, - as a machine and a robot, by definition, cannot be free! And freedom is that decisive point of no return which we should not forget in this context otherwise we loose the very ground of our thinking.

III.

Now we can try to think the possible relations between autonomy and efficiency within the given time and space of post-modern globalisation. The very fact that we have to think and debate the connection between autonomy and efficiency is itself extremely talkative. If we are debating it, there must be the serious reason for that, and this indicates that there must be something wrong with the dominant existing kind of the relation between the two. If that was not be the case, the debate about it would by definition be superfluous. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

So, to the heart of the matter! Our problem today could be defined in a quite simple way: requirements, loud demands and heavy pressure towards growing efficiency at all levels of social life in post-modern surrounding, are becoming a highly critical issue – and this mainly for the sake of frustrating and even of threatening the very autonomy and freedom of the post modern human beings. The highly sophisticated systems of post-capitalist work conditions in all fields of post-modern work are mainly based on the growing pressure on efficiency.

But in order to understand our problem, we should be very careful. Today's pressure towards efficiency is not any more – as it used to be for centuries – the pressure towards efficiency of the bodily & physical (manual) work. It is both lesser visible and it targets the knowledge-work.

The very reason for this is obvious: we are not any more living in industrial working circumstances being characterised and founded on deep split between mind and body. We are – for good and for bad – midst the so-called knowledge society.

What does this mean? According to me, something exceptionally important which should be very strongly emphasized.

- A) The main work instrument within the given circumstances of knowledge-society is thus not the body any more. It is the mind! Speaking from the post-modern, western, developed life-conditions, we are not any more manual, body-workers, we are predominantly knowledge-workers. The today's pressure towards efficiency is directed towards our minds and our knowledge. It is actually a pressure on all of us as a knowledge-workers.
- B) This new and unknown kind of pressure onto free human beings, cannot be based on authoritarian elements of force and violence any more.
- C) Rather, it must be based on something coming from the opposite direction. Today's pressure must be based on a team work, on participatory forms of leadership, on mutual understanding and good atmosphere at work... Shortly it needs authority, or, at least, a new morality if not a religion (of efficiency).

What questions does this raise? I will just tentatively sketch some basic elements.

The first one is: what is the difference between authoritarianism and authority? Basically, authoritarianism is a situation and a position in which one is obeying something or, mainly, someone. The reason for that is force and violence, or, at least, threatening with them – implied from above (for example, “political” force) or from below (for example the force of nature, the force of disease...). The main point here is that someone is obeying the force against her or his free will as some kind of necessity. It is quite different in the situation of authority. Speaking of authority, we are obeying not against our free will, but exactly on the basis of our free will. Under conditions of authority we freely obey something or someone demanding something from us, since we are ready to follow him or her while expecting our own progress, gains...freedom...

But this is only a half of the story. Another half is the problem of authority itself. Authority is – this is the place of importance for us – closely connected with autonomy. Similarly as autonomy, authority also meaningfully concerns exclusively human beings and some of their rare – always very few – products. For example, it concerns democracy or laws and customs, or some religious/theological supra-natural instances. But – an this is crucial point - it cannot be connected, for example, to machine, to machinery, to the System or to the nature, needles to say to necessity and efficiency. There is no doubt that the modern, western human subject can be frightened or endangered by nature or by globalisation, but nature and globalisation cannot have authority over us! Quite the contrary is the case: instead of accepting their supposed authority, we would rather fight nature and globalisation as something which is not in accordance with our free will.

Within the classical, modern, capitalist and socialist situation, we as human beings were either subjected to authority or to the authoritarianism of our masters and not to any authority of “Systems”, not to speak about the authority of the nature. The today's situation is radically different: neither authoritarianism nor the authority are functioning any more. Moreover, today's techniques of leadership, in all fields of our lives, are barely based on personalities

and authority. Instead, we are living midst the highly-personalised circumstances in which everything seems natural/naturalised and necessary at the same time. Speaking of today's globalisation, we are definitely not speaking of it in terms of our free will and our free choice, but exclusively in the terms of necessity. We are arguing, for example, in terms of economical and managerial necessity, but also in terms of "our survival". Consequently – and that is the place where I wanted to situate our today's problem – all present day managers of knowledge-workers in all knowledge societies around the globe are arguing about efficiency – not in terms of our free will and free choice wanting the efficiency (not on the basis of autonomy!), but exclusively in terms of necessity. The reason is that it cannot at all be the other way around!

The result is the following: all managerial argumentation at this point is mainly based on the necessity of globalisation, which means – in last analysis – on the necessity of our biological and even existential survival.

The fundamental problem at this point is that we are not capable (not that we are not willing to!) to accept that kind of authority, namely authority of necessity. To put it differently, we are facing the biggest possible problem: that of the mutual exclusion of the two: of autonomy and efficiency. On the one side there is our free will and our freedom, on the other there is necessity of efficiency. The gap between the two cannot be surpassed by the authority of the subject any more, since the subject of authority is not existing any more. Thus, on the one side, we live in a desperate need for authority, and simultaneously (and that is the other side of the same coin) there are possibilities neither for rising nor for the prosperity of authority. The only exit from this situation is extremely dangerous clash of both: of autonomy on one side and of efficiency on another. Of course, with completely unpredictable outcomes.

To put it in more global way: we are not solely midst the world in which "the clash of civilisations" is taking place, but there is something even worse appearing on the surface. That is - let me put it in a rough form - the clash of autonomy, (which means the clash of freedom of free will of the every individuality) and efficiency. If the first clash is somehow outside of the "developed West", this second is at the very hart of it. According to my understanding, this "second clash" could be even more dangerous for the West than the clash of civilisations. The first one could result in explosion and war between the systems, the second one in implosion of the system itself.

IV.

And finally, where is the place of responsibility in this story? It is definitely on our side and it is mainly the problem of our values. But it is not the problem of values in the sense that we are in the super market surrounding where, as a free consumers, we could buy this or that set of values. The problem is becoming more and more urgent. The very offer of values is, so to speak, exhausted and it is mainly revolving around two sets of exclusive values: of freedom and autonomy and/or of efficiency and necessity. Every one among us could be quite soon in everything but comfortable position of being forced to choose exclusively between the two.

In the stable, peaceful and riche times the very act of choosing between the autonomy and efficiency is a very simple one. Namely, in that position we are not choosing at all. On the contrary, we are connecting both. But I'm afraid that we are not living in the stable, peaceful and riche times any more.

And as already mentioned, we are not living in times of classical exploitation of work at the level of human body any more. We are forced to face the problem of the self-exploitation of our minds. In this context the conflicting relationship between autonomy and efficiency is not the problem outside of us, but at the very centre of our personality and intimacy. We are now not able to say any more that the problem of efficiency is not our problem. It is rather our central problem, endangering our very intimate self at the level of its autonomy and freedom. To put it differently, we are facing one of our most traumatic impossible and forced 'choices': either autonomy or efficiency. The manoeuvring space in between is becoming more and more narrow.

It is exactly at this point where we should locate our central question today: are we still able, are we still willing to isolate or even to erase the question of the very sense and meaning of our lives, which means of our freedom and autonomy? Are the sense and meaning of our lives something that is not important for us any more? Are we still sense making and sense living beings or our lives are already completely senseless? Moreover, aren't we maybe just trying to live our senseless lives happily ever after?

It would be a big mistake to think that this is a moral problem. It is an ethical problem, as morality and ethics are not the same. Key distinction between the two is a radical one: while morality concerns something already written and prescribed from the higher authority (religion, church, state, party, ideology...), ethics is about ourselves and about our abilities to fight for our freedom and autonomy. A moral problem is something where other people or institutions could help us, an ethical problem is always the situation in which we are alone facing ourselves.