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The personal identity of partners in pure relationships

Abstract: The article studies the character of personal identity of the parties in pure relationships. Such personal identity is not a coherent and integrated whole, as it seems to Anthony Giddens, but rather fragmented, unstable and context-dependent set of commodified and externalized self-definitions.

Keywords: pure relationships, personal identity, postmodern self, self-reflectivity, commodification.

In “The Transformation of Intimacy” (1992) by Anthony Giddens, there is no list of characteristics typical to pure relationships. This lack of the list generates serious obstacle to every scholar who seeks to clarify the Giddens’ conception of pure relationships. As a result, the scholar must search carefully through the whole book to identify the main features of such human relationships and to integrate these features into the consistent theory. I deem that on the basis of Giddens’ books five main characteristics of pure relationships can be recognized:

- 1) pure relationships are based on the imperative of free and open communication¹ because the partners perform mutual self-disclosure²;
- 2) individuals enter into pure relationships and maintain them in order to gain benefit and satisfaction³;

¹ Giddens A. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. – Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992. – P. 194.

² Giddens A., Pierson C. *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity*. – Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998. – P. 120; Giddens A. *The Consequences of Modernity*. – Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990. – P. 121; Giddens A. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. – Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992. – P. 138–139, 190.

³ Giddens A. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. – Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992. – P. 58, 63.

3) since the level of commitment in pure relationships is relatively low, each partner can terminate relationship at any particular point¹;

4) pure relationship is an equal partnership in which each party is autonomous and respects one another. Thus this relationship is free from violence and coercion. In other words, the freedom to act, judge and choose is of the main significance for the partners²;

5) pure relationship is a contract which is always open to negotiation and discussion³.

The fact is that Giddens ignores the question of personal identity (self-conception, self-definition) of the partners in a pure relationship. I am convinced that it is a serious disadvantage of Giddens' theory. Human relationships and self (personal identity) are so inextricably intertwined that they do not exist without each other. That is why the conception of pure relationships that lacks a definition of parties' personal identity is obviously incomplete. The only thing to which Giddens⁴ draws attention in this context is that pure relationships are joined with the reflexive project of the self. This means, as he states⁵, that an individual builds and rebuilds his/her own self and as a result of this process he/she gains an understanding of the self. The same is true of all pure relationships. The partners manage their pure relationships, reorganize them at will and at the same time they reflect on the nature of their relationships. It is clear, in Giddens' opinion, that reflexivity is involved in both cases. The main problem here, I believe, is that the British scholar⁶ not only writes about the narrative character of the self but also emphasizes that the narrative of the self is necessarily integrated and coherent. I disagree with Giddens over the nature of the self, particularly that self which is connected with the other one by pure relationships. The statement about narrative coherence of the self does not necessarily follow from the fact that one of the main features of narrative is coherence. From a postmodern perspective, the self must be interpreted as a set of different, contradictory and conflicting self-narratives. Each of these narratives about the self may have coherent unity but all of them must beget no integrity or stable system. Scott Lash⁷ writes that contemporary individuals have to content themselves with bricolage-biographies, because they have not sufficient reflective distance on themselves and as a result of this they are unable to create linear

¹ Giddens A., Pierson C. *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity*. – Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998. – P. 126; Giddens A. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. – Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992. – P. 137.

² Giddens A., Pierson C. *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity*. – Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998. – P. 119, 125–126; Giddens A. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. – Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992. – P. 188–190.

³ Giddens A. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. – Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992. – P. 192.

⁴ *Ibid.* – P. 189.

⁵ Giddens A. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. – Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991. – P. 75.

⁶ *Ibid.* – P. 75–80.

⁷ Lash S. *Individualization in a non-linear mode* // Beck U., Beck-Gernsheim E. *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. – London: SAGE, 2002. – P. ix.

and narrative biographies. On this basis Lash¹ argues that today's individual is not reflective but rather reflexive, for he deals with reflexes that help him to live in a world of speed and quick decisionmaking. When the former Cartesian self and Kantian self applied reflection to themselves and thus were self-reflective, "the non-linear individual may wish to be reflective but has neither the time nor the space to reflect. He is a combinard. He puts together networks, constructs alliances, makes deals"².

I suppose that Lash's rejection of self-reflectivity which is embedded in contemporary personal identity is wrong. Meanwhile, his opinion is partially useful. From my point of view, the personal identity of contemporary individuals that have immediate or computer/device-mediated pure relationships is self-reflective but this self-reflection has changed its character and is not of the same type that was in the past. Today's self-reflection is only an immediate self-recognition, a fleeting moment of self-categorization, a simplified self-understanding which occurs during the action or just after the action and is oriented not towards the hidden internal dimension of the self (as it was in the case of Cartesian and Kantian selves) but towards the outside extension of the self, that is, towards the body, face, clothes, appearance and the whole personal facade (either actual or virtual). In other words, the self of contemporary individuals is an embodied and externalized self that has no autonomous interior and is emptied out of inner essence or stable and authentic self-definition. But how this externalized self is reconfigured in pure relationships? The partners in these relationships avoid excessive display of empathy, mutual help, care, responsibility, trust because the running to such extremes is an undeniable proof of inner true self, autonomous interior and stable self-definition. Moreover, being together, the results of a cooperative labour, merging "I" with "You" have no great importance for parties in pure relationships. Instead of these moments the key part plays self-fulfilment, self-disclosure, self-realization, instant hedonistic pleasure. The characteristic feature of these processes is that they work only by means of body and personal facade. That is why individuals in pure relationships are typically obsessed with their own actual or virtual facade and with the facade of their partners. They constantly aestheticize their own actual or virtual facade, alter and adjust it, aesthetically appreciate the partners' facade.

In contemporary society, individuals maintain the model of pure relationships with plenty of various partners in everyday life and on Internet. With every partner they agree a different relationship contract and then they rewrite their contract when necessary. If the self is deeply rooted in human relationships and does not exist before any relationship, then the personal identity of partners in pure relationships must be fragmented and decentred. Undoubtedly, this is

¹ Ibid. – P. ix.

² Ibid. – P. ix.

a postmodern self¹. Parties in different pure relationships change their personal identity, use or invent another self-definition, adjust their personal identity to another relationship contract. As a result, their personal identity contains a variety of conflicting self-definitions and is flexible, unstable and context-dependent. Being devoid of authentic self-definition and inner true self, the partners have to invent their self-conceptions together in a current situation. This is a permanent creative cooperation of the parties.

Zygmunt Bauman² stresses the commodified nature of pure relationships because now people consider their relationships with one another as an investment that must be profitable, as a commodity or business transaction. This means that pure relationships must give instant hedonistic pleasure and mutual benefit to the parties, otherwise such relationships are treated as low grade commodities that have to be rejected without delay. In contrast to Bauman, Giddens does not admit the commodified character of pure relationships. When Christopher Pierson³ said that the downside of pure relationship is that “real intimacy or friendship is in danger of being commodified”, Giddens gave no straight answer to this question and began to talk about the equality in relationships. If pure relationships and commodification are knit together, then the personal identity of the parties must be commodified in the same way. The partners in pure relationships promote their commodified personal identities and present themselves to one another as high grade commodities that guarantee immediate hedonistic pleasure and various benefits. Such commodification of human self in pure relationships is coupled with contradictory individualism, for a person constructs and present his/her self as a commodity but depends on the recognition of his/her commodified self.

In sum, despite Giddens’ opinion, the personal identity of the parties in pure relationships has postmodern character and is fragmented, fluid, context-dependent, depthless, externalized, self-reflective and commodified.

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