

Return of the Same with a Difference. A Brief History of Mediocrity from Antiquity to Modernity

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Abstract

The article proposes a brief history of mediocrity, whose evolutionary stages are perceived to run parallel to the human condition from antiquity to modernity: from the normative view on evil to the culture of rights and freedoms, in which the force of rationality is doubled by that of passion. The essay attempts to identify the main ways of being of the mediocre individual, in line with collective mediocrity. Concentrating especially on the contemporary, the article shows how compromise becomes the backdrop for contemporary mediocrity and focusing on a literary example, it analyses the axiological crisis in Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*, in which the amoral hero mixes good and evil indiscriminately.

Keywords: *mediocrity, axiological crisis, helplessness, compromise, megalomania*

“If something doesn't work, it's not my fault!” This is how ordinary individuals can deny any responsibility for their own actions. In this sense, mediocrity can be considered a sort of slap in the face of humanity. This slap may not hurt or make any member of the community shout with pain, yet in the long run the actions of the mediocre bring about a negative result on the community that he/ she is part of.

At the same time, mediocrity can be a virus that spreads beyond any limits and infects a wide variety of people. Paradoxically, it can even become profitable for some of its victims. The question which we attempt to ask in this essay is whether intelligence could really be regarded as an antidote to such a strong and sly virus as mediocrity. The answer cannot be straightforward if we consider what is expected from an intelligent person: to be able to cope under any difficulty, to choose the right moment when to do things, and to obtain what he/she looks for. He/she is his/her master and he/she takes full responsibility of his/her actions. The intelligent person acts as a singularity, while the mediocre are always dependent of others.

Mediocrity and Truth: The Mediocre's *Angst* in Relation to Singularity

From a cognitive perspective, mediocrity could be placed somewhere between stupidity and excellence, as the mediocre walk the middle road so as not to disturb or upset anyone. The only occasion when 'mediocre man' strives for visibility is when he endeavours to avoid falling into oblivion. However, mediocrity can be (mis)taken for some kind of 'virtue' for / by modern man, who can thus more easily adapt to any compromise. This behaviour can be seen as pragmatic and in this context the mediocre man may be considered to be a 'disciplined person' who is likely to set an example for others to follow. In this case, he becomes a 'norm', a citizen who lives in a community and who does not have to be singular. In his *Republic*, Plato held that “a city comes to

exist [...] because none of us is individually self-sufficient, but each has many needs he cannot satisfy”¹. Citizens’ mutual interdependence generated a desirable model, that of the disciplined subordinate, upheld also by Lycophron, a Greek poet and scholar of the Library of Alexandria, who emphasized the importance of the state in guaranteeing citizens’ rights.

In modern philosophy, Spinoza’s and Rousseau’s writings continued such a rationalist-contractual view on society. Baruch Spinoza enlarged upon the idea of the freedom of conscience; however, he considered civic insubordination as unacceptable and the one who refuses to conform to established norms as a sort of *rebel*. It was impossible not to obey natural order, which could be regarded as an example for human solidarity, divine intellect being higher than both human intellect and the order of things. Thus, the condemnation of any contrary behaviour is founded on understanding institutions as being rational and therefore on seeing in any act of insubordination a threat against social equity, which could stir up the hatred of the masses. Human freedom is envisaged only in terms of necessity and all actions within the state are generated by well-determined causes:

No, the object of government is not to change men from rational beings into beasts or puppets, but to enable them to develop their minds and bodies in security, and to employ their reason unshackled; neither showing hatred, anger, or deceit, nor watched with the eyes of jealousy and injustice. In fact, the true aim of government is liberty.²

The power of the state is created in order to support all rights and interests, an idea which implies that the concepts of ‘state’ and ‘society’ overlap in some way. The state preserves the general or common right, which includes all freedoms and all responsibilities of its citizens in what we can name ‘power’.

For Jean-Jacques Rousseau there must be “a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before”.³ Nevertheless, the freedom Rousseau wrote about in his Contract did nothing more than to increase the dependence and the needs of the associates. The care of the state will be easier to amend at the same time as the growth of the power of reason and the decrease of individual responsibility. The state provides assistance for all its citizens’ needs and it has the duty, enforced by its citizens, to secure livelihood for all. Thus, mediocrity can somehow grow on the same branch as rationality.

In the 1930s the importance given to rationality and the state prompted Emil Cioran, the Romanian-born philosopher of “despair”, to put forward the thesis of the incompatibility between reason and life, from which a new human prototype could be evolved, a human being opposed to the abstract rational model which prevailed in the modern age: the “passionate man”, characterised by a “softening of instincts”, in the sense that he lets himself driven by emotions:

¹ C. D. C Reeve, ed., *A Plato Reader. Eight Essential Dialogues* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2012), 313.

² Baruch Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (Middlesex: Echo Library, 2006), 73.

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (New York: Cosimo, 2008), 23.

Shakespeare et l'Ancien Testament montrent des hommes par rapport auxquels nous sommes des singes infatués ou des damoiseaux effacés, qui ne savent pas remplir l'espace de leurs douleurs et de leurs joies, provoquer la nature ou Dieu. (...) Endure et crève ! c'est la devise de la distinction pour l'homme moderne La distinction - c'est la superstition d'un genre corrompu⁴.

For Cioran, the moderns were “lukewarm”: “Les modernes sont tièdes, trop tièdes”.⁵

In *Romania's Transfiguration*, written before leaving the country for good in order to settle in France, and which Ilinca Zarifopol Johnston named “Cioran's quixotic test for a suitable selfhood”⁶, Cioran insisted that while in great cultures individuals can save themselves, in small cultures they lose themselves in the world.⁷ His personal drama in these years was “the curse of marginality”, the small culture in which he was born and in which he had to create in a language nobody knew:

[P]assion for Romania cannot accept its condemnation to eternal mediocrity. . . . Criminal lucidity sees it as a disappearing microcosm, while passion places it at the centre of the heart, and therefore in the rhythm of the world. . . . The pride of a man born in a small culture will always be wounded. It's not easy to be born in a second-rate country. Lucidity becomes tragedy. And if messianic fury doesn't suffocate you, your soul will drown in a sea of disconsolation.⁸

Cioran considered that modernity offered various types of salvation, one of them being abandonment to mediocrity, precisely, which would not have been possible in a state of naïvety. The naïve was not aware of knowledge and therefore was in a state of “innocence”, as opposed to “experience”. The naïve had to fight for survival and, in this fight, transparency was a compulsory condition. According to Cioran in a meditation on Rousseau, man has always felt well in epochs of naïvety. Once his knowledge crystallised with some cultural content, he abandoned himself, contrastingly, to the dramatic dimension of life.⁹ This state of “abandonment to drama” is the result of lucidity which makes modern people see themselves objectively, whereas naïvety brings them closer to the “freshness” of life. Each culture is nothing more than a form of “contemplative exhaustion” and a loss in rationality.

The 20th century rebellions originated from Nietzsche's rejection of the weak, who were searching for salvation through hope. Cioran breaks once again the mirror of illusion, labelling hope “a slave's virtue”: “The mob asks to be overwhelmed by invective, by threats, and revelations, by shattering pronouncements, the mob loves a shouter”.¹⁰ Illusions that men experience as a reconsideration of the attempt to exist urged Cioran to denounce stupidity: “Il est des gens si bêtes que si une idée apparaissait à la surface de leur cerveau, elle se suiciderait, terrifiée de solitude.”¹¹

⁴ Emil Cioran, *Le crépuscule des pensées* (Paris: L'Herne, 1991), 75.

⁵ Cioran, *Le crépuscule des pensées*, 75.

⁶ Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, *Searching for Cioran*, ed. Kenneth Johnston, “Foreword” by Matei Călinescu (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 93.

⁷ See Emil Cioran, *Schimbarea la față a României* [Romania's Transfiguration] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990), 35. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

⁸ Cioran, *Schimbarea la față a României*, 28. (translation by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston in *Searching for Cioran*, 94.)

⁹ See Cioran, *Schimbarea la față a României*, 94.

¹⁰ Emil Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 171.

¹¹ Cioran, *Le crépuscule des pensées*, 102.

Returning to the cognitive side of mediocrity, we might also include in this paradigm parents who want their children to obey without asking questions, and schools which want disciplined students eager to receive information and who never disturb classes. Likewise organizations which value people who do their work while complying with rigid standards and fixed roles. The inclination to obey and comply has thus become a desirable quality. With its mythical references¹², Constantin Brâncuși's sculpture "Wisdom of the Earth" (*Cumințenia pământului*) seems to be a depiction of the contemporary individual, the man who indulges daily in the pleasures of mediocrity. Constantin Noica, a reputed Romanian philosopher, considered Brâncuși's work the art of a genius depicting the human condition. His interpretation of *Cumințenia pământului* was that it described that primordial condition, in which individuals are born "good", but transformed by the society they live in into mediocre people. The sad condition of contemporary human beings comes from the fact that they cannot help themselves. Constantin Noica asserted that man wanted to master the jungle, yet he himself became a jungle:

However, the contemporary man, or the rational humankind as a sort of God, projects on itself what is good and what is evil from the nature they have submitted; or, as Goethe would say, it has a state of innocence, the state beyond good and evil by which demonism is expressed. That is because, indeed, man has put order in nature and in what is beyond it, which means that he ended with the jungle, but he has become himself a jungle.¹³

Contemporary mediocrity brought a new human condition, that of the people born in the age of technology. The progress of science generates its own means of negation: people who can use technology without understanding it just because it brings them pleasure and it helps them savour their free time, the "goodness of our times", as Noica put it. The position of *technological beings* in the new human ontology places them between Man (Spirit) and Nature, but its manifestations are felt against Man as much as against Nature. The world of *technological beings* has relatively independent and even autopoietic devices and systems which have become detrimental both to the environment and to humanity. According to the Polish philosopher Josef Borgosz, technology drains the life of the planet, by making land and water barren.¹⁴ He must have been inspired by Heidegger's engagement with the question of humanity's passive or active assignation of modern technology, which could become either "danger" or "saving power.", "enframing" the human being. Man has to get the ability to listen to, reflect on and witness either the "supreme anger" or the "saving power" of technology¹⁵.

¹² Brâncuși intended to make his sculpture represent the relation between Man and the primordial elements of nature, which were considered by the Pre-Socratics water, air, fire and earth. Their combination results in the diversity of life. The sculpture represents a primitive woman from Oltenia, which is in the South of Romania, sitting.

¹³ Constantin Noica, *Simple introduceri la bunătatea timpului nostru* [Simple Introductions to the Goodness of our Time] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1993), 144, (my translation).

¹⁴ Jozef Borgosz, "Desalination of the Techno-Scientific Civilisation as *raison d'être* of Universalism," *Dialogue and Humanism* 4 (1994): 109.

¹⁵ See Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, 283-318 (London: Routledge, 1978).

What has not been engulfed by this process of desertification is precisely Man as a being alienated from his own essence. In spite of technological progress, or, more likely, because of it, Man has turned into a creature who zaps between images and who is glued to artificial intelligence, waiting for its effects and dispensations. By acting in such a way, he partakes of an essential mediocrity, his mind swathed in a comfort zone which leaves no room for questioning but rather instils the hope that everything will be alright. Contemporary mediocrity does not anticipate, has no past and does not care about the present: paradoxically, too much knowledge has made man stupid. Seen in this way, contemporary mediocrity feeds off the progress of knowledge.

If mediocrity can be considered atemporal, it has to be dependent on a space. This is why Eastern mediocrity is not the same as Western mediocrity. What the history of culture has taught us since antiquity is that value systems and their criteria always take Western culture as a point of reference and in turn, the East compares itself to the West. It would seem that, as Cioran noted, Western rot smelled nice.

As an idea, mediocrity has its own mysterious ways; it integrates behaviours, suppresses the need to know, cultivates precaution in telling the truth as well as shrouds in mystery or just indifference the distinction between truth and falsehood. The mediocre are not interested in scientific truth, which is only secondary, and they desire power to influence the others, they long for the power of being credible, and the pathos that accompanies any pseudo information to make it more credible. All this takes place because the new coordinates in contemporary politics conflate right and left in the pursuit of power. "Compromise" is the watchword both for the decision maker and those he leads, and it has become the backdrop for present-day mediocrity, because those who make commitments without fulfilling their promises are mediocre.

If *post-* is the favourite prefix for the period following modernity, *pseudo-* is what unites the destiny of millions of people in the well-known phenomenon of mediocrity beyond any cultural barriers. Crisis, imposture and lie form a perverse trinity which spreads like the plague did in the Middle Ages. According to Jean-François Revel, in the typology of lies, the totalitarian lie is one of the most pervasive lies ever known in history. Its purpose is both to keep the population from getting information from the outside world, and to keep the outside world from knowing what is going on inside.¹⁶ This type of lie generated a mediocrity fuelled by the struggle to survive in a closed society. The mediocre man from a totalitarian regime is the subconscious bearer of a faith in the egalitarianism of status in social hierarchy. Nothing and nobody can shake his conviction that s/he is capable of any form of power, ignoring any form of responsibility. The new democracy, with its variety of codified liberties, fades away before mediocrity.

The question we are asking is still a question on a cognitive level: is it sufficient to have a knowledge of this situation, to discern it in the first place? We could identify the answer in the title of Revel's book: *Useless Knowledge*. Knowledge does not help us to stop mediocrity. This idea brings to mind Plato's distinction between opinion and science, circumstantial judgment (*doxa*) and reliable judgment (*episteme*), which is dependent upon the way points of view are shaped rather than the attitude of the one who expresses a judgment.¹⁷ No matter what position one may align oneself with, that of reliable information or that of a mere opinion, the moral dimension (understood as

¹⁶ See Jean-François Revel, *La Connaissance inutile*, (Paris: Grasset, 1988).

¹⁷ Revel, *La Connaissance inutile*, 15.

good faith), is included *a priori*. In an attempt to determine the degree of clarity of thinking, the dialectical method “gently draws forth” and “leads up”, as Plato asserted, “the eye of the soul” that “is really buried in a barbaric bog”.¹⁸

The modern world does not value philosophers. In Plato’s *Republic*, philosophers had something of a divine nature and a modelling role for citizens:

They would take the city and the dispositions of human beings, as though they were a tablet (...). After that, I suppose that in filling out their work they would look away frequently in both directions, toward the just, fair, and moderate by nature and everything of the sort, and again toward what it is in the human beings: and thus, mixing and blending the practices as ingredients, they would produce the image of man.¹⁹

Wisdom in the Socratic sense meant a sort of humbleness which encourages questioning. “I am *not ashamed* to learn, and I *ask* and enquire,”²⁰ confesses Socrates to Hippias, and in *Charmides*, in his dialogue with Critias, he enlarges upon what it means to be a philosopher: “And so this is being temperate, or temperance, and knowing oneself — that one should know what one knows and what one does not know”.²¹ Plato admits the power of science and distinguishes between this one and Man’s moral dimension. The supreme “good”, a fundamental moral value, situated in the world of Ideas coordinates the power of science; yet, if science is force, honesty does not confirm the power of science.

For Nietzsche science and wisdom have various effects on the individual. Being wise does not necessarily mean that one possesses Truth. This idea is developed in the general image of the philosopher; in Nietzsche’s view, the philosopher seems shy and unskilful in his options. The Nietzschean revolt puts the philosopher in a difficult position that is opposed to truth: “Supposing that Truth is a **woman** — what then? Is there not ground for suspecting that all philosophers, in so far as they have been dogmatists, have failed to understand women?”²²

In the “Foreword” to *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche formulated a plausible hypothesis on the relationship between truth and mediocrity as embodied in an individual contaminated by the virus of philosophy. In other words, truth does not belong exclusively to any kind of philosophical thinking and truths are the means through which we approach things, beings, words, images, forms, sounds and colours. Lack of skill and dexterity in working with essences can lead us to dogmatism, locking the thought in a set pattern. To avoid this deplorable state, we will look into the issue of mediocrity from an axiological point of view.

¹⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 212.

¹⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, 180.

²⁰ Benjamin Jowett, Pedro de Blas, eds., *Essential Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005), 32.

²¹ Plato, *VIII: Charmides, Alcibiades I and II, Hipparchus, The Lovers, Theages, Minos, Epinomis*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (London: William Heinemann Ltd.; New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1927), 57.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (Rockville, MD: Serenity Publishers, 2008), 7.

The Axiological Dimension of Mediocrity; or, How and When It is Profitable to be Mediocre

Platonistic ideas had a special status in ontology; they announced that the essence of things is beyond them, participating in their existence. It is exactly this status of *Ideas* that sets in motion the reflexion on the difference between Value and Reality. In modern philosophy, Hartman saw values as belonging to the spiritual realm, “the ideal sphere of being”, a realm which cannot be perceived or sensed because it is distinct from the “real sphere”. The idealism of values is independent of reality and, at the same time, it influences the possibility of good in a positive way. Thus, we can make the distinction between the objectivity and the functionality of values.

Axiology clarifies understanding cultures and behaviours in a cultural space. Without focusing on the research of contemporary axiology and philosophy, we may enumerate a few existentialist positions illustrated by Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Karl Jaspers, who emphasized individual experience; Émile Durkheim, an adept of axiological sociology, connected values to objective collective representations, to models to be followed by social individuals. Social representations within the collective mind turn into real interpretative grids of understanding social events. We should add the view of contemporary American pragmatism: philosophers like Charles Sanders Pierce, John Dewey and William James considered that Man assumed the attitude of seeking recognition for the utility of his work, a tendency which is much appreciated nowadays. Modern anthropologists like David Bidney and Ralph Linton regarded values as the most revealing means for interpreting cultures. As far as mediocrity is concerned, this one has its own system of values and hierarchies, which turns upside down all theories on true/false.

In order to understand mediocrity in the Romanian space, I propose to investigate the axiological model that Petre Andrei, a reputed sociologist, philosopher and politician, put forward in his debate on “the process of recognition of values”²³. He reached the conclusion that “as far as cognitive values are concerned, the supreme value, the absolute value, is the truth”. As far as judgment values are concerned, they “surpass the subjectivity of the individual consciousness through the Ideal”²⁴. The Ideal is the totality of values and it is something impersonal and objective. According to Petre Andrei, all values that have been created or are about to be created represent what is called *culture*.²⁵ The cultural ideal has an absolute value that comprises all the other types of ideals – the economic, the ethical, the legal, the political or the religious. The one who creates cultural values is the closest to the cultural ideal. This proximity comes with different degrees of achievement and responsibility. Thus, the axiological issue can be applied to the social ideal. In Andrei’s view, the social individual can be “any being aware of himself, who can act deliberately, has free will and, consequently, is responsible”.²⁶ The levels at which personalities manifest themselves refer either to the individual plan (the personality of the individual) or social context, where the

²³ Petre Andrei, *Filosofia valorii* [Philosophy of Value] (Iași: Polirom, 1997), 213.

²⁴ Andrei, *Filosofia valorii*, 213.

²⁵ Andrei, *Filosofia valorii*, 213.

²⁶ Andrei, *Filosofia valorii*, 219 (my translation).

personality is the expression of unity of “all individual, constant and independent wills, and a subordination of all their partial individual purposes to a single target”.²⁷

Following Meyer’s position, Andrei thought that the ideal is “an intellectual society, a community in which each individual strives separately to achieve the common goals that humanity has, and in which, on the other hand, it is a completely unique personality”.²⁸ This is how every social person understands and assumes the ideal of humanity without losing their individual independence. This is the articulation of the idea of a vindicated, politically emancipated and philosophical mediocrity, since, in contradiction, the mediocre man does not feel this loss of his individuality; it is only the society that pushes him towards the “bad” human nature that is specific to mediocrity. This is exactly what Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s social contract stipulated; by the modern social contract, he made a pact between the “good” human nature and the “bad” human condition, the latter making Man aware of his responsibilities before all social evils. In times of revolt and rebellions, the prudent man gets away, and the crowd gathers together. The thoughtless crowd gathers under the drive of passion:

Among the passions which stir a man’s heart, there is one that is ardent, impetuous, makes one sex necessary to the other, a terrible passion that braves all dangers, overcomes all obstacles, and in its frenzy seems liable to destroy Mankind which it is destined to preserve.²⁹

Being dissolved in the crowd leads to imitation: “Everyone began to look at everyone else and to wish to be looked at himself, and public esteem acquired a price”.³⁰ The dependence of the one who becomes part of a community strengthens: “The breakdown of equality was followed by the most frightful disorder: thus the usurpations in the rich, the Banditry of the Poor, the unbridled passions of all, the stifling natural pity and the still weak voice of the justice, made man greedy, ambitious, and wicked.”³¹

According to the situation, a personality will follow one of these two paths: it will either keep its individuality, assuming it critically, or it will dissolve into the crowd, where actions and options are randomized.

Considering Petre Andrei’s theory that a personality is a person aware of values, endowed with free will and thought and devoted to intellectual ideals, I propose to answer questions such as: under what circumstances could this personality dissolve into mediocrity? What could lead to the loss of critical thought? A first circumstance could be a repressive social context, where the personality cannot manifest its free will. Such a context existed in totalitarian states, where political ideology was unique and absolute. This answer is, however, only partial, as mediocrity manifests itself not only in totalitarian regimes, but, historically, in all political and social systems. Another explanation can be the lack of adaptation of the human ideal to the communitarian ideal, in such a way that humanity does not need free will and responsible thought, but only simple ministering to people’s interests. Individual goals are aggressively distinct from

²⁷ Andrei, *Filosofia valori*, 219.

²⁸ Andrei, *Filosofia valori*, 220 (my translation).

²⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, ed. and trans. N.K. Singh (New Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2006), 90.

³⁰ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin*, 138.

³¹ Rousseau *Discourse on the Origin*, 145.

the social goals and the economic, political, ethical, juridical aspirations can seem to belong to totally different worlds. On the one hand, they are backed up by individual goals, on the other hand, they dominate social needs. Under these circumstances, a new context appears, in which the individual is part of the society but does not engage with the members of that respective community. This confers an apparent autonomy to the individual, yet this is the autonomy of the mediocre, as he does not understand the context in which he acts, but he is pushed to act automatically. Justice is no longer a social regulator, but an imposed standard which denies individual will and generates different ways of adaptation. In such a context, mediocrity seems to be a way of survival; it is the moment when what Nietzsche called “nullity” can bloom.

The objective man is an instrument, a cosily, easily injured, easily tarnished measuring instrument and mirroring apparatus, which can be taken care of and respected; but he is no goal, not outgoing nor upgoing, no complementary man in whom the rest of existence justifies itself, no termination – and still less a commencement, an engendering, or primary cause, nothing hardy, powerful, self-centered, that wants to be master; but rather only a soft, inflated, delicate, movable potter’s – form, that must wait for some kind of content and frame to ‘shape’ itself thereto – for the most part a man without frame and content, a ‘selfless’ man”.³²

In this characterization that we can attach to the mediocre man, in his criticism of the smugness of German culture, Nietzsche refers to women as a dogmatic philosopher would do it: “Consequently, also, nothing for women, IN PARENTHESI”.³³ The only feeling the mediocre can have is helplessness; that is why they will try to defeat their complexes with any act of imposition. Where you would expect it the least, the mediocre must lead institutions and parties, sometimes even states or administrative districts. This kind of mediocrity is visible and can wear out any strong personality through perseverance. One of Schopenhauer’s aphorisms warns against the people who credit mediocrity by stating that they have never known real value.³⁴

The mediocre man, the one belonging to the violence of barbarism and primitivism, is placed by Robert Musil between the consciousness of the inevitable decline and the megalomaniac delirium. *The Man without Qualities* is the label applied to the mathematician Ulrich by his childhood friend, Walter. Walter thinks that “as a so-called normal person, one’s thoughts are truly hardly less incoherent than a madman’s!”³⁵ Madness is thus seen as a normal state.

Ulrich manifests indifference and passivity towards life. His crisis is not demonstrated by his appearance: he is handsome, rich, intelligent, charming, strong in his power of influencing people, but he does not know what he wants and, consequently, he has no axiological standards. He has so many qualities that he does not know what else he could add, and that is when his tragedy begins. “It seemed to Ulrich that with the beginning of his adult life a general lull had set in, a gradual running down”.³⁶ This is the reason why, as Musil put it, “in his concern with the question of

³² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 90-91.

³³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 90-91.

³⁴ See the fourth aphorism in Arthur Schopenhauer, *Complete Essays of Schopenhauer: Seven Books in One Volume*, trans. T. Bailey Saunders (New York: Willey Book Co., 1942).

³⁵ Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins (New York: Random House, 1996), 1373.

³⁶ Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, 55.

whether everything else should be subordinated to the most powerful forms of inner achievement, in other words, whether a goal and a meaning can be found for what is happening and has happened to us—had always, all his life, [Ulrich] has been quite alone”.³⁷

Ulrich is unhappy, he loves nobody, but he does not love himself either, he follows no examples. Musil’s novel is about an abandonment of will power, yet in spite of confirming to the rules of society, Ulrich trusts no one and thinks that society cannot understand his aspirations. As a result, the only way for him to resist is to imagine a transcendental world where life oscillates between desire and fulfilment, generating the energy for a mystical ecstasy. His behaviour is based on a moral imperative: “It seems really that it’s only the people who don’t do much good who are able to preserve their goodness intact!”³⁸ For the mediocre, there is amorality rather than immorality at work. The modern mediocre man has no moral values because “the moral person as such is ridiculous and unpleasant, as we know by the odor of those poor, resigned people who have nothing they can call their own but their morality”.³⁹

The man without qualities lives in contrast with the fashionable ideal and with the orthodoxies of the day. As H. Istvan saw, such a man can admire Hitler as a historical figure and at the same time he can condemn the common thief, he may be the enemy of war and yet understand the Germans’ desire for *Lebensraum* (vital space). He can deliver speeches about humanism, being a genuine supporter of humanist ideals, but at the same time, he can declare himself a supporter of racism. Such a man is dogmatic, but mutually exclusive dogmas have the same influence on him.⁴⁰ The existential desire of the megalomaniac mediocre is to justify their life with feelings and ideas. It is an *in actu* helplessness when they consider themselves misunderstood because of the bad circumstances. The key to survive is to falsify their existence; it is the way to adapt to an unfavourable environment. In Robert Musil’s view, the pressure of the future era of scientific civilization where all people will be wise and moderate puts more pressure on the contemporary generation, whose last refuge is in sexuality and war.⁴¹ By sexuality, the individual returns to his instinctual side and by war, he situates himself in a permanent revolt against the context in which the individual has to adapt. Musil insists on what Patricia McBride called “the ethical vacuum at the heart of the modern experience in terms other than the demise of binding systems of values and universal visions of the good life, if contemporary evils are to be confronted effectively”.⁴²

Musil reminds us of Julio Cortázar, who confesses, contemplating the meaning of the creative effort: “I believe that it makes as much sense to make a doll out of breadcrumbs as it does to write a novel I will never write or defend with one’s life the ideas which redeem nations”.⁴³ Time borders are cancelled and repetitiveness can appear any time. There is no safety, no precise orientation; all can be equally real or

³⁷ Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, 266.

³⁸ Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, 793.

³⁹ Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, 213.

⁴⁰ H. Istvan, *Kitsch-ul fenomen al pseudoartei* [The Kitsch. A Phenomenon of Pseudo Art] (Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1973), 65.

⁴¹ See Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, 1756.

⁴² Patricia McBride, ed., “Introduction: An Unfashionable Modernist,” in *The Void of Ethics. Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity* (Evanston and Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 6.

⁴³ Julio Cortázar *apud* Steven Boldy, *The Novels of Julio Cortázar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 53.

only possible. The mediocre is the disciplined man who executes without being able to comprehend the decision, and valorising remains an arbitrary process, which adapts itself at the right moment.

Coming back to the metaphor by which we interpreted mediocrity as a virus, we can conclude on its proximity: the virus is here, near us and it often acts through us.

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Revenirea „Aceluiași” cu o diferență. O scurtă istorie a mediocrității de la Antichitate la Modernitate

Analiza mediocrității parcurge aceleași etape pe care le înscrie evoluția condiției umane de la antichitate la modernitate: de la viziunea normativă asupra răului la cultura drepturilor și libertăților, în care forța rațiunii este dublată de cea a pasiunii. Articolul caută să identifice principalele moduri de a fi ale mediocrului individual, în acord cu mediocritatea colectivă. Axându-se mai ales asupra lumii contemporane, articolul arată cum compromisul devine fondul pe care evoluează mediocritatea contemporană și analizează criza axiologică din romanul lui Robert Musil, în care personajul principal nu cunoaște valorile morale și amestecă binele cu răul în mod indiscriminatoriu.