The ethos of the fire service in the context of postmodern changes

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Abstract
Professional involvement and the moral life of individuals and professional groups, especially those with high social prestige, such as firefighters, are linked by the category of “ethos”. Since the ethos of this service is today significantly influenced by multifaceted and dynamic ideological and existential transformations, it seems necessary to analyse the nature of this impact. Therefore, it seems that postmodernity brings with it ideological tendencies, which, by destroying the traditional preferences established so far, do not propose anything in their place. These include, among others: the crisis of personal and community identity, secularisation processes, the “axiology” of consumerism that is clearly being shaped nowadays, the depreciation of the meaning of work, and, finally, irrationalism and the crisis of the meaning of life.

Keywords: ethos, fire service, postmodernism, humanity

Introduction
One of the elements that radically distinguishes man from other beings is his pursuit of perfection. Therefore, if he makes full use of the power of his rationality and freedom, he can never be fully satisfied with himself. In turn, the factor which, especially in postmodernity, sets out a significant framework for constituting one’s personal maturity, is still the professional work they perform. Professional engagement and the moral life of individuals and professional groups find their correlation in the field of meaning of the term “ethos”. For centuries, at least since the era of chivalry, this concept has opened a wide space for moral ideas and attitudes in professional groups enjoying great prestige, respect, and trust: priests, scientists, teachers, doctors, journalists, and representatives of uniformed services, which include the fire service.

The need to conduct broadly understood research on the ethos of these professional groups is adequate to the specificity and importance of the tasks they carry out for society. It is this premise that this article stems from, and its purpose is to reflect on the ethos of a firefighter in the broad context of postmodern reality.

A deeper reflection on this significant topic is important both from the point of view of academic theory and the pragmatic functioning of the Fire Service. Since the ethos of this service is today significantly influenced by multifaceted and dynamic ideological and existential transformations, it seems necessary to analyse the nature of this impact. Each epoch, shaping a specific vision of man, the world, social life, the essence and meaning of the work one performs, and finally morality, brings with it specific determinants for all areas of life. Therefore, they also cannot be indifferent to the firefighter’s ethos. Due to the fact that the specificity of each era is only fully visible in an appropriate historical perspective, it is now too early to indicate the features precisely identifying the social reality at the beginning of the 21st century. With regard to this question, the assessment of the same phenomena is for various reasons almost antinomically contradictory. Existing in the world between something that has ended and something that has not yet begun, we cannot unequivocally assess what will happen in the future. In fact, the only thing that remains unchanged is that everything is subject to constant variability. From the perspective of shaping the ethos of the fire service, postmodernity is constituted by factors that should be considered at least worrying. It brings with it ideological tendencies which, destroying the preferences established so far, do not propose anything in their

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place. These include, among others: the crisis of personal and community identity, secularisation processes, the “axiology” of consumerism that is clearly being shaped nowadays, the depreciation of the meaning of work, and finally irrationalism and the crisis of the meaning of life.

**Crisis of personal and community identity**
The starting point of analyses concerning the functioning of man in postmodernity should be a reflection on his nature, vocation, and identity. The importance of this issue cannot be overestimated, since we fully exist only to the extent that we can understand the meaning of our existence. Reflection on this issue becomes necessary in the context of postmodernity, which reveals a tendency to depersonalise the human being by negating its spiritual plane. Within popular consumer culture, the foundation of the identity of modern man almost seems to be only his body (Arendt, 2006). The integral way of thinking about man is replaced by materialisms of various provenances, which try to explain the phenomenon of human life in the same way as in the case of other living beings, i.e., by questions of matter, energy, natural selection, chance, and necessity (Zięba, 2018, p. 45).

The lack of personalism is also visible in the sphere of shaping interpersonal relations and the functioning of various communities, including professional ones. Natural difficulties in this area are even intensified in the postmodern world, because one of its important characteristics is a serious crisis of interpersonal bonds, as well as significant changes in social structures, roles, values, and norms (Sztompka, 2005, p. 24). Social relations seem to be increasingly based on the vision developed as far back as in the Enlightenment by Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques Rousseau, in which man is seen as an extremely selfish and antisocial being who constructs certain communities guided by reason and his own benefit.

Individualisation also can have positive effects in the area of the fire service because it can trigger personal dynamism and potential in individuals. However, as it is often understood today as something that leads to egoism, it results in the weakening of institutional social foundations and even natural impulses of solidarity or those motivated by empathy. Individualism promotes the creation of a disturbing culture of separation, where man becomes a selfish but also lonely monad. Selfishness makes it difficult for a person to “be” with others and to create truly human communities, i.e., communities based on subjective and dialogical relations (Marcel, 2010). Moreover, man does not notice, in the area of social, professional, and even family life, that he lives next to people worthy of their attention and kindness, and even love. For this reason, instead of close-knit social communities, ephemeral, occasional “cloakroom” or “coat hanger” communities are created where there is no place for the full involvement of the people who create them. In this type of community, their members are not concerned with coming together to perform their service and build its ethos; they are only united by common interest, or a common matter in the area of specific needs and tasks (Bauman, 2000). They are dominated by the paradigm of individual life and professional success combined with the fear of destroying personal aspirations by entering into closer relationships with colleagues. Meanwhile, the fire service, based on teamwork, invariably demands competence in the area of personal communication, trust, and loyalty.

**Secularisation tendencies**
For centuries, the ethos referring to fidelity to the highest values, and therefore also to those that are difficult to implement, has been closely correlated with religious life. Firefighters have been among those who turn to the space of faith to search for the strength necessary to meet the tasks related to the high ethos of service, tasks that demand exceeding the limits of physical endurance, and even risking health and life. Postmodernity brings with it ideas and phenomena conducive to departure from the social and axiological system which was guaranteed and
This progressive secularisation is also noticed by religiously oriented thinkers, since the well-known contemporary Catholic intellectual, cardinal Walter Kasper, believes that the drama of our era is the distance between faith and modern culture (Kasper, 1990, pp. 298–306). In a pluralistic society, it is not only that faith is neglected in everyday life; religious rituals that have shaped social life for centuries are also disappearing. Marxism has already denied the existence of God and religion, but now it is replaced by this version of atheism which has long been manifesting itself in developed Western countries. Its typical features include the rejection of the transcendent dimension of humanity, the lack of the need to lead a deeper religious life, at least in the church sense, as well as the tendency to eliminate religion from public space.

It is hard to overlook that, at least since the 18th century, numerous philosophical or ideological systems indicate completely different ways to the “salvation” of man than the Church. Along with the popularity of views promoting absolute axiological “neutrality”, there is a growing tendency not to recognise religion as an important reference point for the lives of individuals and even entire societies. The weakening of thinking with religious categories implies the denial by many modern people of basic concepts for shaping faith and ethos: sin, conscience, objective values, and moral norms (Zdybicka, 1988, p. 40). In modern societies, churches become the same institution as all others, and the sphere of their mission that is seen as “appropriate” is charity work (Dobbelaere, 2004). The situation in which postmodern man himself wants to give meaning to his existence is also conducive to the constitution of an extra-ecclesiastical religion, “dispersed”, “moving”, subjective, non-dogmatic, invisible, and often correlated with quasi-scientific or pseudo-mystical concepts (Luckmann, 2022). It is not a religion that can have a real impact on human activities, such as those undertaken in the area of building a firefighter’s ethos.

The purpose of the “pilgrimage” of postmodern man is no longer the salvation of the soul, but the realisation of the possibilities contained in the only world that is available to man, and thus “real”. Thus, he becomes a “nomad” without a charted path and has little in common with the biblical Abraham wandering through the Steppe towards the unknown land promised to him by God. The wandering of the postmodern nomad has no purpose, because no such purpose gives meaning to his efforts (Życiński, 2001, p. 58). He is plagued by numerous fears, but he does not want to hear about his weaknesses and sins, suffering, death, or his transient nature.

It seems that without religion, human life would be just a flash of momentary joy in the midst of immense suffering and misery, an insignificant episode. Apart from the psychological implications to which the afore-mentioned philosopher referred in terms of secularisation, it is impossible to overlook the fact that postmodern societies which reject religion, at least in the institutional dimension, are moving in a direction that is difficult to read unequivocally.

The “axiology” of consumerism

Since moral values build the spiritual structures of humanity, the lack of their proper system clearly destroys people and human communities (Gluchman, 2005). Worrying changes in the area of values visible in the axiological consciousness of postmodern people must raise concerns in the perspective of shaping the ethos of the fire service. This ethos, setting moral standards for the representatives of this service, stems out of the world of values respected by them. In pluralistic postmodern societies, this world of values is constituted by numerous new, subjective “axiologies”, which coexist side by side. This is because it is assumed that no recognised value can be in principle constant, nor that it can result from faith in God or religiousness.

The rejection of the traditional moral “should”, together with the social authorities who proclaim it, with the Church at the forefront, is even considered a condition for the existence of a fully mature morality. Postmodernists believe that in the past centuries, morality was a fairly
primitive synthesis of coercion, fear, punishment, love, and persuasion. Only the dispersal of this ethical smokescreen gives a chance to finally face the “naked truth” of moral dilemmas emerging from everyday life experiences. Only after the rejection of heteronomous morality and the associated codes of ethics and universal norms and values, can moral autonomy be obtained. Thrown into postmodern society, we must somehow face, even if it is not our desire, our moral independence, and thus our own and inalienable moral responsibility. Unfortunately, it is difficult to overlook the fact that this responsibility of postmodern people, guided by a “creative” conscience that does not disturb the realisation of “dreams” about “peaceful” and “eternal” satisfaction of “necessary” needs, refers rather to the sphere of consumption, and what becomes the default philosophy of life are quasi- “axiology”, “metaphysics” and even “religion” of consumerism (Bauman, 2007). The previously unknown technological possibilities, free movement of goods and capital as well as consumer mobility imply that a new range of experiences is being developed whose intensity is unlimited (Benedict XVI, 2009, No. 9; Aldridge, 2006, p. 13). What used to refer almost all people to God now becomes symbols of a new “religion”, and thus of what can be purchased and possessed. Instead of seeking a difficult way of life filled with values, modern man often surrenders his soul to consumption, making it a para-religious ritual (Barber, 1996; Pieszek, 2013, p. 68). As noted by Daniel Bell, modern and now postmodern society tries to replace religion with a utopia that is terrifying in its essence, as it is not “a transcendent ideal, but one to be realised through history (progress, rationality, science) with the nutrients of technology and the midwifery of revolution” (Bell, 1976, p. 28). Just as medieval society found support for balance in God and the Devil, ours is based on consumption and its simultaneous condemnation. However, while around the concept of the devil at least heresies and sects could organise, in the world of affluence there is no place even for heresy (Baudrillard, 1970). It is consumption that assumes the role of the devil who tempts and changes man, who takes over all spheres of life and deprives him of the possibility of making decisions. The ideal consumer becomes as passionate in confessing his faith as any other neophyte (Grzybek & Malczyńska-Biały, 2019).

Depreciation of the meaning of work

When considering the problem of the ethos of the fire service, one cannot ignore the issue of the value of work and its importance in individual, family, and social life. In attempts to break out of the obligation to work, one can see something more than a symptom of laziness or light-heartedness. Low involvement in work or avoiding it altogether is simply an act of desertion from humanity. It is through work that man not only transforms the world of nature, but fully realises himself as a man, somehow becoming more of a man. While noticing this correlation, however, it is difficult to overlook the fact that work within postmodern civilisation, at least understood in an integral way, is experiencing a clear crisis. Undoubtedly, the socio-political system functioning in the People’s Republic of Poland, which determined the context of Poles’ lives for almost half a century, contributed to the depreciation of work. The practice of economic life based on central planning and management, full of pathology and bizarre ideas, significantly depreciated the autotelism of human work and the possibility of shaping ethos. Even if three decades have passed since the fall of communism, there is no doubt that, in the social and professional consciousness, especially of older employees, the mechanisms that used to be favoured there are still functioning (Konstanczak, 2021).

The contemporary, flexible labour market, typical of capitalism, does not facilitate the treatment of work as activities based on commitment and dedication to the profession. Therefore, it is currently difficult, due to the short-term nature and instability of many modern jobs, to identify more strongly with work and build an individual identity and place in society based on it (Gluchmanová, 2021). Modern man is unable or unwilling to engage creatively in work because he is tired and bored with it, and often receives unfair remuneration, even if he
does it effectively. Committing oneself along with all one’s personal wealth to work is made all the more difficult by the process of technologising work mentioned earlier, which is also becoming more and more evident in the space of activities carried out by firefighters.

Many postmodern people do not notice the importance of contemplation or even reflection on the effects of their actions, including those related to professional life. The consequence of this situation is today’s visible instrumental attitude towards work, which is to be primarily a means of pursuing consumer interests and of spending more and more free time in an enjoyable way (Prendecki & Rejman, 2013, p. 69). It is difficult to find the loyalty and devotion that are so necessary to be a good firefighter in an employee who does not notice other aspects of work than those related to financial gratification.

However, as John Paul II rightly emphasised, respecting human subjectivity in relation to work (John Paul II, 1997, no. 32, 41) and the priority of work over capital (John Paul II, 1991, no. 12) should also be included among the fundamental values of personalistically understood work. The omission of these principles is conducive, in every community of work, to isolation and alienation of individual people, and even ruthless competition that destroys the possibility of personal cooperation. Depersonalisation of the employee and organisation of work is also not conducive to shaping the ethos of work, or even effective implementation of tasks.

Moreover, many modern employees, including firefighters, show symptoms of workaholism, having problems with developing a balance within their work-life relationship, necessary for mental and physical health. The lack of ability to combine work with private life, family, health, social activity inevitably implies deficits in all these areas, also in the context of the effectiveness of employee actions. This results more and more often in occupational burnout, which today, also in the uniformed services, poses a serious threat to the effectiveness of their work. Burnout, which degrades an individual, is also an extremely dangerous social problem. In addition, it affects the most committed, sensitive and conscientious employees, who represent the greatest value for each organisation.

Irrationalism and the lack of meaning of life
Thanks to the emergence of science in the nineteenth century, there was a “disenchantment of the world”, which, as Max Weber wrote, was to enable the transition from traditional to modern society (Weber, 2004). However, in postmodernity, which contests the rationalism of the Enlightenment, the existence of an objective meaning of the world and its teleological vision is denied (Welsh, 1993). Questions about the meaning of human life are automatically considered irrational, leading to the impoverishment of human reflection by removing from its range the fundamental questions that man has been asking himself since the beginning of his life on Earth.

Postmodern man, not knowing the purpose for which he appeared in the world and why he inevitably has to leave it, is also unable to carry out his tasks wisely and effectively. It is also impossible to engage in interpersonal relationships, including marital or family relationships, if you do not understand the meaning of your dedication or self-sacrifice. Of course, it is also impossible to fully realise yourself in professional work if it is not correlated with the broader sense of existence.

Although the ideology of postmodernism cannot be blamed for all worrying contemporary fluctuations, it involves conscious abandonment of most values that distinguish European civilisation: truth, goodness, beauty, reason, and, finally, the search for the meaning of life and everything that lies a little deeper. Popular culture sees the model man as guided by passions and emotions, not reason. Instead of spending your energy on understanding the reality around you and yourself, you just have to live your life with passion. Since, according to Richard Rorty, only that is true which we are comfortable believing in (Szahaj, 1993, pp. 112–114), we should prepare for the primacy of subjectivity and relativism, which entails the lack of the Archimedean fulcrum (Dębowski, 2006–2007, p. 14). According to the supporters of
postmodernism, as John Paul II perceived it: “the human being must now learn to live in a horizon of total absence of meaning, where everything is provisional and ephemeral” (John Paul II, 1998, No. 91). Józef Życiński, commenting on the papal encyclical *Fides et ratio*, expresses a belief that this leads to “a radical distinctness of life in present times. This distinctness is supposed to be a natural consequence of the fact that nothing can be known for sure, since all foundations turned out to be doubtful and unstable” (Życiński, 2003, p. 108).

The dramatic consequence of this rejection of Enlightenment axioms, according to John Paul II, is one of the greatest threats to humanity at the turn of the second and third millennia – the temptation to despair (John Paul II, 1998, No. 91). Modern man, succumbing to this temptation, due to the rejection of a powerful tool of meaning that is reason, often falls into nihilism and the correlated inertia of the spirit, loss of sensitivity of conscience, a surprising synthesis of noble aspirations and destruction, and especially scepticism, pessimism, and catastrophism. In parallel to the flattened versions of the meaning of human existence, a strong sense of fatalism is growing in a large part of contemporary societies (Życiński, 2003, p. 108). For when all our desires are satisfied by the market and life is reduced to earning and spending money, as Bauman concludes sadly, “we will become the most unhappy, lonely and absurd creatures in the world” (Bauman, 2004, p. 7). An open question is how man can find his place in such a world, also from the perspective of the fire service.

However, the anti-rationalism and anti-dogmatism favoured by postmodernism do not prevent postmodern thinkers, contrary to logic, from aspiring to find the “meaning” of reality in meaninglessness, absurdity, and nihilism. When denying the existence of religious or philosophically based metaphysics, various metanarratives are proposed, which, while being seductive in their apparent depth, in fact, remain a rather imprecise argument, with which it is difficult to even argue. These narratives are not able to indicate the meaning of human existence, nor to construct a serious proposal in the area of morality, because, having been shaped in the atmosphere of metaphysical-axiological emptiness, they remain their dramatic testimony.

**Conclusion**

Over the years, as a result of life experience, every person gains a worldview in the form of a system of theoretical judgements about the world, acquires knowledge about themselves, their needs and the purpose of life. Based on this worldview, they choose a given good, recognising something as valuable or devoid of value. Such a worldview, in the context of the professional activities of a firefighter characterised by a moral context, can be identified with the ethos which sets the course of their conduct. Recognising this ethos and respecting it determines the personal and moral maturity of individual officers, as well as the entire institution of the Fire Service.

It is hard to think of a better background for considering a firefighter’s ethos. Without references to morality, one cannot speak of a full verification of the human path to perfection through professional work. Man needs an ethos in order to live and be himself, also within the work or service that other people share with him (Gluchman, 2004). A “professional family” that prefers a specific ethos shapes the personality of individuals, their habits and ways of behaving, arrangements, and justifications for how to behave with dignity and morality. In this type of “family” connected by ethos, every firefighter should find a community with which they share the same values and implement a specific common good, while enjoying well-deserved social respect. In the case of the profession of a firefighter, which carries with it a connotation of a vocation, this respect, and at the same time, prestige must be based on the implementation of certain moral rules that require everyone who forms the community of service to follow the desired behaviour. This prestige, and, at the same time, the strength and effectiveness of the ethos of the fire service, does not result, of course, from formal orders and prohibitions, but from its voluntary recognition by employees identifying themselves with this profession. Representatives of the profession identified with service, at least for the most part, must respect
more or less formal deontological principles and respond unambiguously to cases of their violation. Only in this way can we correct the ethos of service and try to adapt it to the indicated ideal. An essential element of these efforts is to make the formulated norms more internalised in the community of service and translate them into building its high ethical culture. This process is absolutely constant and not only because of moral ambivalence which can sometimes appear even in those officers who seemed to exhibit high ethos. Every subsequent generation must shape anew the ethos of the fire service taking into consideration their predecessors with their achievements, and firefighters who are just beginning their careers must constantly learn appropriate behaviours, respect the ethos of service and redefine it, adequately to the changing requirements of liquid reality.

References


