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IS TADEUSZ KOTARBIŃSKI'S INDEPENDENT ETHICS PROGRAM IMPORTANT NOWADAYS?

Abstract. In the paper, the essential elements of Kotarbiński's independent ethics are presented. These are ethics which are one example of ethics in the broader sense, with a range of problems related to the question: how should we live our lives? Kotarbiński proposed an idea of independent ethics, ethics that are independent of religion and philosophy, ethics based on "platitude (obviousness) of heart". In the paper, some shortcomings of this proposal will be shown, but also, by analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan, it will be shown how we can overcome the weaknesses of independent ethic theory.

Keywords. Independent ethics, obviousness of heart, conscience, dignity, anthropology, Christian Revelation.

Professor Tadeusz Kotarbiński, the first Rector of the University of Łódź, left a significant mark of his rich and creative personality in many areas of the humanities, especially so in philosophy. One of these areas is ethics, and one of his original ideas was the concept of independent ethics. The idea of such an ethics he presented as far back as 1948, then returned repeatedly to it – up until 1987. Initially, the idea was met with quite lively resonance among philosophers, and some took it up, sometimes critically, but approving the general thrust of independent ethics.¹ Later, however, from approximately 1970, interest in it waned. Below I shall first present the important elements of this concept, then try to show some of its weaknesses, which – perhaps – have

¹ Cf. esp.: A. Grzegorzcyk, *On foundations of natural ethics*, [in:] idem, *Diagrams and Man. Philosophical Essays*, Kraków 1963, pp. 166–184; T. Czeżowski, *On Tadeusz Kotarbiński's independent ethics*, *Philosophical Studies* 1976 No. 3, pp. 27–32; T. Styczeń, *Independent Ethics?*, Lublin 1980 (cf. esp. pp. 59–63). Each of these authors in a slightly different way included the proposal by Kotarbiński in their own ethical suggestions. Noteworthy is particularly Czeżowski, whose conception of ethics as an empirical science, published at the same time, comes especially close to Kotarbiński's idea of independent ethics. Cf.: T. Czeżowski, *Ethics as an empirical science*, *Philosopher's Quarterly* 1949, vol. 18. 2, pp. 161–171. Cf. Also: A. Szostek, *Ethics as an empirical science as presented by T. Czeżowski and Kotarbiński*, *KUL Annals of Philosophy* 1971, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 43–57.

caused loss of interest in it, to finally highlight these qualities of Kotarbiński's thought which, in my opinion, still deserve attention. The title question of this presentation ought to have an affirmative answer: I believe that the independent ethics program today is worth taking up,² even though it requires adjustment and development.

1. Outline of independent ethics by T. Kotarbiński

Let's start with the fact that Professor Kotarbiński presented his idea of independent ethics several times, although it was unlikely to be developed. The individual texts differ little, some are directly inspired by the intention of popularizing this idea, not its development. He most fully presents it in the papers: *The essence of ethical evaluation* and *Issues in independent ethics* – and first of all to these texts I will make a reference here.

So first Professor explains the meaning of the two key terms. Ethics can be, in his opinion, understood more broadly or specifically. Ethics in a broader sense includes any directive on the spiritual life of man. However, within that framework one can distinguish at least three types of evaluations, referring to threefold motivation. Firstly, actions can be judged from the point of view of their giving happiness, secondly, their efficiency, and thirdly, respectability. With reference to the three criteria for assessing human action, these can be distinguished: felicitology, praxiology and ethics in the narrower and proper sense. The term "independent ethics" refers exclusively to ethics in the third of the highlighted meanings.³ What then lies behind the postulate of the independence of ethics? Firstly, it is to be ethics independent of religion, secondly – from philosophy and any worldview-inspired assumptions, and thirdly – from the opinions of others. Emphasis on independence in the definition of ethics thus understood corresponds to an equally strong voice to emphasize the importance of individual conscience.⁴

² Kotarbiński first introduced the concept of independent ethics in a paper sent to the Philosophical Congress in Amsterdam (August 1948) *On the essence of ethical evaluation*. An extended version was published in the Philosophical Quarterly in that year. Subsequent texts devoted to this idea are: *On the essence of ethical evaluation*, *An attempt at characterizing ethical evaluation*, *Issues in independent ethics*, *Some independent ethics issues*, *Issues in independent ethics*, *Signposts in independent ethics*, *Independent ethics rules*, *How and why independent ethics established the main key pattern of a dependable guardian*, *Theses in independent ethics*. Most of these texts were published in various magazines (not only philosophical), all of them can be found in T. Kotarbiński, *Works in ethics*, ed. P. Smoczyński, Wrocław in 1987, in the section titled *About the essence and tasks of ethics*, pp. 91–208.

³ T. Kotarbiński, *Issues in independent ethics*, [in:] idem, *Works in ethics*, p. 141.

⁴ Cf. Ibid., p. 140, 143, 149.

Even these preliminary assumptions to define the concept of independent ethics deserve comment. Firstly, Kotarbiński's intention was clearly socio-pedagogical, not just theoretical. "The problem is with us now current and socially important. For whoever keeps his eyes open, he sees around this moral anarchy," writes the Professor at the outset of *Issues independent ethics*- and let me remind that this text comes from 1956, an important year in our history, and the periodical "Chronicle", aimed at a wide social readership, not just philosophers. "In traditionalist, religious milieus, there developed over the centuries an awareness of the ethical, and that largely determines the behaviour of people so minded." But Kotarbiński was an atheist and a materialist who often sharply criticized the religious worldview, which in his opinion was doomed to gradual disappearance. "Scientific socialism, the leading current today [...] is essentially tied to the scientific worldview, in which view there is no place either for Providence, or the life to come. [...] It is hard not to suspect one of the most important sources of hooliganism among adolescents in the absence of ethical awareness, in the ethical void created in place of the lost traditional ethics. So even for medical and social needs we must try to create and build an independent ethics framework."⁵

What may then fill the emptiness in those who discard religious ethical assumptions? Simply put: moral convictions common to all and a similar assessment of human behavior that does not require supernatural reasons. "Then, after all, you do not need to appeal to Providence, nor to immortality, to consider it suitable to praise courage, goodness of heart, integrity, dignity, one's own nobility, righteousness of motivation. [...] Who so feels, they do not feel the need for otherworldly reasons to get going to defend the underdog, to return the borrowed money, nor would they allow themselves the betrayal of marital fidelity".⁶ Kotarbiński is aware of the fact that ethical concepts were diverse in different cultures and at different times, which makes some thinkers limit their attention in research only to the considerations contained within narrative ethics, sometimes called ethnology. Such a kind of departure from the ambition to build the foundations of normative ethics is definitely not enough for the Professor. "The result is this," regrets Kotarbiński, "that the most important question for a decent man (how to carry on if you want to be a decent human being?) does not even receive an attempt at a decent response from decent thinkers".⁷ Meanwhile – in his opinion – "active goodness has its sufficient justification in the obviousness of the heart".⁸ What then is the response to those who suggest that this conviction is by no means confirmed in the beliefs of other peoples in other times? The Professor replied: "We do not even intend to be tempted to

⁵ Ibid., p. 140

⁶ Ibid., p. 142–143

⁷ T. Kotarbiński, *On the essence of ethical evaluation*, [in:] idem, *Works in ethics*, p. 107.

⁸ Ibid., p. 106.

show that just this common core is common to all known moral prohibitions and injunctions among all peoples of the earth and in every historical period. We set ourselves at ask incomparably more modest. We assume that the group of Readers of this article shall understand in the same way the words ‘venerable’ and ‘shameful’, which we use in assessing decent people as such and rogues as such”.⁹

Next, the Professor proposes a small catalogue of these obviousness of the heart common to us all, regardless of the professed beliefs, and first presents four obvious virtues (kindness expressed in deeds, courage, integrity, self-control and internal sublimation), which are the opposite of disgraceful attitudes: cruelty, cowardice, deceit, a kind of bankruptcy (as exemplified by succumbing to addictions)¹⁰. In *Issues in independent ethics* this catalogue is slightly adjusted and arranged in five moral oppositions: courage – cowardice, self-sacrificing kindness – selfishness; integrity (including the keeping of promises) – dishonesty; mastery (and willpower) – weakness of will (succumbing to addictions), noble motives – primitive motivation (yielding to instincts).¹¹ These virtues represent, according to Kotarbiński, the diverse manifestation of a fundamental attitude deserving moral recognition, for which he proposes the term “dependable guardian”. “And let style specialists allow us to use the Silesian adjective *spolegliwy*. Translated as dependable, trustworthy – it denotes the one you can rely on. Conversely, deserves contempt who leaves pupils in need”.¹² The obviousness of the heart is subject to a particular test in the light of the conscience of every human being, and also to the temptation to turn away from it in the name of extra-moral benefits that can be achieved when one ignores the voice of conscience. In the end, we all know that these benefits: a comfortable life, the effective implementation of the desired aims, etc. are easier to achieve if we give up demanding ethical standards. “Therein lies the hidden appeal from ethics to felicitology” – warns the Professor, adding: “Instead of questions about what is more noble, the question arises: what will you be better off with? This question dictates the one and only answer: for anyone who has our collective conscience, the largest misfortune is – to be at loggerheads with it. It is a disaster not comparable to any other loss”.¹³

Yet Kotarbiński recognizes that, apart from the cases in which conscience clearly shows us the proper way to proceed, we face situations often difficult to appraise unambiguously to indicate the proper course of action. Having set out a series of such moral dilemmas the Professor concludes that appeal to the obviousness of the heart of is not enough; in other words, it is not enough to

⁹ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Idem, *Issues in independent ethics*, p. 142.

¹² Ibid., p. 144.

¹³ Ibid., p. 145.

refer to the strictly understood ethical arguments. "The voice of conscience, pronounced in very simple situations, begins to babble in the face of complications in tangled relations. [...] In many cases, it leaves us without answers, that voice of conscience, not sufficiently informed about things and regularities. We stay answer-less regarding what to do to behave as a good man should. Yet it is unbearable to unintentionally flutter in the chaos on the net. The extra-ethical need of order and stability demands definitive decisions in the fullness of action. Whenever the voice of conscience cannot provide them, we have to turn to other sources".¹⁴ These "other sources" come close to ethics, and Kotarbiński indicates an approach of teaching which "may somehow be a substitute for an attitude strictly ethical. Unable to answer the question of what to do in a given social situation in order to fulfil really, not apparently, the motivation of a dependable guardian, we can often answer the question of how – if proceeding in such a situation – to best contribute to the release in people, within their own actions, dispositions of dependable guardians".¹⁵ Moreover, the very idea of dependable guardianship – which does not need moral heroism, but stimulates man to achieve ever greater ethical maturity – is characterized, according to Kotarbiński, by three tendencies: to defend the weak in their conflict with the stronger, to extend its application possibly to all, and to refrain from excessive violence. In this context, Kotarbiński formulates the known aphorism: "not a single blow over militant necessity".¹⁶

The Professor realizes that his idea of independent ethics is not an extensive system of ethics, to which, moreover, he himself refers with large reserve. In conclusion, the article *Issues in independent ethics* stipulates: "The least we are doing here is creating a semblance of completing an independent ethics system. We want to merely give an outline of the possibilities of such a system of ideas and directives. Moreover, ethical issues naturally are characterized by a certain plasticity. They do not tolerate solutions that are detached, and specific at the same time. [...] You should be aware of the main direction, and have something like a compass, and issues to execute [...] decide specifically for each individual case in all its fullness, in all its peculiar distinctness".¹⁷

2. Problems with independent ethics

Next to the "obviousness of the heart", man also experiences doubts, uncertainties about how to proceed. Kotarbiński remembers it, but does not consider these situations in too much detail, presumably stressing that he barely

¹⁴ T. Kotarbiński, *The essence of independent ethics*, p. 113–114.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁶ T. Kotarbiński, *Issues in independent ethics*, p. 147.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

draws a sketch of independent ethics. Meanwhile, when you pay more attention to it, then the ethics of independence itself is put into question – at least independence from philosophical premises. Here's an example: as it is known, the Professor kindly referred also to deliberate suicide, which he preferred to call euthanasia. Of course he did not encourage hasty deprivation of life, but pointed out that “over the years, the problem of euthanasia in general and, in particular, voluntary euthanasia gained weight.” He went on to encourage us to “by all means not only absolutely not disturb those who, after rational deliberation, want to speed the end of their own being and to liberate themselves from the inevitable anguish, but on the contrary, show them in this respect a friendly, legal and technical assistance”.¹⁸ It's hard not to notice that this perception is a consequence of his materialistic and atheistic worldview, in whose context the idea of an afterlife must be regarded as meaningless. There are, however, those who believe in God, who man will meet after death, and then the assessment of voluntary euthanasia (or simply suicide) must look different. For a Christian, life on earth bears the sort of relationship to eternal life as life in the womb to life on earth (hence the liturgical feast of Saints is usually associated with the date of their death). And just as the quality of earthly existence largely depends on the preparation for that in the womb, so also the shape and level of eternal life must be affected by what man on earth lived through, what he experienced. An important element of that preparation may also be the time of old age, the struggle with pain, the experience of loneliness. This is just one example, and more can be pointed out; they show how much beliefs about what is morally right and what is wrong appear as a consequence of a particular understanding of man and the world; in this sense they arise from the worldview, that is – in the broad sense – they convey one's philosophical assumptions.

Please note that the above takes a closer look at the obviousness of the heart. It is true indeed, we generally agree, that courage is laudable and cowardice shameful, that truthfulness is commendable and dishonesty shameful, etc., but it is not so that these assessments are in the sense as elemental and non-variable as is perception of certain colors.¹⁹ Such assessments not only allow further justification, but sometimes they even demand it – especially where the standards behind “obviousness of the heart” are not exception-less in character. Basically, truthfulness is laudable, but it is easy to identify situations where a waiver from speaking the truth seems to be more appropriate than a steadfast adherence to the principles of truthfulness. Kotarbiński prefers to talk not so much about activities, but rather about human attitudes and to those apply the term “obviousness of the heart.” I do not think that – while praising truthfulness

¹⁸ T. Kotarbiński, *Works In ethics*, p. 390.

¹⁹ Such sentences confirming elementary sensory experience equates initial assessments among others T. Czeżowski. Cf. his *Ethics as an empirical science*, [in:] idem, *Writings on ethics and theory of value*, ed. P. Smoczyński, Wrocław 1989, p. 97–104.

– he questioned the possibility of not telling the truth in some cases, but also moral assessment of attitudes, pretending to “obviousness of the heart”, provokes him to seek a kind of common denominator for the directory of virtues cited by him. The Professor sees the common denominator in the attitude of a dependable guardian; that is, the attitude of someone on whose help when needed and as far as it lies within his abilities one can count on. But is it not that the trustworthy guardian is in fact a kind of justification for what appears to be the obviousness of the heart? Is it not that we appreciate the courage, truthfulness, diligence, helpfulness, etc., and that in these very attitudes dependable guardianship is expressed?

But that idea itself also allows further justification. When Kotarbiński distinguishes ethics in a broader sense, which also includes felicitology and praxiology, from ethics in the strict sense, which deals with the fairness of our behavior, then in the end that fairness is associated with man's value, with his worth, often called dignity. Is not that why, just in a dependable guardian, he sees the culmination of moral fairness, and that this attitude is a particularly appropriate response to the dignity of every human being due to him? However, only the one who has any idea about who man is, what strengthens his humanity and what he is threatened by, may respect the dignity. For behind the so-called obviousness of the heart there seems to be hidden a certain human vision common to us all, at least in our cultural milieu. And if so, ethics turns out to just depend on how we understand the human being: his dignity rooted in who he is, that is, in his most generally understood nature. Where we share knowledge about man and in the cases where it is clear what attitudes and what actions serve him, and what attitudes and actions deeply hurt man – there can we talk about the heart's obviousnesses which mask a reference to his anthropological reasons; but then apparently there is no need to invoke those reasons. In situations when we differ as to the understanding of man, however, his nature and purpose of his life – e.g. when our beliefs differ as to the existence of God and the posthumous life of man – our assessment of individual attitudes and actions will be different. And even independent of the understanding of man's immortality, otherwise crucial to understand him, there comes the question: is it not the case that we draw different educational programs, depending on what in a child or young person we want to develop and strengthen? A multitude of pedagogical visions and programs herein find their foundation and reason: the different understanding of what the fundamental nature of humanity in man is. It seems that this anthropological perspective has led some critics sympathetic to Kotarbiński's independent ethics to propose a complementation of the ideal of a dependable guardian with a suggestion to form man's own completeness even when he has to deal with himself only, not with someone over whom he could exercise care. Robinson Crusoe, before meeting Friday, could behave in a manner either worthy of admiration or

reprehensible. A positive character is also described by de Saint-Exupéry's pilot, though he fought only for himself, to save his own life.²⁰ Kotarbiński could retort that the attitude of dependable guardianship also encompasses the very subject of an action; for myself and my decent future I, too, am morally responsible, not only some others. That is correct, and such a possible reply by Kotarbiński is very close to me, but once again – and very clearly – it points out that the so-called obviousnesses of the heart and their culminations in the attitude of a dependable guardian are established within a particular vision of man and of what is important for his humanity morally understood.

"Obviousness of the Heart" is not fundamental in the sense that the Professor, as it seems, suggests in some of his texts. Furthermore, stopping at them as a basis to build ethics condemns us to helplessness in situations – how many! – when to such obviousness one can make no appeal, but you need to act. Kotarbiński attempts to weaken this uncomfortable consequence of his independent ethics plan, which is the need to appeal to extra-ethical criteria, when the conscience is "babbling", unable to refer to any obviousness of the heart; this idea, supported by the prospect of teaching, can serve as a compass also in non-obvious situations. But it is hard not to report a substantial reservation: where the conscience clearly says what should be done, there is no need to appeal to ethical principles; if people need ethics at all, it is in non-obvious situations. What is an ethic worth which in these very situations makes you refer your criteria to outside ethics?

Behind this lies another, critically important question: what, in fact, is ethics? Kotarbiński definitely does not want to limit it to ethnology (descriptive ethics), he simply describes how people react to certain behaviours, some considered glorious, others heinous, and still others too difficult to clearly qualify ethically. In his intention, independent ethics has to be the foundation of normative ethics, not just descriptive and, moreover, normative ethics must indicate the reasons that justify both the obviousness of the heart and – in many cases – the lack of such obviousness. The Professor deplores the fact that the process of departing from the religious worldview that is otherwise-backed by him is accompanied by the abandonment of Gospel morality, which he highly appreciates. Why is it that those who abandon religion also abandon this morality? Crudely said, many are ready to abandon being motivated by the obviousness of the heart (also felt by themselves alone) because that ethical liberty does not threaten any punishment. Whoever believes in God, he – at least in a primitive version of Christianity – envisages a posthumous consequence of their actions. Simply put, he is afraid of hell. But if there is no God, then there is no hell either. What help will come

²⁰ An idea which complements Kotarbiński's independent ethics is postulated by A. Grzegorzczuk. Cf. his *About the basics of natural ethics*, [in:] idem, *Diagrams and man*, Kraków 1963, pp. 174–176.

from a reminder of the obviousness of the heart, from imputation of the ideal of a dependable guardian? Kotarbiński feels the urgency of this problem, and so he says that the greatest misfortune is to be at loggerheads with one's own conscience. He adds that "it is a disaster not comparable to any other loss." This argument raises at least two observations. Firstly, man can cope with remorse; this is a rather pessimistic thesis, but it seems to be confirmed by numerous examples and studies showing how man can deform the voice of conscience, among other things using a so-called rationalization mechanism, known to psychologists, wherein we take recourse to an allegedly valued motivation for our evil deeds. Secondly, even if the disobedience to conscience is such a great human misery, is strictly an argument from felicitology, one from which Kotarbiński after all wanted to release ethics in the strict sense. It is not in the prospect for the sake of your own happiness that you look for a significant incentive for ethically fair activities.

It seems that, among other things, these understatements and ambiguities decided that the idea of independent ethics was not developed in the long term, and today it is invoked more as an original idea of Kotarbiński's than as a concept worthy of continuation.

3. Why the idea of independent ethics is worth reflecting on today

All said, I think that the idea of independent ethics is worth taking up today, both because of theoretical and pedagogical reasons, although it provokes expansion in such a way which I do not know whether the Professor would approve. Two of Kotarbiński's thoughts seem valuable and worthy of developing. The first is the distinction of ethics in the strict sense and ethics in a broader sense. It is true that strict ethical motivation (referring to the fairness of deeds) differs from both felicitologically and praxiologically. Since, however, only the first is considered by the Professor as strictly ethical, you have to ask how that is connected to the other two. Motivation and praxiological evaluation are by their nature intermediate: they speak of effectiveness of actions, not reaching over to the value of what the purpose of this action is. In this sense, they focus on the *bonum utile*, a useful good, which, however, of necessity, is linked to the rationale of the intended action, which also must be evaluated beyond the level of its effectiveness. This purpose can be the happiness of the subject; in this sense, the felicitologic argument overrides the praxiological. And we are familiar with such concepts of ethics which do not go beyond the felicitologic perspective. At the beginning of his most important work on ethics, Aristotle poses a question about the ultimate goal of all human efforts: the highest good

that does not require further justification. And he says: "As for the name of that good in most people almost universal agreement prevails, both generally uneducated and people with higher culture perceive that in happiness, while they think that to be happy is to live well and feel good".²¹ As we know, this path to developing ethics was followed by many philosophers, including Christian thinkers, with St. Thomas Aquinas at the helm. Kotarbiński knows and trusts that ethical thought, but does not want to limit ethics so. He is known for his criticism of utilitarianism, which somehow fits into this felicitologic perspective.²² A trustworthy guardian is, after all, not one who thinks of his own happiness, who takes care of others not because in this finds his own happiness, but because his charge needs the help. The strictly ethical motive is the charge, and not the hope for self-happiness. Now I think Kotarbiński is right – and that view is confirmed very clearly in Judeo-Christian Revelation, whose ethical potential Kotarbiński valued anyway, despite his atheism and materialism. I am writing this as a Catholic priest who wants to be faithful to this Revelation. I want to say that the Gospel confirms the prime value of the basic moral intuition – and its importance – in relation to any religious argument.

May we recall the commonly known parable of the Good Samaritan, or rather its context. "And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying: 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'" (Lk 10, 25). The lawyer, just like Jesus, is convinced that worldly human life has a further goal: eternal life unattainable on this earth. What really is more important than accurately knowing the way to the ultimate goal of human life? If by "morally good" we are to understand "what is good for man as man" (and I accept, not the least original of such an understanding of morality), this question from the expert in the law can be considered to be the question of the essence of morality. This is confirmed by other Evangelists, who refer to the same meeting of Jesus with scholars of law or similar (though only St. Luke cites the parable). In the version by Matthew, the question was: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" (Mt 22, 36). According to St. Mark the answer of Jesus to the question "Which is the first commandment of all?" (Mk 12, 28) gains recognition of the questioning scribe, which is appreciated by the Master ("you are not far from the kingdom of God", see. Mk 12, 34). Each of these synoptic versions of the question is therefore a critically important issue for people. The greatest commandment (the first) is the one with reference to which you need to understand and interpret all the other commandments: such a one, the observance of which, leads man to eternal life. The answer of Jesus – mentioned by all the Evangelists – makes reference to the two commandments of love: to God and your neighbor. In St. Luke, the most important for us here, the lawyer

²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. by D. Gromska, Warszawa 1982, p. 7–8 (1095).

²² T. Kotarbiński, *Utilitarianism and the ethics of mercy*, [in:] idem, *Works in ethics*, pp. 85–88.

turns to the Lord Jesus with the title of “Teacher”, treating him as an authority in the matter about which he interrogates Him, while the Lord Jesus refers to what is written in the law. He seems to respond: “You are a scholar, so you know the law, in there you will find the answer to your important question, then obey it.” Now, however, only in St. Luke do we find a continuation of this conversation, which seems to complete the clear and firm response by the Lord Jesus. The scholar has no comments to the commandment to love God, but the second one troubles him and – “wanting to justify himself” – asks further: “And who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10, 29). The question is not trivial. “Neighbor” is more or less the same as a fellow close-by, but “close-by” is a vague concept. The opposition “close – distant” is fluid, like the difference between small and large, heavy and light, the young and the old, etc. So whom do I have to love, “as myself”? This “wanting to justify” sounds a bit like a critical remark as “The commandment is beautiful, I myself quoted it, but it does not give me enough guidance on how I should proceed. The commandment of the love of God is clear, God is one – but the people are many, some closer, some distant, so still I do not know what I should do to inherit eternal life.”

The Lord Jesus does not respond directly to this question. In particular – and this is especially important for us – He no longer refers to the authority of either the Scriptures nor his own. He could recall a fragment of the Mosaic Law, which requires reacting to one who is in a difficult situation with compassionate care; striking and easy-to-understand examples can be found eg. in Deuteronomy 24, in harmony with Isaiah’s admonition: “Learn to do good! Seek justice, rebuke the oppressor, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1: 17). How many such texts are contained in the Law and the Prophets! But the Lord Jesus does not refer to these texts. Nor does He refer to his own authority. He was named Teacher, and could therefore say: “I, the teacher, I say to you, neighbor is the one who is in need, and you can remedy this need”. However, the Savior does not do that, but referring to the legal scholar’s second question, he tells us the well-known parable. Let us lift for a moment this entire conversation from its evangelical context. Suppose it is heard by someone who had never heard about the Gospel or the Lord Jesus, who lives in another culture, believes in another of God, or does not believe in any. Could he have doubts about how to answer the question ending this parable: “Which of these three proved to be, in your opinion, the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (Lk 10, 36) I do not think so. The Lord Jesus holds back this answer, making not the priest nor the generally revered Levite the “positive hero”, but the Samaritan, though the Israelis treated them with hostility. So what does the Teacher refer to in relation to such a crucial question concerning the human way to inherit eternal life? What does everyone who reads this parable refer to, while he is convinced that no different answer could be given in conclusion? Be it their own moral self-consciousness, the obviousness of the heart, or basic knowledge about what

is morally right and wrong – you can call it differently, but it is still the same thing: that what in a compelling way we recognize as morally obvious, and what it is not to be ignored. In this sense, this “obviousness of the heart” is grounded in *the moral experience*: the direct knowledge of what is good and what is evil, not based on theoretical, theological or political premises, but referring to specific facts and events as they are lived by man.

If I am right, this whole dialogue with scholars of the law is essential for the understanding of the relationship between ethics and religion, at least Christianity. It is not that a divine commandment constitutes the first source of knowledge about what is good and what is evil. Religion in this sense is not a provision of ethics, rather the opposite: the Christian revelation (which is filled and culminates in Jesus Christ) is associated with this moral experience, which is the foundation of revelation. Catholic theology coined the adage: *Gratia non destruit naturam supponit et perficit sed eam*: grace (the supernatural order, which stems from supernatural abilities and powers in man) does not destroy nature (what is given to us in the very humanity), but assumes that nature and strengthens her. This adage is also a reference – if not the main reference – to the realm of morality, of which ethics wants to be a theory.

Does the reversal of this relationship, which is derivation of ethics from theological premises (God’s commandment), not result in moral distortion, to the point of becoming fanaticism saturated with hatred (in spite of pious declarations)? The parable referred to above, together with its context, is not the only example that shows how Jesus understood the reference of Law to moral experience. In the Gospels we find many of his disputes with the Pharisees about the meaning of keeping the Sabbath behavior. When on the Sabbath day they brought to him a man suffering from dropsy: “And Jesus [...] spoke to the lawyers and Pharisee, saying: ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’ But they kept silent. And He took him and healed him and let him go. Then He answered them, saying: ‘Which of you, having a donkey or an ox that has fallen into a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?’ And they could not answer Him regarding these things” (Luke 14: 3–6). What, then, is the argument? Does not also here the Savior refer to accepting the primacy of the elemental, natural moral discernment, in front of which an otherwise valid law of keeping the Sabbath should not be placed?

In this sense, I believe that the moral message contained in the Gospel is not only not in opposition to the idea of Kotarbiński’s independent ethics, but even the idea to which it refers. Christian philosophy and Catholic theology developed it in the science of natural law. This is no place for its full presentation, but it is worth recalling that according to St. Thomas Aquinas, who in particular developed this teaching, the foundation of the law is the principle *faciendum est bonum, et prosequendum, et malum vitandum*: you must do good

and avoid evil. Standards cannot be reduced to a simple banality; if you define welfare as “what must be done”, and evil “what should be avoided”, it is obvious we come up with a very sterile principle, according to which “that should be done, what needs to be done and that avoided what must be avoided”. Well, this principle has a much deeper meaning: it indicates that the person *is able to recognize good as what needs to be done* and evil, as what should be avoided.²³ In other words, the man “sees good normatively”. It is much more than the attractiveness of good. At least in regard to the moral good (leaving aside other goods) it normatively means that the good *should* be met, and not only that it “attracts” the will of man, because such is the nature of human will. Each listener or reader of the parable of the Good Samaritan knows that his action is good, that he did what in this situation was to be done, while the priest and the Levite who “saw and passed” the wretch, acted morally wrong. Of course, into this knowledge is inscribed a certain perception of man; both the dignity that is owed him, and human nature. Based on this knowledge, we can identify what in a given situation is good and what is evil. Today, more likely than about the natural law, we talk about human rights, which should underlie all legislation – but the idea is the same: we are able to know man in his dignity and recognize how it is respected in relation to an elementary knowledge of man and to a number of situations in which this dignity can be compromised. The recognition of human nature and the dangers it meets is obviously vulnerable to error, but it does not override the fundamental way of knowing what man is due from others. In this sense, the ethical perspective turns out to be not only prior to the precepts contained in Christian revelation, but also – contrary to the opinion of extreme legal positivists – it underlies the legislation.

The idea of ethics independent of religious assumptions is therefore, in my opinion, incorporated into the Christian revelation. Is it therefore superfluous? For Christians, of course, not. The Christian sees in God the ultimate foundation of the dignity of every human person; in God, who “is love” (1 Jn 4,8), and who, to save man from eternal death, himself became Man and took upon himself all human weakness and sinfulness, which even led to the cross. But it does not lead to the justification of ethics with the same Revelation; rather it constitutes a development of the anthropological perspective reaching to God and eternal life. This theological thesis Kotarbiński did not share, however, he rightly appealed to the conscience of every human being, in which this basic provision of morality is contained. It is just that fidelity to moral challenges contained in the conscience cannot be justified by any profit, neither temporal nor outwardly. Resorting to such profit as the main moral motivation (whether hell or misfortune incomparable with any other) violates the essence of morality. Moral good, love as its highest expression, is justified by itself. He who does not

²³ S. Th. I–II, q. 94, a. 2.

understand that or rejects it, does not understand his own humanity or rejects it. It needs to be always remembered – and this is not so much a theoretical perspective, but rather pedagogical (in the Christian context: Pastoral). You can recall a number of reasons why today, also in Poland, we argue for the relevance of such actions (ideological pluralism, pervasive consumerist mentality, ideology of rivalry with others, promotion of one's own careers, etc.). But the need to evoke the basic moral intuition is always important, today not otherwise than yesterday and tomorrow. In this pedagogical, in fact, deeply humanistic sense, the idea of independent ethics is extremely important and always up to date. And in my opinion, it is also a profoundly Christian idea.

(transl. Anna Krotkiewska-Zagórska)

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