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THE POSSIBILITY OF A MORAL LIFE WITHOUT RELIGION
IN THE LIGHT OF THE ETHICAL WRITINGS
OF TADEUSZ KOTARBIŃSKI

A b s t r a c t. In ethics much attention has already been paid to a dispute concerning the issue of autonomic ethics. Yet it is still worthy to look again at least at some of Tadeusz Kotarbiński's arguments. Their way of reasoning is being used today for defending the position of the autonomic ethics. The autonomic ethics proclaims a complete independence of the field of human morality from the realm of religion. If it is so then a polemic with Kotarbiński's views (which is led from the perspective of Christian ethics) will still be able to become a useful instrument in contemporary discussion with supporters of ethics independent from religion. For this reason the problem undertaken in this paper is still up-to-date. This problem can be summed up in the questions as follow: How to present Kotarbiński's arguments by which he justifies his thesis about the possibility of a law-abiding life on the high moral level without reference to the realm of religion? How can one argue with those arguments? Relying upon the analyzed texts by Kotarbiński and Styczeń mainly one can say that the differences between materialistic approach represented by the Student of Lvov-Warsaw School and views of personalistic ethics were shown. They show-up especially in the field of methodology of ethics and axiology. It is noticeable that the differences in views that cause the polemic cited and discussed in this article are based more on a variety of starting points. They are based also

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on goals of speculations that were undertaken by various ethicists and in groups of issues that should be the domain of ethics.

Key words: ethics; autonomic; Tadeusz Kotarbiński; morality; personalism.

The question regarding the relation between religion and the moral life of a man is often raised in the public discourse nowadays. Not only is the question about the existence of this relationship being posed but also a negative answer is being promoted. It is believed that one can lead a life of an honest and respected man while being an atheist or even not identifying oneself with any religion at the same time. That point of view is not a new phenomenon. A Polish philosopher, logician and ethicist, Tadeusz Kotarbiński, also held this standpoint. He wrote his mid-twentieth century articles in the field of ethics from the point of view of an atheist and materialist. On the other hand, the proponents of Christian or personalistic ethics proclaim the necessity of reference to the Absolute Being in man's moral life. Ethical views of Tadeusz Styczeń can be considered as an example of the latter position. As we can see, the current dispute between Christian and atheist ethicists, concerning the independence of ethics from religion has already existed for a few decades.

Even though so much attention has already been paid to a dispute summoned here, it should be noted that it is still worthy to look again at least at some of Kotarbiński's arguments. The way of reasoning contained in those arguments may be used today for defending the position of the autonomic ethics, which proclaims a complete independence of the field of human morality from the realm of religion. If it is so, then a polemic with Kotarbiński's views (which is led from the perspective of Christian ethics) will still be able to become a useful instrument for the contemporary discussion with the supporters of ethics, independent from religion. For this reason, the problem undertaken in this short paper is still up-to-date. This research issue can be summed up in the questions as follow: How to present Kotarbiński's arguments, in which he justifies his thesis about the possibility of a law-abiding life on a high moral level without reference to the realm of religion? How can one argue with those arguments?

To be precise, the student of Lvov-Warsaw School not only did not approve himself of the religious references in the field of ethics, but also he was strongly opposed whenever someone did so. He even blamed his scientific adversaries that their views were detrimental for the community. Kotarbiński claimed that when religion and morality are bind to one another in the

process of education, then finally the moral level of society falls. The enlightened young generation, who for obvious reasons abandons their religious faith, automatically ceases to live morally.

In order to answer the questions summarizing the main problem of this article, I would like to lay out and set forth a number of Kotarbiński's arguments in favour of independence of ethics from religion. They are contained in his various ethical writings. I would like also to call some of the relevant counter-arguments of Christian and personalistic ethics formulated by Tadeusz Styczeń, although not always explicitly. In order to achieve all the purposes, I have decided to analyse *Pisma etyczne* by Kotarbiński, its polemical book, *Autonomic ethics?*, by Styczeń and several other works on personalism and ethics. The results of these analyses would allow me to recapitulate some still ponderable arguments 'for' and 'against' the existence of morality without religion.

I hope that on the occasion of such a comparison of the reasoning of both materialistic and personalistic ethicists, it will be possible to render once again the polemic concerning the link between morality and religion. I believe that one can find enough arguments in this discussion, that today are put forward against all those who consider religion to be necessary in a truly moral life. Therefore, one can seek some points relevant to contemporary allegations and useful in today's debate. Those points can be found among the views of personalists who have already led such a discourse in the second half of the twentieth century.

1. SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

Kotarbiński assumed the existence of a single and common morality of a man. That means that morality would be similar among all members united by one civilization or society like Europe or Northern America, etc. According to Kotarbiński, various ethical systems, within the same mentality, are like two mutually contradictory prepositions within one theory. The methodology of sciences assumes that every theory permitting a pair of contradictory prepositions is disqualified as a science under the law of the logic, known as the Law of Duns Scotus¹. The Polish ethicist thought that the situations of disputes in the field of ethics occur only when the theory of morality is

¹ L. BORKOWSKI, *Wprowadzenie do logiki i teorii mnogości*, Lublin: TN KUL 1991, p. 40.

pursued, depending on non-ethical domain. Then, such a theory of morality becomes a discourse about nothing, comparable to pejoratively understood lecturing someone². It is true that even Kotarbiński would admit that there exists 'a temptation' of justification of consciences dictates by their relation with some 'supernatural factors'. Indeed, our conscience sometimes requires a man to act even against his/her own nature. What can explain the fact of acts against our nature? Similarly, what could explain the fact that the voice of conscience is such an overwhelming force for the human of the ethical nature? That force is so strong that it is hardly possible to break it. According to the Polish ethicist, that voice works on the basis of feelings of shame. These feelings could be formed only in social intercourse, and they re-pass on the same unit up to the point that a man can be ashamed even in front of himself. A sense of shame not a sense of God's will has become a strong and overwhelmingly imperative³. Karol Wojtyła noticed that a shame, indeed, is associated with the community. A person experiences the shame in front of another person. But there exists also a metaphysical shame which is associated with one's own person. That shame does not concern the nakedness of a body but the values that are carried out by the social life of a man. Human's sexual life is its special case, and Wojtyła describes it in detail in his work *Miłość i odpowiedzialność* [*Love and responsibility*]⁴. But shame appears anywhere when what was to be covered by the intention of the person is discovered. A shame works regardless of the qualifications of the discovered value: morally good or bad. If it is so, we may ask: when a man does bad that no one else knows about, then he or she experiences a shame because of who?

Following Kotarbiński's thought, it should be said that the attempt of justification of the moral obligation, either results with emotional ethics⁵, or

² This thesis is consistent with the philosophy of neo-positivist, represented by, e.g., Rudolf Carnap; see: S. KAMIŃSKI, *Nauka i metoda. Pojęcie nauki i klasyfikacja nauk*, Lublin: TN KUL 1992, p. 162-164.

³ T. KOTARBIŃSKI, *Niektóre problemy etyki niezależnej*, in: ID, *Pisma etyczne*, ed. P. Smoczyński, Wrocław: Ossolineum 1987, p. 154.

⁴ K. WOJTYŁA, *Miłość i odpowiedzialność*, Lublin: TN KUL 2001, p. 158-159.

⁵ Maria Ossowska is appreciated by Kotarbiński, but it does not mean practising the preaching ethics, „as it should be,” apart from how it is. Could ethics be the result of what it should be and how it is? Ossowska seeks to ensure that she occupies the position of a researcher of moral facts. To be able to practise psychology and sociology of morality, one should bring out of the confusion of facts the morality itself. As a result, the author does not reach nor practises any science of morality, but she only gets engaged in 'cleansing' the site of the

links to the field of religion. The first possibility may be proved with the inbred feeling of shame after committing a bad act. Its followers are worthy of respect as the scholars, but it should be noted that they do not practise as much ethics as psychology or moral sociology. The second possibility is also not worthy to be named scientific ethics because it puts the burden of proof of ethical assumptions on the shoulders of social conditions. Those conditions keep up their *status quo* due to too little enlightenment of the society⁶. Additionally, Kotarbiński claimed that religious ethics is highly unreliable in practice. Its functioning is looped with a duration of religious superstition in the society. In order to prove his claims Polish ethicist mentioned a situation that occurs very often when a man after quitting his or her religion also quits his or her morality⁷.

Both Kotarbiński and Christian ethicists would agree that ethical valuation dictates to people of conscience to be the main and decisive one in cases of conflict. However, Kotarbiński's writings contain an accusation directed at personalists and even at Christian ethicists, who bind unfoundedly ethics with religion. The followers of personalism attempt to merge existentialistic, in their genesis, views on human death with eschatological hope⁸. Meanwhile, Kotarbiński considers as a fiction a derivation of ethical evaluations from the field of 'supernatural', what is preached by religion, because the religion in fact begins and ends in the sociological field⁹. Christian ethicists preach that nonreligious ethics is ineffective. That alleged ineffectiveness of ethics is just a homework to do for secular ethics. It must be carried out by making the society more ethical, but only through motivation independent of religion. It must be also proved that what the personalists call 'impossible' can really be done¹⁰. Kotarbiński puts the postulate of autonomic ethics, i.e., ethics independent from religion since it fails as a science. In addition, not all the people detached from religion are morally despicable. They have their ethical conscience which is not detached from the practice, and that way they can

ruins instead, accumulated by individual ethics, in which their creators were trying to build something that just collapsed, see: T. KOTARBIŃSKI, *Maria Ossowska. Podstawy nauki o moralności (Warszawa 1947)*, in: ID, *Pisma etyczne*, p. 492-494.

⁶ T. KOTARBIŃSKI, *Niektóre problemy etyki niezależnej*, p. 163.

⁷ T. KOTARBIŃSKI, *Zagadnienia etyki niezależnej*, in: ID, *Pisma etyczne*, p. 140.

⁸ S. KOWALCZYK, *Personalizm – podstawy, idee, konsekwencje*, Lublin: Wyd. KUL 2012, p. 81.

⁹ T. KOTARBIŃSKI, *Trzy główne problemy*, in: ID, *Pisma etyczne*, p. 138.

¹⁰ T. KOTARBIŃSKI, *Niektóre problemy etyki niezależnej*, p. 154.

achieve moral beauty¹¹. There is a very popular current view which proclaims that ethical life detached from religion is enough to become a decent man. Nevertheless, Benedict XVI identified this view as the phenomenon of 'ethical blindness', which involves a boundless trust in one's own reason¹². There are truths expressed in normative statements that are accessible to human reason. However, they are still so subtle that the reason does not always manage to discover them. That is why, the voice of religious faith enables the human reason to perceive what is the most proper for it. Our reason is able to notice the truth, even that very implicated in the context, and thus, it makes human mind more itself¹³.

2. MORAL EXPERIENCES AND JUDGEMENTS

Kotarbiński's ethics holds a standpoint of a minimalist philosophy, and this is a common methodological approach promoted in the Vienna Circle. According to the Polish philosopher, there is no need to refer to the eternal beings, to know that, generally, some kind of human characteristics are boasted of and thus considered to be good¹⁴. We can conclude that the results of applying the methods of analytic philosophy is just another description of moral experience, already discussed by personalists, where ethics would not end but it would begin. While for Styczeń, the same experience of the absolute moral obligation proves its real existence. The real dispute about the manner of conduct is usually caused by a situation of danger of death. But its existence does not deny the fact that a particular manner of conduct is actually due to appear. That it is a linguistic equivalent of reality of what should be done¹⁵. A really existing moral duty is indeed *ens sui generis* (a being of its kind) but still it is a being. Therefore, the preposition describing the experience of that duty belongs to the area of existential judgements that are known in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. According to personalists, that kind of preposition could be described as follows, „there exists a duty of affirmation of the person as a person and by the person as a person”¹⁶.

¹¹ T. KOTARBIŃSKI, *Zagadnienia etyki niezależnej*, p. 140.

¹² BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Kraków: Dehon 2008, no. 28.

¹³ P. MOSKAŁ, *Religia i prawda*, Lublin: TN KUL 2008, p. 51-52.

¹⁴ S. KOWALCZYK, *Człowiek w myśli współczesnej*, Warszawa: Michalineum 1990, p. 154.

¹⁵ T. STYCZEŃ, *Etyka niezależna?*, Lublin: RW KUL 1980, p. 67.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

Kotarbiński, in turn, believes that the one who shares a common positive feeling in relation to the positive values of man, does not need any motivation from the other world to perform a good act. The ethics does not need any religious justification and any philosophical justification either. Even more, one has to defend oneself against phantasms, such as determinism or fatalism, in justification of ethical conclusions¹⁷. The Student of Lvov-Warsaw School refers to a sentence of John Stuart Mill, who proclaims that the motivations of religious education have become outdated and they have not appealed so far¹⁸. And to make matters worse, their remains still present in the education are hindering this process of education. It happens that even Catholic educators reject any inner value of important moral acts due to the fact that they rely only on eternal prize or punishment. In order to prove that view, Kotarbiński recalled the words of St. Paul, „If Christ has not been raised, then let us eat and drink, because we will die soon”¹⁹. The Author of *Autonomic ethics* remembered a priest who declared that the only thing which kept him on the good path was a hope for eternal reward and fear of eternal punishment. So if it turns out that the faith is false, what the Communists believed that not much is missing to get to that point, then it would be allowed to do anything for everyone. If the catechist says such rules, and so allegedly heard Kotarbiński himself when he attended catechesis as a young man, no wonder that the religious foundation of morality is weak²⁰. Meanwhile, the words of the Apostle understood in the existential or personalistic perspective take on a different meaning. Under the Christian perspective, hedonism in human life is something totally against man’s dignity. So the argument of St. Paul at the conclusion gets a clear alternative: either religion as a consequence of the resurrection of the Lord, or a defying life for a man²¹.

According to Kotarbiński, moral judgments vary from the highest honour to the greatest contempt, in relation to a specific character. So the conscience

¹⁷ T. KOTARBIŃSKI, *Zagadnienia etyki niezależnej*, p. 142.

¹⁸ T. KOTARBIŃSKI, *Recenzja książki Wiktora Chrupka: O reformę wychowania moralnego w naszej szkole (Warszawa 1924)*, in: ID. *Pisma etyczne*, p. 507.

¹⁹ The First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, Chapter 15 verse 32.

²⁰ T. KOTARBIŃSKI, *Recenzja książki Wiktora Chrupka: O reformę wychowania moralnego w naszej szkole (Warszawa 1924)*, in: ID. *Pisma etyczne*, p. 507.

²¹ S. KIERKEGAARD, *Bojaźń i drżenie [Fear and Trembling]*, trans. J. Iwaszkiewicz, Warszawa: PWN 1969, p. 174, see also: S. KOWALCZYK, *Z problematyki antropologii personalistycznej*, Lublin: TN KUL 2014, p. 44.

would be ensemble of intuitive beliefs about what is shameful and what is honourable. The content of conscience, and thus the set of motivations to venerable acts would be the issue from the field of ethics in the strict sense. Relying upon common conscience, and trying to analyse the term 'respectable' on its basis, we can formulate some positive judgments. Kotarbiński claimed that our positive moral judgments can go at least in five directions: courage, a good heart, integrity as opposite to dishonesty, tempering on will and nobility, i.e. the activity of some higher reason²². As maintained by Kotarbiński, it is easy to fall into casuistry in the Christian ethics, based on the experience of moral obligation²³. However, no less casuistry will threaten us when we talk about disharmonies between the admired or despised character in the discourse, which this Polish professor proposed, instead of ethics based on religion. We are allowed to suppose that it is important for ethics to have a semantic determination of moral obligation, its concretization and justification. All together they are called by personalists a right dimension of moral judgement. Christian ethicists claim that ethics without that right dimension would not be an important normative theory of morality, but rather it would be based on a repetition of obvious statements about good and evil. Therefore, as in the paradigm of personalism, experience indicates which entities the moral duty is absolute for, there is a need for theory of this class of beings. Then, ethics must be dependent to this theory²⁴.

3. CONCLUSION

In this article a still current problem related to the possibility of the existence of morality and ethics, independent of religion, has been taken. Also the arguments in favour of that viewpoint, that Tadeusz Kotarbiński put forward, have been taken here, as well. There were also some counter-arguments formulated in the spirit of personalistic ethics in favour of the necessity of a final reference to the Absolute in the field of morality.

The aim of this paper was to present and to restore this historical controversy in such a way as to show its course and arguments of both sides. The purpose of this paper was also to show a topicality of spoken controversy

²² T. KOTARBIŃSKI, *Zagadnienia etyki niezależnej*, p. 142.

²³ T. KOTARBIŃSKI, *Trzy główne problemy*, p. 139.

²⁴ T. STYCZEŃ, *Etyka niezależna?*, p. 76.

towards the views, separating morality from any reference to the Absolute, that are present in the contemporary social discourse. I believe that, relying upon the analysed texts, I was able to answer the question about Kotarbiński's reasoning, its timeliness and possible counterarguments. It is noticeable that, contrary to the appearance, the differences in views, that bring about the polemic cited and discussed in this article, are not caused by various points of view on one issue. They are based more on a variety of starting points. They are based also on goals of speculations that were undertaken by various ethicists, and they are based in groups of issues that should be the domain of ethics, according to the individual authors.

Because of a small size of this paper, it is not an article that could pretend to be a comprehensive study of a polemic undertaken here, which, otherwise, is very widely commented and still current. This paper is rather demonstrative and indicating the main differences between the views of ethicists, under the banner of Marxism, and ethicists, associated with Christian philosophy, in particular personalistic one. It also helps us to note the ways of the argumentation for and against the ethics based on religion. I believe that this article can become a motive for further deeper and wider research of the matters undertaken here, and it will result in many more substantial and comprehensive publications.

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MOŻLIWOŚĆ ŻYCIA MORALNEGO BEZ RELIGII W ŚWIETLE PISM ETYCZNYCH TADEUSZA KOTARBIŃSKIEGO

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Wiele już uwagi poświęcono w etyce sporowi o etykę niezależną. Warto jednak przyjrzeć się raz jeszcze przynajmniej niektórym argumentom Tadeusza Kotarbińskiego. Ich tok rozumowania jest używany do dzisiaj jako obrona stanowiska głoszącego całkowitą niezależność dziedziny moralności ludzkiej od dziedziny religii. W takim wypadku polemika ze stanowiskiem Kotarbińskiego, prowadzona z punktu widzenia etyki chrześcijańskiej, może stać się użytecznym narzędziem we współczesnej dyskusji ze zwolennikami etyki niezależnej od religii. Z tego względu problem podjęty w tym artykule jest wciąż aktualny. Streszcza się on w pytaniach o to, jak przedstawiają się argumenty Kotarbińskiego, za pomocą których uzasadnia on swoją tezę o możliwości praworządnego życia na wysokim poziomie moralnym bez odniesienia do dziedziny religii, i w jaki sposób można z tymi argumentami polemizować. W oparciu o przeanalizowane teksty różnych autorów (w głównej mierze Kotarbińskiego i Stycznia) można stwierdzić, że różnice w poglądach, które powodują przywołaną i omawianą w tym artykule polemikę, leżą w różnych punktach wyjścia, celach stawianych swoim dociekaniom przez poszczególnych etyków oraz grupach zagadnień, które powinny stanowić dziedzinę etyki.

Słowa kluczowe: etyka; niezależna; Tadeusz Kotarbiński; moralność; personalizm.