

ETHICAL BASIS OF SOCIAL LIFE IN LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI'S PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract — The main purpose of the study is an attempt to answer the question about the evils of everyday life and an analysis of the possibility to indicate a code or codes of rules that will allow the regulation of social life. The article is based on an analysis of selected texts by Leszek Kołakowski — mainly on «Ethics without Code» and «Education for hatred».

For Kołakowski philosophy is not a profession, it is a vocation, which simply means that philosophy is not for him, but he is for philosophy and that it was not him who chose, but he was chosen by philosophy and thus became his fate. The paper begins with the introduction and a brief analysis of evil both contemporary as well as in ancient times; then the author tries to bring closer the views of Polish philosopher on human nature and the possibility of constructing moral codes to be a beacon for the community. The summary of this article is the conclusion that the best possible ethical approaches is «ethics without codes».

Key words: Polish ethics, Polish philosopher, ethics without a code, Leszek Kołakowski.

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1. Introduction

The main theme of Kołakowski's accomplishments, regardless of the stage of his work, was man and his behavior in the world of culture. As Gesine Schwan mentions, Kołakowski has always been interested in «a specific person in a specific social situation, not only what it is in reality, but [...] as it should be should be»(Schwan 1971: 40). The aim of the paper is an attempt to provide answers to issues of evil manifestations in daily life, and to analyse possibilities of suggesting codes or sets of rules useful in regulating social life. It seems that no one could more accurately comprehend the issue of morality, not just by definitions and attempts to describe it, but by reference to ethical responsibility for the world in which we live, the world that we embrace from birth. We can, of course, reject this notion, but this would be suicidal. However, having decided to remain in this world, which most of us did, one should be aware that this is tantamount to consenting to a world of hate, suffering, exploitation and violence. Since we are constituent parts of it, we can neither reject nor accept it only partly. It is true that there are some activities that can be accomplished partially, e. g., smoking a cigarette or part repayment of debts. However, there are such life activities, where partial accomplishment is not permissible, rather they can be fully performed or not at all for example, one cannot partially jump out of the train, marry, or die. According to Kołakowski such activities also include our acceptance of the world. The article is based on an analysis of selected Leszek Kołakowski's texts, especially his «Ethics without a code» (1962), «Education for hatred» (1977), and several recent texts including «Mini lectures on Maxi issues», or «If God does not exist... about God, the Devil, Sin and other worries, often referred

to as philosophy of religion». However, in the main thrust of the analysis will not be based on the chronology of the publications chronology, but on the selection of issues that seem timeless.

2. The Issue of Evil

Psychologists, sociologists as well as philosophers do ask questions regarding the origin of evil and its root cause in the world around us. Philip Zimbardo in his book «The Lucifer effect. Why do good people do evil?» puts it bluntly: «We are afraid of evil, but it fascinates us. [...] we are excited when contemplating sexual excesses and the violation of moral codes by those who do not belong to our kind» (Zimbardo 2013: 28). A study conducted in 2013 by Atmedia shows a picture of Poles who are much more enthusiastic about murder programs than cooking, sports or music programs. However, the human delight in watching the suffering of others and in the widely understood evil has a very long history. In ancient Rome people were attracted to the crucifixion, gladiatorial combats and hunting, fighting and implementing sentences with the use of animals. One of the most popular shows in Rome was that in which wild beasts tore bodies nailed to the cross, with the audience relishing the sight of dropping body parts. Medieval Europe was not more ethical; some even suggest expanding and enriching the repertoire of public spectacles of cruel chastisements and executions. The most popular sentences were punishing criminals by means of the garrotte, the rack, stripping of skin, evisceration or cooking in boiling water. Each type of punishment was accompanied by events or funfairs. King Louis XVI was, on January 21, 1793 at the Revolution Square in Paris, beheaded in presence of hundreds of thousands of visitors. A description of the torture and execution of King Henry's IV murderer, François Ravailac, which is set in the book, «About the cruelty», by Mariana Zdziechowski is chilling. The few fragments cited herewith, show how cruel people can be in inflicting suffering. «On the day of the execution, the morning started the torture. In the afternoon, [...] he [Ravailac] stood on the scaffold with

the dagger, with which he had murdered the King, in his right hand; This hand was burned to simmer until charring; the body was pulled with hot pincers, the wounds were covered over with molten lead, burning tar, boiling oil, sulfur and wax. Finally, then came the quartering: horses worked a half an hour stretching and tearing the body. At the end of this, the crowd ran behind a barrier, where human abomination was manifested in all its fullness; women were seen digging their teeth into such bodies often with quarrels about choosing which remnant of the torn body, as everyone wanted just a piece for themselves» (Zdziechowski 1993: 42–43).

This description is not a figment of imagination of a sick man, but unfortunately the documentary of the events that took place in 1610 (Stecko 2011). Nowadays, are we less hungry for entertainment associated with cruelty and violations of the principles, characteristic of our culture. Optimism, at this point, seems to be little justified. A quick glance at the statistics and the number of games with the cruel execution of American reporter, James Foley, which took place a few months ago¹ would serve as pointers. Servers were blocked due to the unexpected number of those interested in the gruesome views of the head being cut off from the rest of the body.

Does the view of Kołakowski seem to be right when the evil of modern times is compared with that which became part of our often disgraceful history? This, unfortunately, seems to be the case. Kołakowski as a historian, who critically looked into past history, did not spot any difference between the demonic evil of hundreds or even thousands of years past, and of the present. According to the thinker, neither were the chances of survival in the Roman lead mines of Sardinia higher than in Auschwitz, nor the invasions of the Huns or Mongols gentler than those by Hitler.

¹ In August 2014 the Islamic jihadists published the video with the enforcement of American journalist James Foley and two months later a video of the execution of a French tourist.

3. Modern Man and His Nature

Leszek Kołakowski, inspired by Pascal, also tries to answer the key question of who we really are and what the human nature is. Modern man still continues his run away from loneliness, to avoid being alone with his thoughts; we carry «pocket transistor radios to avoid being surprised at any one moment without a company» (Kołakowski 2003: 105). Moreover, we are unable to create what Kołakowski calls «real community». The community sought after in antagonistic situations, in moments of suffering or emotional tension. This means that we can much more readily participate in a group that is strolling at the playground, but find it much more difficult to ride in a crowded bus. A society that thrives on non-intrusion in a lax environment soon dies away in an increasingly strict situations.

It is also characteristic that modern man is opposed to the cult of suffering. Being safe from suffering is worth any price. One can observe panic-stricken avoidance of suffering, which is manifested not only in the sphere of physical ailments, but worse still, in the field of inter-personal relationships. Kołakowski notes that we avoid anticipating death, not for the purpose of comprehending it but to push it beyond the realms of our attention. We avoid love, by imposing on ourselves forced cynicism, being afraid of any risks that may result in suffering, but resort to conformism which we impose on our relatives, «[...] the fear of specter of misery, alienation from the environment which makes it really difficult to believe that a man's attempt at self-constitution is surpassing conformity» (Kołakowski 2003: 105). The culture which exhibits such a huge reluctance to suffering is termed by Kołakowski the culture of analgesics.

Today's world is a world without such concepts as God, the devil, the original sin, the soul, good, evil, sacred, profane... mainly because these concepts have become outdated and unfashionable, and what is more, some of them seem so absurd for the ideas of enlightenment. However, according to Kołakowski, the image of the world that excludes these rules (Kołakowski 1988: 234) seem even more absurd. He connects the phenomenon

of disappearance of these concepts with the decline of interest in religion, but without any indication of what was the origin. However, modern man does not even see these changes, as he is too busy and intoxicated with «narcotic agents» in his search for new «builders of life.» Kołakowski describes it as «life drugging», which is a voluntary self-dazing and jamming of one's consciousness. The effect of these phenomena is the fact that man has lost the ability to independently deal with problems, failures, pain, disaster, suffering, and even the ability to face life without outside help.

One of the manifestations of evil in a given society is the phenomenon of hatred. According to Kołakowski, its noticeable dimensions include moral, political or religious aspects. Since moral and political party does not contradict each other, it means that there are no cases when hatred could be, at the same time, morally condemned and prescribed as a useful political instrument to pave way to a world free of hatred: an instrument that sanctifies purpose. However, religious tradition, at least in our cultural circle, demands more than just resignation from hatred: we ought to, in addition, do good to our persecutors, by praying for our enemies (Kołakowski 1977).

Man, in the words of Kant, was carved out of a crooked piece of wood, so nothing simple can be achieved from it. In man there exists a fundamental corruption, which cannot in anyway be eradicated. So the issue of whether evil can be completely destroyed in the world is identical with that of, if the devil can be saved. This, contrary to the belief of Origen and several other thinkers, does not seem possible. The devil is not a being hungry of destruction, and famine. Kołakowski seems to have no doubt as to the inability of complete eradication of evil. Although what we perceive in the world makes us optimistic, it is difficult to find any reason to conclude that we can eliminate these phenomena, and thus also evil. We have observed so many horrible things in this century. We can hardly assume that all that wrong has now passed away and everything will be fine. «I, however, have the feeling that things will not be that fine. I do not want to prophesy of my freewill, since it is known that if prophets are not inspired by God, they err. So I prefer to err as a prophet of misfortune» (Pawelec

2000: 106). Moreover, he opines that the complete elimination of evil remains an impossibility.

4. Ethics Without the Code

There is, according to Kołakowski, a moment in the life of every man when he learns at least three things. The first is the awareness that we live in a world where there is torture and concentration camps, where people are dying of hunger and cold, where twelve-year old prostitutes live, where old men are tortured by their children and children are abused by their parents. Second is the perception we received this world as a heritage with unpayable debt burden and mortgage and last but not the least is a kind of consciousness that we can abandon it by giving up life. If we do not, then we should take responsibility for the world into which we were born. As long as we live freely, we through our behavior, as well as our conscious or semi-conscious act of consent accept the world as it is offered us. Just live — which translates to mean acceptance of all the rottenness of the world as our own disgrace and rottenness, but recognizing at the same vein that, despite the burden the heritage is worth accepting, or that life, despite its suffering is worth our involvement (Kołakowski 2009: 140–141). When we come to the conclusion and, what's more, realize that by living we affirm life, our consciousness bears a liability for the debts of the world. «The refusal to settle ones debts takes two ideological forms: it is expressed in, These are two different variations, based on age, of the same mask which requires cowardice to avoid responsibility for life» (Kołakowski 2009: 141). Although Kołakowski positions his reflections between the two extremes, namely conservatism and nihilism, he equally distances himself from both currents. If nihilism is an attempt of an apparent disagreement with the world, conservatism could be its opposite — as an identification of oneself with the contemporary world. A nihilist consequently reduces the world to himself, whilst a conservative reduces himself to the existing world. Each of us — according to Kołakowski constitute a part of the world, accepting

it as a correlate of its own existence and as a matter of responsibility we try to describe this situation; similarly as in recognizing the irreducible nature of moral decisions which are forced on us. As responsible beings, we cannot fail to be interested in the problems of the modern world, even if they are very distant from us. We need to know that all the evil of this world has been caused by beings like us. The fact that there is in each of us the seed of evil, which we cannot always prevent, we are not without blame, even if we are not the perpetrators. We are humans, and its man, who perpetrate evil on other people. The desire to have a moral code is a component tendency to safety, the avoidance of decision making. It is, indeed, the desire to live in a world where all the decisions have already been made once and for all. Ideally, the code should serve as a set of abstract decisions replacing any specific decision; it should provide a sufficient condition for each settlement, to automatically locate any situation in the world of values, that reduces its elements to points on a uniform universal scale, to annihilate any field of indecisiveness and to create conditions of certainty. The Code contains all the tips, so we would for sure know, under what conditions, in a given situation we could be free of guilt, and permit the attainment of this freedom by actually subjecting oneself to its rules. There is a tendency to get hold of an ideal code, which encourages improvements of existing codes and demands of us the treatment of existing codes as ideals accomplished.

Kořakowski, however, does not believe in the codes to be full, complete and perfect, saying «[...] no code is really ultimately exhausting, but the idea of the code contains a constant striving towards the achievement of the idea of completeness and, therefore such a set of rules that are applicable in any given moral situation while prejudicing it likewise. The ideal code is an idea of a perfectly decided system which, in conjunction with the description of a situation, can be legally deduced as valuable or negated. The code is intended to transform the world of values into a crystal landscape, where any value can always be without doubt located and identified» (Kořakowski 2009: 153). Kořakowski showed how much indecision and doubt arises when we take moral principles seriously. Instability and dilemmas accompany

us in experiencing our own freedom and relates to persons who are not unfamiliar with ethical reflection. As Kołakowski said, in moral life there is symmetry of claims and obligations. Moral life, according to Kołakowski, is like a world in which there are a lot of holes. In patching one of these, we increase another and thus rigid rules are a fiction. For each decision, which claims to be moral, I bear full responsibility and I never know, and will never know whether it was appropriate. This uncertainty makes people who are morally valuable feel they are never saints and that saints are not always morally valuable.

5. Conclusions

For Kołakowski philosophy is not a profession, it is a vocation, which simply means that philosophy is not for him, but he is for philosophy and that it was not him who chose, but he was chosen by philosophy and thus became his fate. Therefore, he is tormented by questions that others are simply curious about, because whenever he talks about philosophy, he talks about struggle and agony, not creative ecstasies and satisfaction from a job well done. It seems that we extremely need such philosophers who will sow in us some seeds of doubt, not only because, according to Kołakowski, doubt is some sort of defense against evil, but because it can weaken the Promethean confidence in ourselves (Kołakowski 1982: 157) and also against all kinds of rigid rules and codes; but also because it forces us to reflect and consequently make us take actions. Of course, one has to remember that this is a double-edged sword. Doubt can also be a leaven of evil because there does not exist a good rule that cannot be used in a wrong way (Kołakowski 1997: 39).

This is so because every idea and human activity can be used to unethical practices. However, this conclusion does not call for inaction, but rather a more prudent and cautious approach that will be specific to the subject of conscious existence of evil. Also the proper conclusion seems to be the fact that evil will always be a challenge for us to which we should respond and try

to change since it within our capacity to change. As Kołakowski writes «In the world full of hatred, jealousy and vengeance, in the world that — not so much because of the nature of poverty but rather because of our gargantuan gluttony — seems to us more jam-packed, hatred turns out to be one of those evils of which are can say cannot be removed by any institutional procedures. In this case, each person is free, without being exposed to ridicule, to presuppose that by taming the evil in himself, contributes to attempts to subdue it in the world, and so bears in himself an uncertain and fragile anticipation of a better life on this ship of madmen» (Kołakowski 1977).

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