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Social responsibility of man as an ethical challenge

Summary

If we talk about dilemmas and the ethical challenges of the present time, then we suggest simultaneously that these problems differ in some way from universal ethical questions, important to man in every epoch and in every circumstances, and from these issues which were important in the past or will turn out important in the future, however, at present the general agreement concerning definite decisions prevails. Then it is necessary to identify those special problems of the present time and point out the features due to which they acquire special significance to us.

However, presenting the matter in such a way does not seem fully justified, because the times in which we live differ in many regards from all mankind has ever experienced. The development of science and technology and increasing possibility of activities resulting from them, and also a level of complexity of relations linking the acting subject with other different subjects and the external world, caused that also ethical problems have taken on a whole new dimension. The issues which in the beginning of the XXth century were considered as minor or banal (e.g. the problem of man's influence on the environment) became the key ethical questions in the course of several decades stirring up deep divisions not only among ethicists, but also in the whole society. In majority, they are however practical problems connected with certain general philosophical theories, such as abortion, euthanasia or medical experiments. In the last years they grew almost into symbols, and the way of their deciding shows a general ideological attitude, and even allows to define political views.

Key words: social responsibility, philosophy, anthropology, ethics, moral philosophy, moral theology, ethical dilemmas, ethical challenges, the present time versus morality.

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However, if we want to find answers to the question about man's situation in the context of ethical problems characteristic of the present time, first of all, it is necessary to think over what we understand by the notion of the ethical situation. In the present ethical discussion, meanings of such notions like "ethical dilemma" or "ethics" are getting more and more muddled, and provided in the case of "ethical dilemma" the matter is relatively simple, because this notion came into being as a result of transferring a dilemma notion from the field of logics to the field of ethics, and as a result of it the notion seems to mean simply the situation, in which the simple choice between good and moral evil is impossible. Then when it comes down to the notion of ethics, we can already speak about certain erosion of this notion, the erosion leading to breaking the unity of factual content and the formal side of ethical norms more than once¹.

It would be appropriate to agree that the notion of ethics underwent "erosion", both in colloquial language and in the language of the philosophical reflection on morality. On the other hand, however, it is impossible not to notice that also the meanings of many ethical notions and even notions from colloquial language such as death, life, disease, health, suffering, fight, guilt etc. have got muddled or at least have been redefined. Without precise further clarification of all these notions, any ethical discourse ceases to be possible.

1 H. Promieńska, *About some dilemmas concerning violating the principles of the ethics in extreme existential situations*, from *Ethicist in the face of border-line situations*, edited by D. Probuska, Cracow 2007, pp. 21–22.

It is necessary to recognize for particularly disturbing that the difference between the notion of ethics and the notion of morality is getting blurred. As it is known, many philosophers distinguish between ethics (ethical system) and morality (moral system). According to the definition given by S. Jedynak, the ethical system is “the set of well ordered views with reasoning” possessing certain aim, namely convincing others to accept these views. However, we define the moral system as “valid in a given society and in given time the set of standards and moral values fulfilling the function in regulating a human life”². One can have doubts whether defining the moral system through referring to the moral values has a sufficient explanatory power, however it does not seem the most important at the moment. The principal question here is whether the distinction between ethics and morality reflects the real way of using these notions, or this is only postulate-based and designing solution. It seems that S. Jedynak’s definitions constitute an attempt arrange the notional chaos reigning in the present ethical discussion into order. They are by no means a description of the actual condition of the thing.

Then one can propose the thesis according to which one of the causes of the difficulty with definition what is the present man’s ethical condition, is that a border between ethics and morality is getting blurred. If we define morality, as S. Jedynak did, as the set of standards really valid in the given society, then we should also accept that the set of standards is obvious for every member of this society, so it is not subject to “controversiality”. Even when we agree that there are lots of moral systems competing with each other in Western societies in reality, then it will signify no more than that the individual faces the necessity of choice suitable to his morality (assuming naturally that the possibility of the unhindered choice of his own identity exists). Meanwhile the problem which the man faces at present is not by no means the problem of choice, but axiological state of confusion or simply axiological emptiness leading practically to the conviction that every choice is equally devoid meaning.

It is also easy to notice, observing contemporary ethical discussions, that they are characterized by not only ambiguity of key notions, but also with multidimensional character and multiaspectedness. On the one hand their result is free referring to various, often excluding ethical theories functioning in that discussion under common name of the ethical tradition, and on the second hand, the fact that except for ethicists and philosophers also theologians, politicians, journalists, doctors, geneticists etc. take part in it. That second aspect of present ethical disputes seems to be particularly symptomatic, because it is not the symptom of the intellectual fashion, but the result of growing complexity of the reality as a result of new scientific discoveries, technological inventions (cellular telephony, the Internet), and finally social and economic changes (globalization). These phenomena are the direct source of the ethical problems i.e. they require an answer to the question, how we should proceed in reality shaped under their influence, and simultaneously due to their ethical ambiguity they provoke bringing our hitherto existing convictions under review.

2 Por. S. Jedynak, *Słownik etyczny*, Lublin 1990, s. 237 i nast.

For the assessment of man's condition, who is trying to find the solution of the ethical problems of the present day, is not admittedly essential which of the above mentioned phenomena we are going to recognize as primal in relation to remaining ones. In the first half of the XXth century many philosophers discerned the causes of the crisis of morality in the increasing role of the technology and in its degrading, alienating influence on man. Such opinions get rarer and rarer at present time. It seems to result from the fact that we get used to technological inventions facilitating our everyday life quickly and begin to treat them as a natural element of our surroundings. Only the newest discoveries or inventions, such as the Internet or cloning of animals still arouse discussions, however these problems also in the course of the nearest several years or decades will be "domesticated" and stop arousing anxiety about the future of mankind.

The fact that science and technology tend to be treated as the cause of the ethical dilemmas of the present day causes that in the present ethical reflection the tendency to search solutions of ethical problems in areas where those problems take their origins is visible, so actually in science and technology. If these kind of attempts aim at finding the final answers concerning ethical questions, then it seems that we have to deal with the hidden cult of the science, that is with scientism³. The question whether the science will ever be able to give answers to the ethical questions (so e.g. to bring us closer to understanding of the relation between the nervous system and consciousness) is certainly an important and interesting philosophical question. However, when we wonder about the man's condition here and now, then we have to be content with the statement, that both "making scientific" of ethics and man's philosophy is so far a philosophical myth which might be never realized.

Neither science nor technology constitute the cause of ethical conflicts anyway, but multiplied possibilities for action thanks to them. Moreover, the science and technology are the product of man's definite attitude towards the world, an expression of hope for liberation from the state of various dependencies in which the individual was in pre-industrial revolution period. Hence, at present for the second source of the ethical uncertainty is quite universally acknowledged the progressive bankruptcy of the Enlightenment ideal of rationality (or at least growing belief in this bankruptcy). The Enlightenment model of rationality made assumption that essential and really existing is only this what is universal. The contingency and individuality in any case seem to constitute, if not the essence, an equivalent component of the human existence, treat this model as aberration.

The most conspicuous sign of the bankruptcy of the Enlightenment model of rationality is our attitude toward suffering and death. It does not concern only the Holocaust, which is presented by the followers of the post-modernistic philosophy as the final consequence of this model, but about one of the basic outlines of the

3 The example of such attempts at solving a dispute concerning moral admissibility of euthanasia by determination – based on biological criteria - the moment when human life begins. Cf. J. Sak, P. Kiciński, B. Kołodziejczyk, K. Marczewski, *Bio-ethic aspects of protection for human life in the pre-natal period*, from *Ethicist in a face of border-line situations...*, p. 175 and next.

present culture, namely tendency to comodation i.e. transforming larger and larger fragments of the reality including man into goods. Hence endeavour to repress from consciousness this what does not allow to be reduced to the object level i.e. human death for example, is characteristic of contemporary times. The contemporary man became an object of the laws of supply and demand, and the social life resembles the market where each of us is treated like the object possessing the definite value. Old, ill and suffering man stops being to be suitable goods for sale, therefore he is eliminated from the social life (market) and is subject to special 'utilization' at institutions created especially to isolate disease and death from the social life⁴. It leads to the rise of falsified picture of the world, because "the death is still horrible, terrific phenomenon, and fear of it is common, though we even believed that it has been mastered in many aspects"⁵. The man has now to cope with universal ethical problems resulting from his human nature, and the attempts to repress them from the field of vision leads to loneliness and larger suffering in consequence.

The numerous attempts of overcoming this condition of the thing are undertaken, both in the level of the individual problems (bioethics, eco-ethics, professional ethics etc.) and in the level of the general philosophical reflection about the morality. An attempt to make an effort to face a specific ethical situation of the contemporary man is situational ethics of the Anglican theologian J. Fletscher, among others. It assumes that the detailed, invariable moral norms we should be guided by in every circumstances do not exist. How we should proceed, always depends on the situation. Only four general principles exist (the deed should be effective, i.e. should lead to the result in conformity with the commandment of love, the same deed can be morally good or bad depending on the circumstances, the acceptance of the fact of the religious belief, treating other man as the aim itself), however we cannot come to conclusions concerning practical action based on them⁶. In the XXth century the meta-ethical theories came into being, which question the sense of practicing ethics as the philosophical science (emotivism) or they put off the moment of reaching the certainty concerning essential values and ethical principles far in the future (constructivism).

Disadvantage of all these proposals is lack of reference to dynamically changing ethical situation of the contemporary man. However, it is hard to actually count on coming into existence of the ethical theory or even the philosophical direction which would be able to describe situation of the contemporary man, showing simultaneously how man should live in the world created by himself. It happens as a result of development pace of the present civilization and new ethical problems continually appearing. The problems, which forty or fifty years ago still seemed absolutely basic e.g. the threat of the atomic war and annihilation of the whole mankind⁷, at present became so minor that we are almost unconscious of their

4 Por. R. Tokarczyk, *Prawa narodzin, życia i śmierci*, Kraków 2000, s. 323.

5 E. Kübler-Ross, *Rozmowy o śmierci i umieraniu*, Poznań 1998, s. 23.

6 J. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, Philadelphia 1996.

7 B. Russell aged 91 wrote that he did not know if his whole life had made sense because he was not sure if he had managed to contribute to prevent the atomic war. *The Last Testament of Bertrand Russell*, Independent, 24th November 1993. In 1970s and 1980s the

existence in everyday life. One can have the impression, that every attempt of seizing man's situation in the face of new ethical questions constitute rather the symptom of fear of the future than clean cognitive attempt of understanding of the change of man's situation in the world.

Even the most detailed characteristics of the ethical problems of the present day does not give the answer to the question about man's condition. The solutions of those problems also do not define the contemporary man's condition made from the perspective of various philosophical and religious positions. These solutions differ depending on ideological assumptions, which disputing parties accept on the principle of axioms, meanwhile these assumptions themselves usually constitute the elements of ethical theories formed as the attempt of explanation of the man's condition in completely different reality. Referring to these assumptions certainly does not facilitate seizing the exceptionality of the man's situation here and now.

What does that exceptionality consist in? It seems that one of the features of ethical condition of the contemporary man is the feeling of increasing complexity and the multiaspectedness of ethical choices. The relation between action and its result has been broken off, though not with respect to result's distance either in time or space, but with respect to possibility of its foreseeing. We are forced to act, however we are not able to foresee what influence our actions will have on us, on different people, and in the end on our surroundings. On the one hand it evokes the feeling of special ethical helplessness, and on the second hand it breeds temptation of ethical relativism or even nihilism. One can simply recognize the temptation for the natural and inevitable consequence of the development of the contemporary civilization. One can interpret the well-known work of H. Jonas *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* not only as the attempt of creation of the new ethics adapted to the civilization of technology, but as the special appeal to oppose nihilistic attitudes.

In fact, we are to deal with the special paradox. In the epoch when man managed to understand and subordinate the considerable areas of the natural reality to himself (including his own body, which of Descartes's time is also treated as external natural reality towards the individual). When as species he is influenced by the external strengths to less and less extent, and he is becoming their subject to more and more extent, then as the individual he begins to lose his own subjectivity becoming the object of the action of the strengths which he produced himself.

So the difference between the man's situation now or formerly consists in the lack of the certainty, which is the cause of the loss of belief in cohesion and the homogeneity of all reality. So it does not concern only about the fact of involvement of the individual in the complicated net of the relations and the dependencies, over which he is not able to take control and which causes the feeling of the internal captivity, but also about the loss of the basis of which one could draw

majority of publication from the field of bioethics concerned the problems of conscious procreation and genetic engineering, while in 1990s one of the main problem became the end of the human life (the definition of the death, euthanasia, palliative care). cf. S. Leone, *Deadly ill*, Cracow 2000, p.59.

out the coherent sense giving direction to the life. In other words, inasmuch acknowledgement for his own a certain superior and explaining the whole reality idea (God, reason, science, race etc.) allows to recognize that external, phenomenal incoherence and the contingency of reality for the unimportant attribute of this reality, for the transitory state or simply for an illusion. The atrophy of belief in such an idea takes away this possibility. The man is being left alone in the face of breaking into innumerable quantity of the incoherent elements of the reality, and he has to cope alone with this metaphysical pluralism. The present epoch also gives the chance of working out of ethics which is closer to man and more authentic. It is the object of the voluntary acceptance, not the compulsion that is forced on tradition or definite social relations. If, however, we look at the past rejecting all ideological prejudices we can perceive that ethical systems often became, even in spite of their creators' intentions, the tool of suppression of the individual freedom and the source of the injustice. The vagueness, ambiguity and uncertainty of the ethical choices, characteristic for man at the turn of the XXth and XXIst centuries, will favour beyond the doubt the increase of ethical consciousness.

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