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Rev. Konstanty Michalski's reflections on beastliness and heroism

The history of humanity is a spectacle difficult to understand, in which the actors break the boundaries of beastliness and heroism. There are moments, such as the Second World War, when a sea of evil and cruelty, but also of good and heroism, are at war with each other on a metaphysical scale. A thinker competent to grapple with this subject is Rev. Konstanty Michalski, a respected scholar who spent several months in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp during the war. He presented his profound analysis of the essence and sources of the struggle between love and hatred in his book *Between Heroism and Beastliness*, which was first published after the author's death in 1949. Although more than 70 years have passed since then, the reflections it contains are still relevant today.

Keywords: Michalski, beastliness, heroism, Germans, war

Introduction

The history of humanity is an astonishing and yet difficult to understand performance in which the actors push the boundaries, both of beastliness and heroism. In this story incessant conflicts of tribe, race, land, gold, power, ambition, bring to the fore battles and wars, along with chiefs, soldiers, and politicians, and only in the background do the victims of these events appear. In doing so, there are moments when evil and cruelty, and the antithetical good and heroism, seem to be at war with each other on an almost metaphysical scale. Undoubtedly, this kind of struggle lasted throughout the six years of the Second World War, and spanned virtually the entire world, resulting in the deaths of tens of millions of people. It is not easy to understand the motives of those who, denying their humanity, at that time committed bestial acts, which were often irrational and senseless, devoid of any utilitarian dimension. It is also impossible to understand the origins of the attitudes of many people who at that time com-

mitted acts of incomprehensible heroism. The Second World War and the resulting brutal occupation or even extermination of entire nations was undoubtedly a period of great trial for people and humanity. One could then see the amplitude of all attitudes – for and against – God, man, justice, decency. Some unscrupulously committed all kinds of atrocities in the name of building the Thousand Year Third Reich or the imperial illusions of the governments of Japan, Italy or the USSR. Others, inertly choosing easier paths in difficult circumstances, were unable to oppose the cruelty happening around them, and even participated in it. Alongside the criminals, the blackmailers, the denouncers, the mindless followers of orders, millions of people tried to survive while yet trying to remain faithful to moral principles.

In the context of the above theses, dilemmas and questions, it is difficult to find a thinker who would describe these events more vividly than Rev. Konstanty Michalski,¹ an esteemed scholar who lived during the war in a space of beastliness and heroism, or rather between the two. For on 6 November 1939, together with other professors of the Jagiellonian University, he was deceitfully arrested and transported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin, where he remained until February 1940. He presented his profound analysis of the essence and sources of the struggle between love and hate suggestively, also for the 21st century reader, in his book *Między heroizmem a bestialstwem* [Between Heroism and Bestiality], first published after the author's death in 1949. Even though more than 70 years have passed since then, the reflections it contains have not lost their relevance. Even if we do not personally experience acts of beastliness, nor are we compelled to be heroic, modern media in particular create an environment in which we are constantly confronted with the drama of humanity being trampled or saved by millions of people every day.

In spite of the fact that Rev. Michalski himself spent several months in a place where beastliness and heroism manifested themselves at every moment, in this book he hardly contains any analysis of the events of the Time of Contempt. He mentions them only by way of allusion, as, for example, in the preface to the book: "When the forests are burning all around me, I find myself some 130 kilometres from my research workshop, with only a few books at hand. But the terrifying light from the burning forests falls on all their pages" (transl. from Polish).² Poign-

¹ Rev. Michalski was born in Dąbrówka Mała (now a district of Katowice), but all his adult life was associated with Kraków, which until 1918 was part of Galicia. There he graduated from the high school in the Congregation of the Mission of St. Vincent de Paul in Kraków, where he was admitted to the group of alumni and in 1903 he was ordained a priest. He studied Slavic studies at the Jagiellonian University, and from 1914 he lectured at the Faculty of Theology of the Jagiellonian University. He died in Kraków in 1947.

² Zob. K. Michalski, *Między bestialstwem a heroizmem*, Częstochowa 1984, s. 26.

ant, though subtle in its poetic form, is another passage from the book, showing the emotions of a man who has experienced incomprehensible cruelty: "on the battlefield, hammer clashes with hammer, machine clashes with machine, tank clashes with tank, and in the prisons and camps, hammer clashed with anvil. An anvil cannot be made of brittle, breakable iron, or else it would shatter into splinters under the blow of a hammer. In the camps, the prisoner was the anvil and the torturer was the hammer. The blows were hard, terrible and well-aimed" (transl. from Polish).³

The reasons for the lack of descriptions of camp cruelty and heroism in the book can be found in Michalski's aversion to memories, which the prisoners preferred not to keep. It also seems that his aim was primarily to search for the deeper, ahistorical, metaphysical sources of beastliness and heroism. In light of the wartime conflagration, he writes: "I have read the length and breadth in all directions of the New Testament, and I have come to understand that some carry this golden book on their heart, and others throw it into the flames, for the reason that the two great engines, the two great forces of love and hatred are constantly at work in human history" (transl. from Polish).⁴

The point of departure in the course of the book's analysis of the struggle between these two forces are the texts of Plato, especially Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas. On their basis, Michalski reflects on the various symptoms of beastliness and its antithesis, i.e. heroism. He illustrates his theoretical reflection with examples from history, literature and events that took place in his contemporary times. In preparing to write this work, Michalski also read *Żołnierskie nabożeństwo* [Soldiers' Piety] by Skarga, the works of L. Pastor, R. Guardini, E. Krebs and T. Carlyle.⁵ He often inserts psychological themes into his deeply metaphysical reflections on beastliness and heroism, trying to penetrate deeply into the human soul choosing good or evil. It is no coincidence, as his scientific interests, especially initially, were directed towards experimental psychology. Later on, he took up other issues, but he was still interested in psychology, and in his library works from this discipline constituted the largest section.⁶

The creation of this book is also firmly rooted in the (then ongoing) post-war process of settling accounts with the perpetrators of beastliness. In November 1946, Pastor Zygmunt Michelis, on behalf of the public prosecutor of the National Tribunal in Warsaw, asked Michalski, as a block comrade from Oranienburg, to assist during the trial of Governor Ludwig Fischer. This involved a written characterisation of Nazi doctrine as a denial of the Christian religion,

³ K. Michalski, *Co trzymało w obozie*, „Tygodnik Powszechny”, 22 IV 1945.

⁴ K. Michalski, *Między bestialstwem...*, s. 26.

⁵ Zob. A. Usowicz, K. Kłósak, *Konstanty Michalski (1879–1947)*, Kraków 1949, s. 102.

⁶ Tamże, s. 131–132.

from which the desire to exterminate the clergy would logically follow. Michalski did not take part in the trial, but collected material on the martyrdom of the clergy during the war and compiled a sketch on the essence and tragic consequences of National Socialist ideology.⁷

It is also worth noting that, aiming to complete his book, Michalski published a questionnaire about his camp experiences in *Tygodnik Powszechny* of 28th October 1945.⁸ The questionnaire contained, among other things, such questions as: what held me most in the camp and prison?, what hurt and tormented me most?, did I feel a deeper respect for anyone there and why?, did I do anything apart from the forced activities and against the prohibitions?, or did I act on my own initiative or in agreement with my comrades?, did I deepen or change my view on any important issue of life during this time? Michalski received as many as 1150 responses to the questionnaire by letter or orally, but he did not have time to compile them and use them in the book due to his deteriorating health. Perhaps, the analysis of bestiality and heroism presented by him, for this reason, has a more universal character, referring not so much to the manifestations of specific beastliness and heroism, but rather to their immutable essence, genesis and social consequences.

Beastliness and the roots thereof

The starting point of Michalski's reflections on particularly degenerate beastliness is the distinction between what can be called normal and abnormal in man. Thus, he calls normal that which corresponds to innate, natural psychic factors, distinguishing or linking man to the animal psyche. Thus, what separates man from the animal world is spirituality, reason and will, while the lower, animal part brings him closer to the animals, causing degeneracy.⁹ While heroism manifests itself in the spiritual, superhuman and human spheres, beastliness, antagonistic to it – in the subhuman, animal sphere, pulling man down into the abyss of sensual feelings and desires. Bestial sadism is a kind of flaw in human nature implied in an immoral and fixed way of behaviour, "producing in the depraved psyche states of pleasure and even rapture that fill any normal consciousness with revulsion" (transl. from Polish).¹⁰

⁷ Tamże, s. 105.

⁸ The questionnaire was issued in several newspapers: „Tygodnik Powszechny”, „Gość Niedzielny”, „Odrodzenie”, „Piast”, „Dziś i Jutro”.

⁹ K. Michalski, *Między bestialstwem...*, s. 167–168. Por. M. Marcinkowska-Rosół, *Konceptcja bestialstwa w Etyce Nikomachejskiej Arystotelesa*, „Roczniki Humanistyczne” 2016, 3, s. 53, 77.

¹⁰ K. Michalski, *Między bestialstwem...*, s. 109–110, 167–168.

Not content with only analyses of beastliness, Michalski also tries, importantly, to point out its causes. As a result, he refers to the factors implying beastliness, which seem to be crucial in all circumstances and epochs: racism, materialism, pride, hatred, and, finally, anthropocentrism, which attempts to replace God with man. This anthropocentrism, taking on, according to the philosopher, particularly disturbing forms in the 20th century: fascism and communism, is not conducive to the full development of humanity. Despite the appearance of humanism and even heroism, the fact of the contestation of man's relationship with God can never give birth to a sign of hope for a better future. Even if such a humanism seeks a supra-human greatness, by appealing to irrational myths and longings and to broad social strata, it places man, individual or collective, at the head of the hierarchy of values and everything that manages to make man happy on earth.¹¹

Michalski writes that racism and materialism, by contesting the spiritual dimension of the human being and its relationship to God, seek stronger human bonds in blood and matter, forces capable only of destroying and not building. This was evidently shown in the Second World War, when blood stood against blood and matter against matter, devastating what was weak and powerless.¹² For this reason, racism, which prefers brute force, by its nature rejected Christianity (as privileging the sick, unproductive, and, allegedly, persecuting the strong, creative and independent).¹³

For Michalski, Bolshevik materialism was not a less dramatic source of beastliness than racism. This strain of materialism supposedly fights for equality and justice, in fact creating a new world dominated by violence, coercion, and an all-powerful state apparatus. "Foreseeing that it will not be a smooth path on which the transition from capitalism to communism is to be made, Lenin calls for the use of force and terror by the dictatorship of the proletariat; but the call is made again in the name of justice, and thus for the shaping of the future destinies of the world a spiritual motor is again let loose which people do not want to sincerely recognise" (transl. from Polish).¹⁴

Michalski sees the eternal source of beastliness, though less frequently perceived, in the lack of deep pietism, which opens the way for three demons that push down humanity: the demon of pride, wealth and, finally, the demon of the senses, which turns only to food, drink and sex. All these three demons work against pietism in man, blurring sensitivity to all that is divine, spiritual

¹¹ Tamże, s. 103–104, 236.

¹² Tamże, s. 228.

¹³ Tamże, s. 257–258.

¹⁴ Zob. K. Michalski, *Tomizm wobec współczesnej filozofii dziejów*, „Studia Gnesnensia” 1935, 12, s. 4–5.

but also specifically human.¹⁵ The greatest demolishing force, especially in great leaders or kings, invariably remains the demon of hubris. Over and over again, as the philosopher writes, figures appear in history who are attracted by the infinity of space, and already Pompey and Caesar dreamt of oceans as the borders of the Roman state. Alexander the Great, driven by hubris, was the first in a line of great leaders and colonisers who never had enough land.¹⁶ This demonic greed was dramatically revealed in the fascist idea of ‘lebensraum’, becoming a source of beastliness, so spectacular in its scale. It could only be countered by people capable of heroism who, even in these dramatic circumstances, saved their humanity, while at the same time giving humanity a hope of rebirth.

Heroism and the roots thereof

As opposed to beastliness, heroism with the closely associated valour, especially as displayed on battlefields, were celebrated in all the old myths, fables and songs, as well as in the great religious books such as the Bible. The heroic deeds of various heroes were passed down from one generation to another with respect and even reverence, always surrounding them with a halo of legend. A dramatic space for heroic attitudes, and not only for soldiers but for so-called ‘ordinary’ people, was created by the Second World War. The heroism of Rev. Maximilian Kolbe or Janusz Korczak, who, with their decision to sacrifice their lives in the name of love for their neighbour, gave hope that humanity could be saved or, quite the opposite, elevated to greater heights even when it was being trampled on in concentration camps. V. Frankl, the famous philosopher and psychologist, also a camp prisoner, writes of heroic people “wandering from barrack to barrack, comforting their comrades in misery, offering them their last piece of bread. There were not many of them, but they are proof enough that a person can be deprived of everything except one – the last of the human freedoms: the freedom to choose one’s own behaviour in specific circumstances, the freedom to choose one’s own path” (transl. from Polish).¹⁷

Heroism, carrying a lot of faith in man and humanity, as the antithesis of beastliness, is the main subject of the analysis of Rev. Michalski, because “in

¹⁵ K. Michalski, *Między bestialstwem...*, s. 187.

¹⁶ Criticising the Eastern way of thinking and living, Michalski believed that Alexander of Macedon failed in his mission for this very reason, as his Greek soul was appropriated by the Persian. Departing from his Greek sources of spirituality, inspiring valiant and heroic deeds, he followed a path closer to beastliness. See K. Michalski, *Między bestialstwem...*, s. 195–196.

¹⁷ V. Frankl, *Człowiek w poszukiwaniu sensu*, transl. A. Wolnicka, Warszawa 2011, s. 111–112.

the lowlands of beastliness, what is a dwarf in man is expressed. On the heights of heroism shines forth what is divine in man" (transl. from Polish).¹⁸ It is for this reason that Michalski contrasts true heroism, which springs from religious and moral sources, with false secular heroism, an obvious example of which he finds in the ancient Germans. He draws attention to the fact that they were characterised by boldness which was a desiring/emotional disposition, often not coordinated with reason and will. In their heroism, it was not so much the virtue of valour that was revealed as an essentially amoral audacity, stimulating them often to the point of madness. In this boldness, overestimating the value of lustful forces, while ignoring the rational and moral sphere, Michalski saw the sources of the beastliness committed by the ancient Germans, but also by those of the twentieth century. It was a misfortune for the ancient Germanic tribes that they were unable, "like ancient Greece, to bring forth in time a profound, organised philosophical thought that would critically illuminate what was being created by the pent-up imagination of the longing imagination" (transl. from Polish).¹⁹ For in the restoration of Germanic mythology, combined with the destruction of Christianity, as Michalski rightly observed, fascism saw the chance for Germany to follow the path of beastliness, a 'justified' one, to cap it all. This seems to be an extremely valuable observation, which Michalski, however, does not develop any further. However, it is worth noting the fascist leaders' reference to Old Germanic mythology, when citing, for example, the results of archaeological research, in which even respected scientists carried out frauds on an incredible scale to prove the strength of Germanic culture or the ancient origin of such Nazi symbols as the swastika.

Seeking to evaluate the kind of heroism of the ancient Germans that the Nazis were so keen to refer to, Michalski analyses the Germanic soul, attempting to penetrate the mythology and world of the gods they created.²⁰ In doing so, he concludes that "from Odin down to the last giant or giantess, everything bears arms and cannot even live without arms. Odin was considered the god of warriors in the first place, because battle nourished the ancient Germans and they still wanted to live from battle" (transl. from Polish). According to Michalski, this mythology exerts a destructive influence on morality, encouraging acts of beastliness. Michalski pointed out that the imaginative element had spread much more widely here than in other religions. Depth psychology, on the other hand, draws attention to the fact that man in his dreams and imaginings expresses what dwells as a sensation at the bottom of his soul. Thus, since mythologies

¹⁸ K. Michalski, *Między bestialstwem...*, s. 67.

¹⁹ Tamże, s. 205.

²⁰ Tamże.

are supposed to express the deepest longings and wishes of the people who created the myth in question, in the case of ancient Germans it is battle and war.²¹

Michalski had a much higher assessment of the heroism of the ancient Greeks and Romans, for whom bravery comes to the fore, which gives man such power that they are ready to give up their health and life for some noble idea.²² He believed that there is no bravery and heroism without nobility in the soul of a fighter, without the greatness of moral and deep piety, which draws its chief strength from religion, from the furthest metaphysical sources.²³ Although the elephants of Pyrrhus fought, writes Michalski, “with no less stubbornness than the soldiers sitting on their backs, yet their heroism is not mentioned, because in the elephant’s soul there can be neither heart-felt nor profound reverence for the cause” (transl. from Polish).²⁴

Referring to Greek and Roman heroes: Pericles, Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar, Michalski also believed, contrary to Scheller, that heroism cannot be attributed only to great leaders, statesmen, colonisers or politicians.²⁵ Within the Christian perspective which, according to Michalski, is the only one to fully determine heroism, it grows out of and leads always to love, which remains a lifelong challenge, but also the only meaningful way of life for every human being without exception.²⁶ “As soon as I looked into the surrounding conflagration, it was not difficult” – he writes – “to see in its flames two forces that have been at work for centuries: love and hatred. Love intensifies human life; joy is born from it” (transl. from Polish).²⁷ Thus, abandoning other philosophical studies during the war, Michalski found in Christian love the only factor “which can rebuild humanity and save mankind from repeating the drama of the crimes just committed and the universal catastrophe” (transl. from Polish).²⁸ He emphasized, however, that love can be an extremely dangerous weapon, as it can blind or open people’s eyes. “Man’s eyes are truly opened only when the will is ignited in love, because then it inclines the thought to the highest flight. Then the will seeks with its whole essence the infinity of good” (transl. from Polish).²⁹ This reference to the infinite good permeates, as Michalski emphasized, the new law that Christ announced on the Mount of Beatitudes. All barriers that had pre-

²¹ Tamże, s. 210.

²² Tamże, s. 205.

²³ Tamże, s. 78.

²⁴ Tamże, s. 187.

²⁵ Tamże, s. 174.

²⁶ Tamże, s. 281.

²⁷ Tamże, s. 254.

²⁸ Tamże, s. 35–36. See K. Michalski, *Mistyka i scholastyka u Dantego* [w:] K. Michalski, *Filozofia na wieków średnich*, Kraków 1997, s. 465–466.

²⁹ K. Michalski, *Między bestialstwem...*, s. 309.

viously separated man from man were then removed, because the duty of love becomes universal.³⁰ Christ did not come to free man from caring for everyday bread, from caring for the form of social and state life, from caring for learning and mastering nature. "However, he gave the chief commandment, which, on the one hand, opened the heavens above people's heads, and on the other hand, ordered a Christian to go out into the field, without a name, as His rank-and-file soldier, even at the risk of persecution, to multiply bread, to extract it from stones, to introduce unity" (transl. from Polish).³¹ The Christian idea of love has two faces, one of which is directed to God and the other to people. "If you wanted to separate one face from the other, if you wanted to detach the commandment of love of neighbour from love of God, you would lose the infinity of God's horizons, shutting yourself in the passages of anthropocentrism, regardless of its form and origin" (transl. from Polish).³² That is why Brother Albert (a clear object of Rev. Michalski's fascination) loved the poverty-stricken people in the municipal homeless shelter in Kraków, even up to the point of heroism of martyrdom. "When the deprivation hurt him a lot, he said to himself and to others: you have to be good as bread on the table, like bread from which all poor people can take as much as they want, without fear of any excuse" (transl. from Polish).³³ Such love gives rise to heroism, which, although it seems powerless, is, nevertheless, able to resist beastliness and bring hope itself.

Conclusion

After the end of World War II, there was widespread awareness that wars are born first in the mind of man and then are experienced by millions of people.³⁴ To support the idea in a human mind, there must be a corresponding systemic mechanism at work, which in its most appalling form becomes apparent in totalitarianisms (fascism, Nazism, communism). It is, of course, difficult to overlook the fact that democratic systems have also been notorious in this area, needless to say, colonialism, racism or apartheid. Observing the history of wars, occupations and various forms of terrorism, it is difficult to avoid the bitter

³⁰ Although Stoicism also wanted to remove these barriers, as Michalski writes, their metaphysics and ethics were merciless: metaphysics – due to the thought of eternal transformations of everything in material pneuma, and ethics – due to its hostile stance towards emotional life. See K. Michalski, *Między bestialstwem...*, s. 244.

³¹ Tamże, s. 261–262.

³² Tamże, s. 228.

³³ Tamże, s. 119.

³⁴ These words are a paraphrase of a famous phrase included in the UN document of 16 XI 1945. See Polish National Commission for UNESCO: Misja UNESCO, 29 X 2021.

observation that the driving force of the historical process is still heroism and the power of the human spirit, but also bestial cruelty implied by the dark side of human nature. For this reason, reflection on bestiality and its antithesis, i.e. heroism, is still necessary, if not indispensable, especially if we take into consideration the level of technical sophistication of our civilisation, which seems to stimulate acts of cruelty to a greater extent than acts of love.³⁵

Recognising the widespread dream of building a better world after the end of the war, a world where beastliness could no longer occur, Michalski was certain that these dreams would only come true if they stemmed from a 'loving' love and heroic thinking, and not from despair, discouragement or melancholy. All these feelings are derived from the negation of life, while the dream follows the affirmation of life and has its own biological value, i.e. a value for sensual and spiritual life. The function of the dream, however, can be compared to the role of play and games, which fill the child's life completely at first, but become less and less frequent as time goes by, and their place is taken by deliberate effort. "Thus wasted is the life of one who perpetually wants to be a child, who constantly desires to drown himself in games and play, but also of one who perpetually remains in the realm of possibilities, and never wants to descend into the territory of hard work and struggle against difficulties" (transl. from Polish).³⁶

In dreaming of a world in which we eliminate or at least minimize the number of acts of hatred and the correlated beastliness, so often we seem to remain like never maturing children. We do carry beautiful dreams, but we would like to make them come true by carefree existence in the consumptive paradise, having fun in the most sophisticated way possible. Preoccupied with getting the best possible position in it, we see other people as competitors on the way to 'happiness' rather than people worthy of our unconditional acceptance. Therefore, beastliness and heroism in a new, perhaps milder version, at least for a moment, are still waging their eternal struggle. It is a struggle to save humanity and humanity in us; a struggle about which we can still learn a lot from Rev. Michalski.

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³⁵ Zob. J. Chrobaczyński, *Cena odwagi. Pomiędzy czasem normalności a nienormalności* [w:] *Cena odwagi: między ocaleniem życia a ocaleniem człowieczeństwa*, red. A. Bartuś, P. Trojański, Wyd. UP Kraków, Oświęcim 2019, s. 52 (45–72).

³⁶ K. Michalski, *Między bestialstwem...*, s. 155–156.

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Ks. Konstantego Michalskiego refleksja nad bestialstwem i heroizmem

Streszczenie

Historia ludzkości to trudny do zrozumienia spektakl, w którym aktorzy łamią granice bestialstwa i heroizmu. Są przy tym chwile, jak II wojna światowa, kiedy morze zła i okrucieństwa, ale także dobra i heroizmu, toczą ze sobą walkę o metafizycznej wręcz skali. Kompetentnym myślicielem do mierzenia się z tym tematem jest ksiądz Konstanty Michalski, ceniony uczonec, który w okresie wojny kilka miesięcy przebywał w obozie koncentracyjnym w Sachsenhausen. Swoją głęboką analizę istoty i źródeł walki miłości i nienawiści sugestywnie, także dla czytelnika z XXI wieku, zaprezentował w książce *Między heroizmem a bestialstwem*, wydanej po raz pierwszy już po śmierci autora w 1949 roku. Pomimo tego, iż od tamtej chwili minęło już ponad 70 lat, to rozważania w niej zawarte wciąż są aktualne.

Słowa kluczowe: Michalski, bestialstwo, heroizm, Germanie, wojna