

On the search for sources of good and evil in the Lvov-Warsaw School of Philosophy

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Abstract

In this article, the author attempts to identify the sources of good and evil as undertaken by the Lvov-Warsaw School of Philosophy (LWSP) founded by Kazimierz Twardowski. Such attempts were undertaken by both Twardowski himself and his closest students and associates; Władysław Witwicki, Tadeusz Kotarbiński. Tadeusz Czeżowski, and Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz. The best-known approach is Kotarbiński's independent ethics in which the author refers to Aristotle perceiving such potential in the characteristics of each individual as to distinguish elementary qualities in the form of opposites including opposition to good and evil. According to this approach, man acts in an evil manner because he stops following the natural voice of his own heart and instead implements set proposals provided by external factors. In the opinion of the author, the proposals formulated within the LWSP can form the basis for a rational explanation of the atrocities committed during World War II which modern ethics, being focused on neutral metaethical issues, fails to do.

Keywords: Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, Tadeusz Kotarbiński, Kazimierz Twardowski, Władysław Witwicki, the Lvov-Warsaw School, ethics, sources of good and evil

Introduction

In no other scientific discipline do the issues of subject matter and the definability of the concepts used arouse so much interest as in ethics. In everyday language ethics deals with good and evil. Nevertheless, philosophers often acknowledge that the indefinability of the concepts used in ethics is a sufficient basis to deny it a scientific status. A classic example of this approach is reflected in Leon Koja's views. Koja aspired to become a follower in the academic traditions of the LWSP. According to him, ethics is only "wishful thinking", and "ethical considerations are generally a domain of declarations not strongly based on more serious attempts to justify statements, whimpers, repeated complaints, threats and condemnations" (Koj, 1998, p. 7). Therefore, nobody needs ethics, because it does not solve people's real problems. With such a postulation, not only is ethics not a science, but it is not even clear if any judgement in relation to good or bad is necessary at all. However, by holding such a view, the philosopher set himself apart from the scientific movement initiated by the LWSP, in which ethics played an important role and was the subject of interest for the most outstanding representatives. In addition, this approach favours incorrect assumptions related to the understanding of scientific study of individual philosophical sciences by the LWSP. However, this is not an isolated case, and the popularity of such a position was the reason why ethics ceased to deal with what it was called to and ethicists began to deal primarily with justifying the scientific nature of ethics. Due to such reorientation of priorities, to this day ethics struggles in principle to find an answer to the causes of issues related to the traumatic experiences of World War II. On a smaller scale, similar problems occur to this day during contemporary armed conflicts which most often break out on ethnic or religious grounds.

The following study is also an attempt to show that ethical considerations played an important role in the work of the LWSP and its representatives successfully managed to systematise ethical issues by introducing into ethics rules which every science must follow and they did so without giving up the practical task of ethics including its impact on the moral

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condition of society. The representatives of the LWSP were aware that even rigorous adherence to the scientific requirements does not make ethics perform its true tasks.

Ethics at the LWSP – between tradition and the present day

Representatives of the LWSP, as representatives of the analytical trend in philosophy undertook attempts to make ethics scientific, based on various assumptions, which included, among others, a struggle to define basic ethical concepts. However, although all these attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, thanks to them, ethics ceased to be treated as an inseparable part of religious doctrine and gained the status of an independent philosophical discipline. Kazimierz Twardowski, the founder of the LWSP, tried to define what good is even in his early works on ethics. The attempt to analyse the concept of good was essential but, the analysis was unsuccessful. In the end, Twardowski stated that good is shown through the behaviour of a human being, and thus “a [sic] good behaviour is the one that corresponds to the characteristics of a [sic] man. By doing good things, we develop these features (just like muscles). Ethical behaviour, then, contributes to the development of humanity, as well as certain behaviour of animals contributes to the development of their species” (Twardowski, 1994, p. 107). Moral behaviour is therefore the basic duty of man who in this way realises both his deepest self-interest and also the interest of the entire human species. The sense of duty is therefore a natural disposition of every human being, similar to what instinct is in animals. However, reason is man’s supreme authority and directs him through life. According to Twardowski, science is the highest product of reason, which is generalised in philosophy. The starting point for philosophy is three types of facts subject exclusively to the power of reason. These are ethical, aesthetic and logical facts. It is only reason which judges facts, and therefore they depend only on reason. Although such judgments concern facts, reason can judge them according to the principle of contradiction that something exists or not. People may therefore differ in their opinions. Thus, Twardowski was a Platonist, because he thought that there was a close analogy between these opinions, and his view is only a modernised version of the Platonic triad: truth, goodness and beauty. He was convinced that it must be like this, because otherwise the theory of evolution would not make sense. Therefore, it is natural for man to realise three values: truth, goodness and beauty, of course within the limits of his own abilities.

On the whole, most of Twardowski’s students uncritically dealt with the tasks of ethics, only repeating the views of their teacher. Only a few of them tried to formulate their own proposals. Tadeusz Czeżowski initially followed Twardowski’s path and in his work “Metaethic considerations”, explicitly stated his thoughts related to ethics “...arose under the influence of various intellectual stimuli, but they merged close to my views on the structure of sciences. These views are a continuation of Kazimierz Twardowski’s views and through him are related to Brentano’s philosophical system, from which the foundations of psychology were taken, and above all, the idiogenic theory of judgement and the classifications of feelings” (Czeżowski, 1960, p. 1). Nevertheless, Czeżowski’s views on the status of ethical concepts underwent modification. In the 1960s, he claimed that observational sentences and ethical valuations are syntactically similar, the only difference is that in the first case a certain characteristic of the subject is stated and introduced (e.g. its colour), whilst in the second case it is only stated. Hence his explanation: “non-representative terms: existence or truthfulness, necessity and possibility, beauty, moral value or goodness, are not really attributes of objects, nonetheless they are assigned to them as empirical characteristics in modal sentences. [...] they were termed *modi entis*, or modes of being” (Czeżowski, 1989, pp. 118–119). In spite of such declarations regarding defining terms, towards the end of his life Czeżowski’s views came close to that of Utilitarianism. In his reflections related to metaethics, Czeżowski formulated a descriptive definition of the supreme good, in which he stated that good serves to satisfy human needs and since they fulfil this task to different degrees, they can be hierarchized. “The highest good is

the good that satisfies the maximum needs of the valuer due to given parameters. Examples of good include: a handbook, providing the most accurate information in a given area of knowledge, an architectural project, fully implementing the construction plans, car design, perfectly suited to its terrain and economic requirements” (Czeżowski, 1960, p. 40). However, in this approach, good has lost its universal character, because human needs are individual and therefore the degree of their satisfaction is subjective.

In his interpretation of ethical concepts Czeżowski seems to be closest to the understanding proposed by Twardowski. According to him, good is not a simple feature of the subject, but a way of its existence. However, most of Twardowski’s students believed that good is a characteristic of the subject, and thus many problems arose with its definition. Since a characteristic is perceptible, one must therefore explain why it is not perceived by everybody. This turned out to be a flaw in traditional ethics, especially after the dramatic experiences of the Second World War. One of the few students who took up this problem was Twardowski’s first student, Władysław Witwicki (1878–1948). His starting point in ethics and concepts contained therein were the proposals suggested by Twardowski. Such a belief led Witwicki to acknowledge that good and evil are objective characteristics of objects. In other words, their existence is independent from human consciousness, and therefore everybody is able to recognise them infallibly just as they are able to perceive objects. These are the characteristics of objects which exist regardless of the human psyche, and thus they cannot be determined by others (Jadczak, 1989, p. 650). Nevertheless, their obviousness does not allow for their formal definition even though they are experienced by everybody.

Witkowski collected and ordered his loose thoughts relating to ethics and its subject matter in his work entitled “Moral talks”. It was written in 1944 during the traumatic period of the war, as the assumptions of all past ethical systems lay in ruins. The underlying idea of this book was: “There is one good, if it is built-in appropriately” (Witwicki, 1957, p. 7). However, the author did not mean a semantic approach to the issue but to human feelings because each indifferent ethical act must be judged as either good or bad. Since values exist objectively in objects, people can differ in their reception, such as in the perception of colours, but it is never the same object which is both good and bad. Such a modification was necessary for him, because accepting the assumption of universal feeling of good he would have to treat both the executioners and their victims on the same plane. However, Witwicki, did not indicate the sources of human depravity, he concentrated mainly on observing the positive characteristics of objects.

Two interesting concepts about the sources of good and evil were also formulated among the closest of Twardowski’s students namely: Tadeusz Kotarbiński (1886–1981) and Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz (1890–1963). Each concept referred to a different thought initiated by Twardowski. The first one followed the intuitionistic trend in which good is not a definable concept because it is only a certain state of consciousness. The author of the second one took a lot of trouble to verify the traditional views of ethics, and for this purpose he used philosophical analysis. The first of these philosophers (Tadeusz Kotarbiński) is widely known in Poland as the creator of independent ethics, whereas the history of Polish ethics is silent regarding the achievements of the second one (Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz) because his analyses so far have not been publicised (Konstanczak, 2017, pp. 145–154).

Tadeusz Kotarbiński’s Proposal

Kotarbiński aimed to develop ethics which people could use even if they are not scholars. It was not a detailed analysis since it covered a range of issues concerning all people rather than all disciplines of science. “According to us, ethics similarly as healthcare or administration, does not need outward facing justifications. Its guidelines remain invariant, irrespective whether a reasonable person is a materialist, an idealist, or a spiritualist in the general theory of being” (Kotarbiński, 1956, p. 12). There are also no absolute theories of science in which ethics

is guaranteed the status of science because “What belongs and what does not belong to science – this is related to the historical moment and the historical situation” (Kotarbiński, 1980, p. 43). The conclusion to this argument, however, is clear: “And so, many repeat the slogan refusing ethics the status of science. [...] Ethics is refused the status either because it is impossible to achieve serious justifications in ethics, or because ethical problems, which are practical and not theoretical, in principle, do not belong to science. However, none of these arguments can take away from ethics the right to be a science, which is guaranteed by our criterion” (Kotarbiński, 1980, p. 43).

With this understanding of science in ethics, Kotarbiński left Positivism far behind, as its ethical problems were frequently included within those disciplines which were undoubtedly scientific. However, in Kotarbiński’s opinion, ethics receives a scientific status through its cultural significance and not by attempting to classify individual sciences according to theoretical criteria. It can even be said that in his opinion ethics can be considered to be a science because the people want it to be so. “Because of the enormous importance of public ethical culture and the enormous intellectual effort input by thinkers over the centuries into the issue of ethics, and the richness of existing ethical writing, there can be no doubt that this is a whole, ethics is suitable for cultivating as a research speciality, education material in higher education, and moreover, demanding in a loud voice, a place in universities” (Kotarbiński, 1986b, p. 417).

The independent ethics of Tadeusz Kotarbiński was formulated based on rationalism, and its foundation was the same as the motto of Jan Woleński’s book: “I believe in what I can understand” (Wolenski, 2014). Its basic message boiled down to the postulate of “freeing oneself in ethics from what does not belong there” (Kotarbiński, 1986a, p. 11). With regards to human valuation, practical realism hence depends “on taking into account the limited potential and hierarchy of values according to which a rational person should select a path for his own conduct” (Kotarbiński, 1986a, p. 11). Therefore, ethics is a kind of task to be performed by everyone individually. Thus, universal ethics cannot exist for everybody which, up to now, philosophers have ever tried to formulate. Kotarbiński’s statement “let us therefore boldly conclude that reliable ethics is ethics independent from philosophy,” was thus a natural consequence of such an understanding of its status (Kotarbiński, 1956, p. 12).

Thus, practical realism was the result of placing ethics outside philosophy, because every person feels the pressures of duty which force him to rationally assess the situation, make a choice, and consequently to take the most appropriate action in a given situation. Simultaneously, theoretical philosophy is unnecessary, because every human being performs many such processes subconsciously. Therefore, Kotarbiński’s words about himself, concern all people: “I am a stool with three legs: One leg – ethics, the second – logic, whilst the third – praxeology” (Dziewanowski, 1977, p. 10).

This understanding of ethics originates from an attempt to assess human actions according to the criterion of decency. Kotarbiński consciously did not use the terms “good” or “value”, because they would impose acceptable solutions in advance. On the other hand, the criterion of decency allowed for the possibility of making a mistake as well as for the negative consequences of the action taken. The principles of practical realism minimized such a possibility, but yet they did not eliminate it completely. Within ethics, he also distinguished three branches which each person develops for their own use, namely felicitology, praxeology and ethics in the proper sense. This is not about a ready-made ethical theory, but about a system of rules used by people in everyday life. “Thus felicitology, in short it is related to shaping a happy life. It is about how to live to be happy and not to fall into the opposite state when a person says he is unhappy. Praxeology deals with fitness, the correct behaviour when you don’t want to be clumsy but want to be active and act as efficiently as possible. It’s a technique of bravery. Finally, proper ethics (which the subject of this paper) deals with how one has to live

to be a decent person, to live honestly and not live in a state of shame” (Kotarbiński, 1956, p. 7).

Kotarbiński therefore assumed that in life one can face situations when our intellect is unable to suggest any reasonable solution, and in such cases one can only appeal to the judgment of one’s own conscience. It is based on imagining a hypothetical situation in which we judge someone who does the same task we currently want to do. Then, at the time, an infallible power, drawn from Aristotle, to evaluate through good-bad antinomy is revealed. Acting in opposition to one’s conscience is therefore a dehumanising behaviour, against human nature, and thus “the greatest disaster for man is the awareness of betrayal of the voice of one’s own conscience” (Kotarbiński, 1986b, p. 195). However, conscience is highly individual, so “one’s own conscience in moral matters cannot be replaced with someone else’s conscience” (Kotarbiński, 1980, p. 220),

Considering the issue of how a person would recognise that they are following the right path, Kotarbiński was inspired by Aristotle, who in his “Metaphysics” stated that opposites exist where “two attributes cannot simultaneously belong to one thing capable of accepting them” (Aristotle, 2009, 1018a). The ability to perceive such a contradiction is in a way encoded in nature, and therefore the object cannot be both black and white simultaneously, warm and cold, and likewise it cannot be both good and bad. Such coexistence in any object is internally contradictory and even impossible to imagine. Following in the footsteps of Aristotle, Kotarbiński, tried to identify and present such contradictions. Just like for the Stagirite, there were not many and all were specified in just five pairs of contradictions. The natural disposition of every human being is not so much to grasp such contradictions as the ability to assess that one of these mutually exclusive characteristics occurs in a given entity. The consequence of this reasoning was the observation: “Active goodness has [its] sufficient justification in the heart’s obviousness, regardless of ideological concepts, religion or metaphysics” (Kotarbiński, 1987, p. 106). According to Kotarbiński, the whole essence of ethics is contained in only five moral contradictions:

- 1) kindness – cruelty;
- 2) honesty – dishonesty;
- 3) courage – cowardice;
- 4) bravery – tardiness;
- 5) mastery – resisting temptation (Kotarbiński, 1987, p. 187).

It is a natural disposition of every human being to experience them, and therefore does not have to possess any knowledge related to it. Paradoxically, possessing some ready-made solutions originating from tradition or philosophy in some way even impairs such a natural disposition, and consequently teaching ethics at school does not produce better people. The ability to listen to the inner voice emanating from one’s own heart and to follow the voice of one’s own conscience can help someone to become a better person. It was a revolutionary proposal related to the understanding of the subject of ethics and its tasks, and perhaps for this very reason, Kotarbiński’s independent ethics did not find followers in Poland. Nevertheless, in the history of ethics in Poland, Kotarbiński is an outstanding figure who was “One of the philosophers who not only wants to get to know the world, but also [wants to] change it” (Wallis, 1962, p. 52).

Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz’s Proposal

Twardowski’s closest collaborator and privately his son-in-law, Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz formulated ethical fundamentals, which were different from Kotarbiński’s. His proposition was the result of his experiences when teaching classes in ethics at the University of Lvov. He took over these classes after Twardowski’s retirement i.e. from the 1931–1932 academic year. He presented in them an original approach to analytical ethics in which he considered the

possibility of applying the language of logic to ethical considerations. In his essay entitled “Discourse: On the Ruthlessness of Truth and Relativity of Good” he stated: “There are such situations α that if someone in situation α makes a judgement which is a rejection, then it is not judgement S, thus there are situations α which if in situation α someone rejects or recognises judgement S, he then recognises judgement S. Thus, there are such situations in which everyone, in terms of a particular judgement, holds a certain judgement as a consequence, admits that it is true. However, there are no such situations in which anyone who praises or vilifies judgement S, praises S” (Ajdukiewicz, 1932, p. 45). Nevertheless, this reasoning is a consequence of the distinction between empirical judgments and moral judgements. In the first case, rejecting the judgement that something exists automatically means acknowledging the truthfulness of the sentence pronouncing that something does not exist. In the second case, rejecting the judgement, e.g. that someone is good does not automatically mean that he is bad. This is not only about the fact that good is relative but mainly about the fact that someone’s judgement in any situation is only a personal judgment, which cannot be validated simply by excluding the opposite judgement. However, rejection or acceptance is not accidental, but according to a principle which he called “judicial practice”, a certain socially established principle existing in society, which is followed by individuals when required. Such assertions contained in Ajdukiewicz’s preserved lectures on ethics form, as a consequence, his earlier research relating to the meaning of expressions which he presented in his work “Sprache und Sinn”, published in the journal titled “Erkenntnis” in 1934 (Ajdukiewicz, 1934). In this work, there is talk of articulated and non-articulated judgements, which the latter have an experienced observation character. These judgements are unclear, and thus they do not submit themselves to simple logical verification, but in Ajdukiewicz’s opinion “they are a germline form of observation” (Olech, 1993, p. 26).

For Ajdukiewicz, the independence of ethics was something obvious, because dependent (traditional) ethics had no theoretical justification, and only refers to an unverifiable authority. To practise scientific ethics, one should apply the rules of scientific discourse to it, thus it must be verifiable and its postulates must result from scientific reasoning. Certainly, even then an outline of possible analytical ethics occurred to Ajdukiewicz, which whilst fulfilling all the criteria of independence, would also be scientific ethics. For ethics understood in this way, two groups of issues must be exposed, related to the search for answers to the following questions:

1. “What kind of objects are generally subject to ethical evaluation (<< which we judge to be either good or bad >>). This is the problem of ethical evaluation. “Such an evaluation may be subject to human actions, or their intentions or all things dependent on their relationship to a particular object known as the ideal or idea of goodness, and by some God” (Ajdukiewicz, 1923, p. 28);
2. “The question concerns the characteristics that distinguish good objects from bad”. According to Ajdukiewicz, it is a question of “sources of morality”. The basis for the distinction between “heteronomism and ethical autonomy” is a consequence of the answer to this question. Likewise, within the same question there is the problem of “scope of morality”, i.e. the distinction between the characteristics of bad and good deeds, “depending on whether they relate to the object being evaluated being society or to the individual. He also included in this question the problem of defining “characteristics which decide and suffice to make an object good or bad” (Ajdukiewicz, 1923, pp. 28–29). He considered these characteristics to be the key to the whole of ethics which he called “the issue of ethical criteria”.

This type of observation probably prompted Ajdukiewicz to approve the basics of conventionalism. On the basis of language both judgements are expressed by sentences formulated with identical expressions. However, only the first type of judgement is considered to be true, but not the second. Conventionalism makes it possible to reduce such a discrepancy

by using a linguistic technique, because “The proponents of this approach claim that our image of the world is not directly determined by given experiences, but depends on the choice of a conceptual apparatus by which experiences are reconstructed” (Zmysłony, 2009, p. 85). However, this does not mean that the world is exactly as it is presented by a chosen convention. The choice is justified but after all there were also other possibilities and hence such an approach would seem ideal for solving ethical problems. That is why “Ajdukiewicz – being a linguist – asks what role language expressions play in the process of communication. Changing the perspective causes changes in terminology. Instead of treating theoretical claims as cognitive instruments – and therefore not being themselves a part of knowledge – Ajdukiewicz prefers to treat these claims, but more precisely those which are primary (i.e. which are the main principles of empirical theories) as linguistic postulates. Thus, for Ajdukiewicz, they are certain terminological conventions” (Wójcicki, 1999, pp. 73–74).

However, Ajdukiewicz began his lectures in ethics traditionally: “Ethics covers a range of different issues scattered throughout the history of thought. These issues are concentrated around the issue what should be, how a person should behave, what kind of person should be etc. The word << ethics >> originates from the Greek *ethos* – a permanent place of residence – custom. It is not to be confused with *etos* = habit. Custom, unlike habit, is something collective, sanctified tradition” (Ajdukiewicz, 1932–1934, pp. 202–203). Following Kant’s ethics, Ajdukiewicz further argued that ethics deals with “the distinction between the categorical meaning and the hypothetical meaning of the term ‘should be’. Ethics describes a categorical understanding of duty. Sentences beginning << should be a >> are called norms; if should is categorical, categorical norms. The proper field for ethics is categorical norms. Ethics is the science related to moral good because <<a should be = a is morally good>>” (Ajdukiewicz, 1932–1934, pp. 202–203). Therefore, the question of duty was key for him in the formulation of ethics. However, the obligation does not arise from what is, it is always undefined, i.e. there is no criterion for recognising that moral obligation has been fully completed. Nevertheless, it is easy to state only that something has not been undertaken, implemented or ceased altogether. One can see in this the solution to the dilemma why evil is always defined, whilst good is in a sense blurred – because one can never be certain that good has been fully realised. If an individual uses reason then there should be no problem, because in Ajdukiewicz’s opinion “Man should be such, so as to realise the essence of humanity. He should possess courage – man’s virtue” (Ajdukiewicz, 1932–1934, pp. 203–204). His view was similar in this respect to that of his teacher, Kazimierz Twardowski, nonetheless he reached the conclusion that since all people have the same nature, the principle of equal measure must apply: “no one is entitled to anything just because it is him and not someone else,” and added: “no human being exactly like himself, have any privileges over others” (Ajdukiewicz, 1985, pp. 372–373).

Interestingly, it was Tadeusz Kotarbiński who criticised the principle of equal measure. He appealed to its supporters: “But how to determine this quantity? ... In addition to moral principles [...] you must still have a principle of applying these principles” (Kotarbiński, 1987, p. 227). He thus questioned its logical validity, because in this way he turned this principle into an erroneous circle of reasoning.

Conclusion

In retrospect, one can today risk the statement that reducing moral problems to language level issues seemed to be an escape from the fundamental problems resulting from the traumatic experiences of the Second World War. It was a safe niche allowing for dealing with certain problems without needing to specify their true nature. In other words, humanistic studies faced a great problem when dealing with the past and consequently with an attempt to relate

theoretical descriptions to the recent practices. These considerations did not explain how the Holocaust and all the wickedness experienced by the people who had survived the war were possible. Even today, disbelief arouses the assertion why, then, ethics failed to turn people away from a state of “eclipse of the mind” which they succumbed to en masse during the war. It is worth mentioning that representatives of literature did not shy away from this task, to whom we owe many wonderful works of both the greatness as well as the moral fall of man. One can risk the statement then that the great interest of Polish society in the independent ethics of Tadeusz Kotarbiński resulted from the fact that his concept allowed people to keep faith in science, offering a certain rational solution to post-war dilemmas. After all, he noticed that in the case of free man, the voice of one’s own conscience cannot be replaced by someone else’s. However, if during war that actually happened, and with a great number of people, it must mean that people inexplicably returned to the animal state in which the voice of the pack leader is the only impulse to which they pay attention.

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