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Henryk Elzenberg – Stacker of Tables of Values

Henryk Elzenberg was once described as a “stacker of tables of values”, a characterization he readily embraced. To him, values were both fundamental and intrinsic both to everyday life and philosophy. His philosophical approach found its fullest expression in what he termed the “general theory of values”, or general axiology. He immersed himself in the work on formulating and developing the main theses of this theory in the early 1930s. General axiology was meant to substantiate the notion that these theses were not merely Henryk Elzenberg’s beliefs, but that he was right with his claims.

His dedication to creating a cohesive philosophical system distinguished him within the Polish philosophy of the time. Eschewing metaphysical inquiries, he focused on a value-based theory centred on general axiology, which was divided into two primary branches: formal axiology (philosophy of values) and substantive axiology, which was further divided into aesthetics and ethics. While Elzenberg never completed his works on the system of general axiology, his published works largely address issues within substantive axiology. These articles, when considered together, form a coherent framework that outlines both ethical and aesthetic systems. However, reconstructing and interpreting Elzenberg’s philosophy of values, presents certain challenges, which arise primarily because the system of formal axiology was left incomplete, and his main

theses and their justifications existed only in manuscript drafts and scattered notes.

Despite these obstacles, a close examination of Elzenberg's drafts and scattered reflections enables a tentative reconstruction of his systematic views on values. In his framework, Elzenberg distinguishes between two types of value: utilitarian value, which in this context cannot be associated with hedonism, and perfective value. According to Elzenberg, utilitarian value is defined as "a kind of appropriateness between the nature of the thing being evaluated and a given desire or need experienced each time".

Utilitarian value encompasses a set of meanings. In general, value in this sense refers primarily to that which is both desirable and attainable, capable of fulfilling a specific desire. Examples include a drink for a thirsty person or a ball for a team wanting to play a match. Notably, utilitarian value does not imply an immediate desire, but may refer to something desired at times. For instance, tobacco may hold utilitarian value for smokers, even if they are not currently inclined to smoke. There are theoretical possibilities for approaching these values from other perspectives. For instance, one might exclude the attainability criterion, thus focusing purely on the desirability of an object. In such a case, as Elzenberg suggests, "for an ambitious amateur, value may mean winning the long jump at the Olympic Games".¹ Conversely, what is needed also holds value. This includes "that without which a sentient being is harmed – that is, without which it suffers, ceases to exist, or at the very least experiences a depletion of its existence, such as sunshine and fresh air for someone living in confinement, or food for any living being".²

Analysing the examples provided, it becomes clear that what is needed can also be desired, though need and desire can exist independently of each other. This distinction allows for two closely related yet distinct meanings of value. The divergence between these meanings becomes more pronounced when considering the extension of the concept of "need" to inanimate objects, which is theoretically plausible. For instance, one might say that fur requires naphthalene for preservation over the summer or that a crystal requires dry air to maintain its condition. In this context, naphthalene and dry air are essential for the sustained existence of fur and crystals, respectively.

¹ Henryk Elzenberg, "Pojęcie wartości i powinności. Tekst żemłosławski", in: Henryk Elzenberg, *Pisma aksjologiczne* (Lublin, 2002), 124.

² Ibidem, 125.

The idea of attributing the term “need” to inanimate objects requires further clarification. When we speak of the needs of inanimate objects, it is essential to recognize that this type of need represents an objective state of affairs. Conversely, in the case of human needs, there is also an objective state of affairs, which may or may not include subjective elements.

This raises the question: does the scope of the term “need” align with that of “value”? In other words, is everything that is needed also valuable, and vice versa? This question demands resolution. Essentially, there are two primary perspectives here, represented by Meinong and Elzenberg. Elzenberg’s concept appears to be more fundamentally sound in this debate. Meinong seeks a single universal term for value and thus contends that the scope of that which is needed is narrower than that which is valuable. He argues that there are valuable things that are not strictly necessary and that not everything of value results in suffering if we do not possess it. Examples he provides include luxury goods and works of art.³

Elzenberg offers a markedly different perspective, grounded in the fundamental distinction between two types of values: absolute and objective perfective values, and relative utilitarian values. According to Elzenberg, necessity can serve as the defining characteristic of utilitarian value, while anything not meeting this criterion may be categorized as perfective value.

A key question arises as to whether there are any needs that are not closely tied to utilitarian value. If such “non-valuable” needs existed, it would challenge the validity of defining utilitarian value through need. Interestingly, while Meinong initially questioned the legitimacy of defining value through need, he ultimately conceded that it is difficult to prove the existence of need without corresponding value.

However, the definition of utilitarian value cannot be reduced to mere necessity. While need is indeed a critical component of such value, it is not the sole defining factor. In attempting to articulate “utilitarian value”, concepts such as “pleasure” and “desire” in addition to the term “need” emerge as relevant.

Elzenberg aptly observes that “[...] utilitarian value cannot be defined in terms of “need” in all cases”. It would be appropriate to add that “utilitarian value” sometimes also includes that which is pleasant.

³ Cf. Alexius Meinong, *Zur Grundlegung der allgemeinen Werttheorie* (Graz, 1923), 18.

Elzenberg identifies four interrelated categories of meanings associated with utilitarian value:

1. **Desire** (value as the actual or implied ability of an object *P* to satisfy the subject's desire):
 - a) that which is currently desired;
 - b) that which is sometimes desirable;
 - c) that which is both desirable and attainable;
 - d) that which is desirable but unattainable.
2. **Need** (the absence of which results in harm to someone or something):
 - a) that which, if lacking, causes suffering;
 - b) that without which someone or something cannot exist;
 - c) that without which existence is "diminished".
3. **Pleasure.**
4. **"Augmented Existence".⁴**

Utilitarian values, defined by desire and need, are inherently negative in nature; they can only neutralize or alleviate certain states of condition, but do not generate positive states or additional goods. Conversely, utilitarian values defined by pleasure and augmented existence can contribute positively, constituting a certain type of good. In his attempt to clarify these four dimensions of utilitarian value, Elzenberg concluded that all such values could, in principle, be reduced to desire, need, pleasure, or "augmented existence". However, he did not specify which of these concepts should be privileged, or serve as the foundational basis for defining utilitarian value, though he saw the greatest potential in "need".

For Elzenberg, the defining characteristic of utilitarian value is its intrinsic relativity; it is "always a value for someone (or something), such that an object may hold value for one person who desires, needs, or finds pleasure in it, while it may not hold the same value for another".⁵ The question then arises: do utilitarian values, understood in this way, meet the criteria required of values in the axiological sense? In other words, can utilitarian values be considered genuine subjects of axiology? First, it must be determined whether they are capable of eliciting rational and affective positive responses – such as approval, respect, reverence, or love. Elzenberg's answer is negative, rooted in the very nature of utilitarian value: its relativity – the fact that it is always a value for someone

⁴ Cf. Henryk Elzenberg, "Rękopisy etyczne (I) Do kwestii potrzeby i pożądania", *Etyka* 24 (1988): 263–264.

⁵ Elzenberg, *Pojęcie wartości i powinności. Tekst żemłostawski*, 126.

or something. Since emotions (desires, pleasures, needs) vary and often conflict among different individuals, affirming that “A should be” would necessitate conceding that “B (opposed to A) should not be”. This precludes the possibility of making a universal judgement that “A is useful, therefore it should be”. Second, the relative nature of utilitarian values precludes them from providing directives for situations requiring axiological choices. So they do not meet the second condition either. As for the condition that beauty and goodness are varieties of value, utilitarian values do not inherently fulfil this either. According to Elzenberg, utilitarian values do satisfy the final criterion: the existence of a counter-value to utilitarian value can be established. **However, the failure to meet all axiological criteria implies that utilitarian values cannot be considered values in the full axiological sense, as only those values satisfying all foundational criteria qualify as true axiological values.**

Although utilitarian values do not form a core component of Elzenberg’s philosophy of values, his emphasis on identifying and understanding their essence was intended to serve an important role. Throughout the history of philosophy, many axiological systems have been founded on utilitarian values; however, Elzenberg argued that this does not imply that all human judgements are fundamentally utilitarian. Elzenberg firmly rejected the premise of utilitarianism which posits that valuing equates to balancing pleasures and pains. He engaged critically with hedonism – one of the most developed examples of utilitarian value theory – highlighting its limitations. For Elzenberg, identifying the shortcomings of such systems marked the beginning of a deeper search for value in the true axiological sense, a type of value upon which a coherent philosophy of values could be built. This is not to suggest that Elzenberg dismissed the significance of knowledge derived from utilitarian values. On the contrary, he acknowledged its essential role in human life, while asserting that it does not qualify as axiological knowledge; its foundations are primarily biological (need) and psychological (desire and pleasure). According to Elzenberg, disciplines such as hygiene, medicine, economics, and technology deal with utilitarian values. While no distinct field of study exclusively addresses these values, Elzenberg proposed the need for such a field, suggesting naming it “**theoretical biotechnology**”. However, he never developed this concept further, and the pursuit of a comprehensive theory of utilitarian values lay outside his primary scholarly interests.

The Concept of Perfect Value and Ought

Since utilitarian values do not satisfy the criteria Elzenberg established for value in the axiological sense, they cannot form the foundation of a philosophy of value (formal axiology) in the strict sense. Unlike relative utilitarian values, the values sought in Elzenberg's framework should be absolute and objective, allowing for a sound and universal judgement of reality.

To fully grasp the essence of this type of value, it is essential to reconstruct the reasoning that led Elzenberg to his concept of value in the perfectionist sense. Elzenberg's starting point was the analysis of the phrase "Spirit is worth more than matter". Here, the question is not whether the statement is true or false; what matters is that it was sincerely expressed, and the speaker believed it conveyed a meaningful judgement. According to Elzenberg, this phrase qualifies as a value statement due to the expression "**worth more**", which implies "**more valuable**". This is not a matter of utilitarian value; it does not imply that someone desires spirit more than matter or that spirit brings more pleasure than matter. The terms **spirit and matter** are not evaluated as they are in judgements of utilitarian value (spirit and matter are not a value for someone or something). They are terms that capture values in absolute isolation, values in an absolute sense. Consider another example: the statement that the pleasure derived from reading a poem is "worth more" than the comparable pleasure of eating a dozen oysters. While one may desire to read a poem or to eat oysters to different extents, one cannot desire or need the pleasures provided by these activities more, because we have assumed that they are quantitatively equal. Similarly, one might assert that a human being is more valuable than a dog, a dog more valuable than an earthworm, and civilization more valuable than a state of savagery.

According to Elzenberg, the value judgements cited above are comparative, though their comparative nature does not define their essence. For instance, the notion that a dog holds less value than a human but more than an earthworm does not arise simply from comparison, but rather from the dog's intrinsic worth – distinct from utilitarian value. In seeking to clarify this new concept of value, Elzenberg suggested juxtaposing it with its partial synonyms, such as **nobility**, **dignity**, or **respectability**. Thus, one might say that spirit is nobler than matter, or that the pleasure of reading a poem surpasses in nobility that of eating oysters.

As in the case of utilitarian value, Elzenberg faced the problem of giving a name to the value so understood. He found that the terms "nobility", "dignity", and "respectability" were insufficient for a technical

designation. Instead, he selected the Latin term *perfectio* – “perfection” – as the most fitting, and coined the term **perfect value**. Values in the utilitarian and perfect sense, as Elzenberg saw them, are fundamentally different kinds of values, as there is no identifiable overarching concept that would encompass both usefulness and qualities such as dignity, nobility, or perfection. These are entirely distinct categories. Consequently, the disciplines studying these values are separate fields.

According to Elzenberg, the knowledge of perfect values and objects of perfect value is in a different situation from theoretical biotechnology. “By adopting this terminology, we effectively claim exclusive possession of the revered, commonly understood, term “value” – a term elevated by years of intellectual effort – and subtly imply that only ‘our’ concept of perfect value is **genuine** (value par excellence), while all others are mere pseudo-values”.⁶

Thus far, explanations of perfect value – primarily based on the analysis of examples – have proved insufficient. Similarly, referring to terms that are only partial synonyms of the term “perfect value” falls short of capturing its essence. The fundamental question Elzenberg raises is whether defining perfect value is even possible.

His stance on this matter of definability of the term is decidedly affirmative; however, he acknowledges significant challenges that necessitate preparatory considerations before any formal definition is formulated. These challenges stem from two main issues:

- first, the definition itself would necessarily include complex terminology, which might not fully clarify the concept in a universally compelling way;
- and second, the definition could be misunderstood due to the use of words that the audiences are not accustomed to in such a context.

To address these issues, Elzenberg sought to make the concept more accessible by employing alternative explanatory approaches before attempting a formal definition of perfect value, which he formulated with similar caution and consideration. This careful methodology reflects his intent to ensure that the final definition aligns consistently with the foundational ideas presented in his initial analyses. “To accomplish this”, Elzenberg writes, “we will introduce an intermediate concept that maintains, on one hand, a clear connection with the idea of perfect value, while also pointing toward the defining formula we intend to propose.

⁶ Ibidem, 131.

This concept will thus serve as a transitional link, facilitating the movement from *definiendum* to *definiens*. This intermediary is the concept of **approval**".

Elzenberg argues that, in common understanding, all positively valued states are met with approval, while negative states are disapproved of. To clarify potential ambiguities, he defines what he means by "approval": it does not refer to an emotion felt by the person making the judgement. Rather, it indicates that the judgement of the value itself is an expression of endorsement, an approval. Thus, to approve and to value positively in terms of perfection are, fundamentally, the same. The only distinction lies in approval's inclusion of a particular dimension of the act of valuing. Elzenberg elaborates on this point, stating: "Every perfect value judgement is an approval, and every approval is a perfect value judgement. There are no instances of approval other than positive judgements of perfection: approval is exhausted in a value judgement, just as a value judgement is exhausted in approval". Elzenberg introduces the concept of "approval" as a bridge toward defining perfect value due to its unique nuance of meaning, which he describes as aligning with some inherent standard or requirement. He further reduces this notion to the phrase **"as it ought to be"**. In other words, something that meets a set requirement is precisely as it ought to be. Having adopted a definition of approval as an intermediate concept on the road towards constructing a definition of perfect value, Elzenberg arrives at a definition of perfect value: **"An object of value, in the sense of perfection, is an object as it ought to be"**.⁷

In the definition of perfect value, the concept of "ought" is foundational. For Elzenberg, "ought" serves as a central category in his theory of value. He argues that one of the aims of axiology is to address the question: how should one act, both in specific life situations and across all possible circumstances? Elzenberg emphasizes that axiology is not a prescriptive guide through life, nor does it provide a detailed list of possible duties for every individual. Rather, it is meant to offer "some very general, binding rules of conduct – rules of reason – within which the choice of specific actions would be shaped by factors beyond the scope of axiological analysis".⁸

From these reflections, Elzenberg infers that the varied uses of "ought" in conditional-utilitarian statements – whether probabilistic,

⁷ Ibidem, 135.

⁸ Henryk Elzenberg, "Konstrukcja pojęcia wartości", in: Henryk Elzenberg, *Pisma aksjologiczne* (Lublin, 2002), 72–73.

imperative, or stipulative – are enabled by the unique, specific deontological essence of the term. According to Elzenberg, this assumption is possible owing to a shared element that links these distinct applications of “ought”. He describes this common element to be consistent with deontological meaning: “[...] namely, that when something is “as it ought to be”, it is somehow “in accordance with the law”, with the rule (and if it is not, there is a conflict with the law or rule); it is then “in order”, and if it is not, it is not. This subtle aspect is present to varying degrees across all interpretations of the term”.⁹

After identifying the deontological dimension of “ought”, Elzenberg considers whether it is feasible to define “ought” in the same way as “valuable” has been defined. He maintains that it cannot be categorically asserted that a term cannot be defined. He suggests a methodical approach: examine all proposed definitions, reject those that prove inadequate, and, through a process of elimination, arrive at the tentative conclusion that formulating a satisfactory definition may be elusive. Even then, Elzenberg advises caution in making absolute statements, as there can be no certainty that each attempted definition is entirely unsound. This caution is particularly relevant, as Elzenberg observes, because the claim that “ought” is a simple concept that eludes thorough analysis holds considerable significance for certain philosophical frameworks.

He dismisses, from the outset, any interpretations that restrict the concept of “ought” solely to human obligations. Furthermore, he pays some more attention to the justificatory interpretation, which he views as a misunderstanding rooted in the attempt to base ethical terms like “goodness” and “ought” – and indeed the entirety of ethics – on quasi-logical relations. In the justificatory interpretation, something that “ought to be” is only valid when it is justified by some rational reason. For example, the statement: “The judge ought to be fair” is interpreted as equivalent to, “There is a rational reason for the judge to be fair”. Without delving further into the meaning of the terms “justified” and “rational reason”, it is intuitive to conclude that if the first of these sentences is true, then the second should also be true. Do the two sentences have the same meaning? Elzenberg argues they do not concluding that the justificatory interpretation fails to capture the essence of “ought”. Justification, he asserts, is merely a function of “ought”, not its essence. In this context, Elzenberg introduces the distinction between the “ought” of being and the “ought” of doing, Elzenberg’s concept of “ought” pertains to an intrinsic **“ought of being”**, which

⁹ Henryk Elzenberg, *Pojęcie wartości i powinności. Tekst żemłostawski*, 157.

applies to things and states of affairs in themselves. This “ought of being” is considered a fundamental, intrinsic state. When this intrinsic state – what ought to be – can potentially be realized, it gives rise to the “ought of doing”, although this “ought of doing” remains initially unspecific and unaddressed. Only through substantive axiology, particularly ethics, does this “ought of doing” become concrete. Thus, in line with Elzenberg’s reasoning, one must assert that there can be no “ought of doing” without an underlying “ought of being”. To further explain this understanding of “ought”, Elzenberg introduces a conceptual construct known as **“meta-empirical will”**, distinct from **empirical will**. He describes it as follows: “[...] it is conceived as a type of will in man that ‘is not subject to motives’ (from an emotional standpoint), but only to reasons; it would be ‘autonomous’, unchanging, and identical across different individuals. This will stands in contrast to our motive-dependent (‘heteronomous’), fluctuating, and highly individual will”. Thus, when one says, “I ought to”, it is as if one is expressing a desire for “that other will”.¹⁰ Rephrasing slightly, one might argue that a state of affairs that “ought to be” is one that each individual would want to realize if endowed with an autonomous will. But what is autonomous will? In Elzenberg’s framework, autonomous will is a construct designed to rationalize our intuitions about the objectivity of values rooted in the “ought of being”. In other words, autonomous will, as Elzenberg sees it, is a will driven solely by rational considerations.

Elzenberg ultimately struggled to resolve the definitional entanglement between the concepts of ought and perfect value. The challenges posed by this association led to a theoretical impasse in the late 1940s, evident in the notes from his Toruń lectures during the 1948/1949 academic year. He writes: “One can try to reverse the relation and define “ought” by perfect value. This fails (in my opinion); but again: the possibility of such an attempt sheds light on the concept of ought. (They explain each other). [...] What is unsatisfactory here is that only two concepts are introduced in relation to each other, which exposes the insufficiency of the system”. Elzenberg came close to resolving this issue by moving away from defining value through “ought” or vice versa. Instead, he approached their relationship as an axiom, suggesting that both concepts are fundamental and mutually characterizing.

The development of Elzenberg’s theory of value was most profoundly shaped by the philosophies of Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, and Nicolai Hartmann. Like Windelband and Rickert, he held that value

¹⁰ Cit. after: Bogusław Wolniewicz, “Myśl Elzenberga”, *Studia Filozoficzne* 12 (1986): 61.

judgements are inherently cognitive acts. Additionally, they contain a distinct “practical” element, meaning that each judgement is expected to align with and affirm a certain value. Thus, cognition itself involves valuation: it is the act of approving positive values and disapproving negative ones. In Rickert’s theory, this view of cognition is closely tied to a doctrine of a **transcendent “ought”**, allowing him to argue that all cognition involves recognizing an “ought”, so that a true judgement is a judgement that should be acknowledged. Elzenberg’s theory was also influenced by Nicolai Hartmann’s claim that “[...] the essence of every value includes an ought; it must therefore be inherent in the ideal mode of existence”. This notion of *Seinsollen* – a duty intrinsic to value – initially appealed to Elzenberg, but later raised doubts. By 1966, while compiling a collection of his earlier writings, he expressed concern that this interpretation overlooked an essential feature of value: its gradation within a hierarchy.

Within the framework of formal axiology, Elzenberg does not resolve ontological problems of value. He attempts to do so only when analysing the concept of “aesthetic value”, but then he encounters complexities that seem to invite interpretations of value aligned with Plato’s objective idealism.

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Streszczenie

Henryk Elzenberg to najwybitniejszy polski aksjolog, który za cel postawił sobie zbudowanie systemu filozofii wartości. System ów opierał się na trzech filarach. Pierwszy z nich stanowi zdecydowane rozróżnienie dwu pojęć wartości: utylitarnej i perfekcyjnej. Drugi filar to definicyjne związanie pojęcia wartość perfekcyjna z pojęciem powinność. Trzeci to rozumienie powinności jako powinności bytu i przeciwstawienie powinności czynu. Celem Elzenberga

nie była analiza słowa wartość po to, aby rozpatrywać wszelkie jego znaczenia w języku, ale przede wszystkim określenie i analiza znaczenia terminu wartość perfekcyjna. Podstawą ogólnej teorii wartości uczynił wartość estetyczną i wartość etyczną. Piękno i dobro są odmiennymi aspektami wartości perfekcyjnej.

Henryk Elzenberg – Stacker of Tables of Values

Summary

Henryk Elzenberg is the most prominent Polish axiologist, who set himself the task of building a system of philosophy of values. This system was based on three pillars. The first is a firm distinction between two concepts of value: utilitarian and perfectionist. The second pillar is the definitional link between the concept of perfect value and the concept of duty. The third is the understanding of ought as the ought of being and the opposition of the ought of doing. Elzenberg's aim was not to analyse the word value in order to consider all its meanings in language, but above all to define and analyse the meaning of the term perfect value. He made aesthetic value and ethical value the basis of a general theory of value. Beauty and goodness are different aspects of perfect value.

Keywords: utilitarian values, perfect values, ethical value, aesthetic value, ought, ought of being, ought of doing, beauty, goodness