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The axiological concept of the meaning of life in Henryk Elzenberg's philosophy

1. Introductory remarks

The concept of the meaning of life is historically ambiguous. Looking back at the history of philosophy, one can become convinced that our contemporary questions about the meaning of human life are a continuation of the questions and reflections that have been pondered since ancient times. This is not without reason. Plato's reflections on Eros and the sealing of the soul with Form of Goodness, Aristotle's reflections on a happy life befitting a rational being, Epicurus' remarks on the wise use of pleasure – these are just a few examples of ancient philosophical concepts that have been and will continue to be treated as answers to questions about the meaning of life.

At the same time, questions about the meaning of life are *par excellence* contemporary in nature, closer to our times than to those of Plato, Aristotle, or Epicurus. Even if we notice a certain continuity in terms of the issues involved, we cannot ignore the fact that the concept of the meaning of life introduces a semantic novelty. We cannot simply assume that when we think about the "meaning of life" we are thinking about exactly the same thing as the ancient Greeks thought about "eudaimonia". What is this novelty? The historical context provides some clues.

The first use of the expression “meaning of life” can be found at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries in Germany. The fact that the concept of the meaning of life emerged during the Romantic era, a period that emphasized feelings, experiences, and a sense of unity with a greater and higher whole, is no coincidence. After all, the expression “meaning of life” draws heavily on the senses (Latin: *sensus*). It is not simply about participating in the greatest good attainable by man – one still wants to feel and consciously experience.

From the perspective of the history of ideas, the concept of the meaning of life **shimmers**, alternating between continuity and rupture, attachment to the classics and tradition, and at the same time a romantic-modernist emphasis on the experiential side. This duality is clearly present in the philosophical reflections of Henryk Elzenberg – a Polish thinker in whom one can see inspirations from both antiquity and modernity.¹ Elzenberg’s concept of the meaning of life may be attractive to contemporary readers because it refers to the concept of “value”, which has had a meteoric rise in philosophy since the late 19th century.

The subject of this work is the axiological concept of the meaning of life according to the author of *The Trouble with Existence*, and the aim of this work is to reconstruct this concept on the basis of his writings published during his lifetime and his manuscripts. A prominent theme of this work is the dependence of the meaning of life on values. These considerations do not intend to treat the concept of the meaning of life in purely axiological terms. After all, Elzenberg was not concerned with meaning in general, but with the meaning of **human** life. The analysis of the concept of the meaning of life by the author of *The Trouble with Existence* needs to tie axiology with philosophical anthropology: axiology explains what meaning is in general, while philosophical anthropology explains whether, how, and thanks to what a specific way of human existence can be meaningful.

The main methods used in this work were reconstruction method and analysis of source texts, whose task is to reconstruct the content of Elzenberg’s concept of the meaning of life on the basis of his writings. Particular attention was paid to sketches not published during the philosopher’s lifetime (especially *The Axiological Concept of Meaning* from 1942 and the sketch *Can the So-Called Meaning Be Given to Life?* from 1957), as well as texts that have not been published to this day, because it was mainly in them that the issue of meaning was addressed. For this reason,

¹ Włodzimierz Tyburski, *Elzenberg* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 2006), 147–148.

this reconstruction should be treated with caution. When applying the reconstruction method, particular attention was paid to the chronology of the Polish philosopher's individual texts in which he addressed the issue of the meaning of life.² Elzenberg's concept of the meaning of life was reconstructed in the context of his entire philosophy, because the author of *The Trouble with Existence* treated the concept of the meaning of life as part of a broader system of the philosophy of values. In addition, this text uses methods of linguistic and conceptual analysis, whose task was to clarify the content under study and the argument.

The work is divided into several parts. The following section presents an outline of Elzenberg's general formal axiology. The central place here is occupied by the reconstruction of the concept of perfect value, without which it is impossible to understand further arguments about the axiological concept of meaning. The third part of the work addresses the question of whether the meaning of life is axiological or teleological in nature. The fourth part of the work analyses the question of what can be meaningful in the axiological sense. An original reconstructive hypothesis is put forward here, namely that all the proposals considered by Elzenberg can be reduced to one – concerning existence. The fifth part of the work is the most important because it directly concerns human nature, which determines how human life can be meaningful, as well as the role that meaning plays in human existence. This part of the text is the culmination of the research.

2. The system of axiology and the concept of perfect value

For Elzenberg, the most important thing was to develop an axiological "system", which he understood as a **reasonable** and coherent attitude toward the world which is ordered by internal "logic", rather than as a **rational** system of propositions.³ This does not mean that a reliable and rigorous approach to philosophy was of no importance to the Pol-

² The footnotes to *The Trouble with Existence* additionally provide the dates of the aphorisms. The abbreviation "MHE" refers to materials of Henryk Elzenberg's which are stored in the Archives of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, general reference number: III-181. After "MHE", the file number in the collection and the card number were indicated, with a note as to whether it is the *recto* or *verso* side of the card. All quotations from Elzenberg's texts have been translated by the author.

³ Henryk Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem. Aforyzmy w porządku czasu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1994), 150 (22 I 1923).

ish thinker. On the contrary, the attitude towards the world should be based on certain axiological reasons and theses that would **defend** this attitude towards reality.

Every human being should be someone of value, but it is impossible to completely and *a priori* determine what the duties of each individual are and what exactly is required of them in terms of making the world a better place.⁴ Ethics can only prohibit certain actions or encourage others. "Yes, do good outside of yourself as well. But do not look for rational guidelines as to **what** good you should choose to do. Choose the one that suits you best".⁵ Elzenberg argued that in the light of two equally convincing axiological choices, a person has the right to follow the good that is closest to them. "The world has many aspects of this kind, so that under each of them it can be understood without distortion. I have the right to choose my aspect according to the needs of my personality".⁶ Elzenberg was concerned with developing a meaningful, value-based attitude towards the world (rather than the right one attitude, i.e. one that is best and maximizes good), and in particular, not a purely rational attitude, which is entirely determined by *a priori* reasons that apply to everyone and no one.

In order for one's attitude towards the world to be meaningful and coherent, it is necessary to reflect thoroughly on values. Within the discipline of knowledge that studies values – axiology – two orders of practice can be distinguished.⁷ Formal axiology formulates statements that apply to all values, their structure, and the relationships between them, regardless of the objects to which they might apply.⁸ Substantive axiology deals with formulating statements about the value of specific objects and considers them as aesthetically valuable (beautiful) or ethically valuable (good). Elzenberg is familiar with the classical concept of *kalokagathia*, claiming that beauty and goodness are one and the same value *in re*, albeit viewed from different perspectives.⁹

⁴ Henryk Elzenberg, "Rzeczywista podstawa etyki", in: Henryk Elzenberg, *Pisma etyczne*, ed. Lesław Hostyński (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2001), 185.

⁵ Ibidem, 186.

⁶ Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem*, 165 (17 VIII 1927).

⁷ Antoni Płoszczyńiec, *Asceza i człowiek. Studium antropologii filozoficznej Henryka Elzenberga* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2021), 36.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Henryk Elzenberg, "O różnicy między 'pięknem' a 'dobrem'", in: Henryk Elzenberg, *Pisma estetyczne*, ed. Lesław Hostyński (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 1999), 15-17.

Many people, when using the word “value” or a related term, mean something that Elzenberg characterized as the concept of value in the utilitarian sense. This concept refers to anything that satisfies a need, desire, or craving, gives pleasure, or “increases existence” (e.g. gives greater freedom of action). Whatever is valuable in the utilitarian sense is valuable relatively, to someone.¹⁰ Every object that is valuable in the utilitarian sense is, by its very nature, an object whose properties satisfy the needs, desires, etc. of some subject or subjects, or possibly an object whose “nature” corresponds to the “nature” of subject (such as recognizability for a person hungry for fame). Every judgment that assigns value in a utilitarian sense to an object is equivalent to a judgment that establishes a correspondence between the characteristics of that object and the characteristics that would satisfy a subject or subjects (or are desired by them).

However, we also deal with other types of judgments. When we say, for example, that “spirit is worth more than matter”, this judgment, although comparative in nature, presupposes that the spirit has **some** value **at all**.¹¹ This value does not depend on anyone, because when we say “spirit is worth more than matter”, we are not saying that spirit is more desirable than matter, nor that it gives someone more pleasure. Since spirit as such is worth more than matter, spirit has some absolute value, a value that consists in occupying “a certain level in the hierarchy; a hierarchy that is not established; according to some specific point of view and because of some specific feature, but in a hierarchy as if *par excellence*, independent of considerations and points of view, not established”.¹²

A judgment that a given object is valuable is an approval.¹³ To approve something means the same as to recognize that a given object meets certain requirements. Since we are talking about value of which consists in occupying a specific level in an unestablished, absolute hierarchy, it must be said that the approval of an object is the same as stating that a given object is as it should be¹⁴ (*Soseinsollen*). In other words, an object of value is an object that has certain characteristics that it should have.¹⁵

¹⁰ Henryk Elzenberg, “Pojęcie wartości i powinności. Tekst żemłosławski”, in: Henryk Elzenberg, *Pisma aksjologiczne*, ed. Lesław Hostyński, Andrzej Lorczyk, Agnieszka Nogal (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2002), 126.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem, 128.

¹³ Ibidem, 134.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 135.

¹⁵ Ibidem, 139–140.

Elzenberg called the value he sought “perfect value” because the essence of value understood in this way lies in a certain perfection, excellence, and nobility. Perfect value is a value in the strict sense due to its absolute nature. Therefore, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as “utilitarian values”, but there is the concept of value in the utilitarian sense, which deserves to be called “value” insofar as it is similar to perfect values. It should be remembered that everything that is valuable in the utilitarian sense is immanently relative to the subject, while perfect value is an objective value – if an object has some perfect value, it would have it even if it were the only object in the universe. The above definition of perfect value is simplified, because objects can be valuable partially (e.g. when a person is intelligent and courageous but not generous) or only to a certain extent.

Elzenberg calls the features that make certain objects valuable “value-creating features”. Value itself is a kind of “predicate” because it is attributed to specific objects, but it is not a “feature” of an object, such as justice, harmony, lyricism, subtlety, wisdom, or intelligence. Value is a state of affairs that consists in the sameness of what an object is and what it should be: when an object has such and such features and should have such and such features, then that object is valuable.¹⁶

It is still necessary to explain how the word “duty” contained in the definition of perfect value should be understood. Having rejected a number of inappropriate ways of understanding this term (e.g. “should” in a conditional-instrumental, imperative, probabilistic sense), Elzenberg concluded that “duty” in the deontological-axiological sense is indefinable. However, duty can be imagined as something that provides motives for the will,¹⁷ i.e. the metempirical will. Such a will is autonomous, pure, unchanging, independent of the subject’s inclinations, universal, and reasonable. Elzenberg did not assume the existence of a metempirical will, but claimed that we **imagine** duty in the axiological sense as something that would be desired by such a will.

3. The meaning of life as a subject of axiological inquiry

For Elzenberg, the question of which of the meanings of the word “meaning” can be used to talk about the meaningfulness of life (or the

¹⁶ Ibidem, 140–141.

¹⁷ Ibidem, 168. Vide: Elzenberg, “O różnicy między ‘pięknem’ a ‘dobrem’”, 19–20.

meaningfulness of the world) played a fundamental role. The author of *The Trouble with Existence* distinguished between three concepts of meaning: logical, teleological, and axiological. *A limine*, he rejected meaning in the logical sense in the context of his considerations, because meaning understood in this way is simply synonymous with the word "significance". Individual words (e.g., "bell", as opposed to "hrttfgzxxyt") or compound words (e.g., "big bell", as opposed to "bigged bell") can be meaningful in this way, but not human life.

Two concepts of meaning claim to characterize the meaning of human life: teleological and axiological. According to the teleological concept, everything that is "purposeful, internally or externally: an action, an act aimed at something, a deliberately constructed arrangement" is meaningful.¹⁸ In turn, meaning in the axiological sense is "closely related to value"¹⁹ as something derivative of value.²⁰ The former is justified by its relationship to the goal, the latter by its relationship to value.

Meaning of life doesn't mean "the purpose of life" or "a goal in life". First of all, the scope of the word "meaning" in both senses is different. Objects and sets of objects can be meaningful, but only in a teleological sense and only when we treat them as certain arrangements. An individual book as such is not meaningful, nor is a collection of books. However, the arrangement of chapters in a book or the arrangement of books in a library can be meaningful because they serve certain purposes (e.g. organizing the argument in a monograph; making it easy to find works you are looking for). Meaningful in the axiological sense is existence, and above all, the existence of a valuable object.²¹

Elzenberg denied that the purpose of life and the meaning of life are one and the same. On a linguistic level, it is impossible to speak of the equivalence of the terms "meaning of life" and "purpose of life". At most, one can say that some goal or goals ("of life", but also "in life") can give life meaning. Either way, not every goal gives meaning.²² The meaning of life also can be derived from something other than a goal. In this context, Elzenberg speaks, for example, of characteristics that

¹⁸ Henryk Elzenberg, "Aksjologiczne pojęcie sensu", in: Henryk Elzenberg, *Pisma aksjologiczne*, ed. Lesław Hostyński, Andrzej Lorczyk, Agnieszka Nogal (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2002), 177.

¹⁹ Ibidem, 178.

²⁰ Ibidem, 184.

²¹ Ibidem, 179–180.

²² Henryk Elzenberg, "Czy tak zwany sens może być życiu nadany?", in: Henryk Elzenberg, *Z filozofii kultury*, ed. M. Woroniecki (Kraków: Znak, 1991), 377.

he believes are meaningful. "A life striving for holiness is presumably meaningful, but a holy life is probably at least as meaningful".²³

Elzenberg doubted whether meaning is given to life by goals that are imposed on a person – in the sense that a person is destined to achieve a given goal, just as a fire extinguisher is designed to extinguish a fire. First, let us consider the goals to which we would be destined as natural beings ("specimens" of *homo sapiens*). Leaving aside the question of whether humans are destined for any goal at all (e.g. happiness), it is doubtful whether such goals actually give meaning to human life (e.g. prolonging the species). It is even more doubtful whether, in such cases, one can speak of **giving** meaning to one's own life. If the purpose is given in life entirely from "outside", by the forces of nature, without reference to human subjectivity, then such meaning may simply "not be felt".

Elzenberg's writings suggest that we should be even more doubtful about whether society or humanity as a whole can give meaning to an individual's life. The philosopher took a decidedly pessimistic view of human communities. He wrote uncompromisingly: "Society may contain wise and good people in its mass, but it is always stupid and evil in itself. It is amoral, selfish, predatory, tyrannical towards its members; it has low aspirations and shallow beliefs; **it is infinitely worse than the average decent individual** [...]. *La société, c'est le mal*".²⁴ On a macrosocial level, evil spreads more strongly.²⁵ Society as such is not guided by ethical thoughts.²⁶ For these reasons – and others²⁷ – Elzenberg did not treat social norms as a source of meaning in life. "Society: 'an organization for maintaining the flatness and **meaninglessness** of human life and for suppressing any attempts within it to rise above'".²⁸

In cases where goals are indeed self-imposed, the philosopher pointed out that not every such goal would make sense. Many such goals are purely conventional because they are set completely arbitrarily.²⁹ In such

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Henryk Elzenberg, "Sprawy zbiorowości ludzkiej a mój system myślowy", in: Henryk Elzenberg, *Z filozofii kultury*, ed. M. Woroniecki (Kraków: Znak, 1991), 357.

²⁵ Henryk Elzenberg, "Pesymistyczny pogląd na naturę ludzką", in: Henryk Elzenberg, *MHE* 41, k. 13 v.

²⁶ Henryk Elzenberg, "Wolność i autorytet w etyce", in: Henryk Elzenberg, *MHE* 14, k. 8 r.

²⁷ See Płoszczyńiec, *Asceza i człowiek*, 62–66.

²⁸ Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem*, 386 (10 II 1953). Emphasis from author of this article.

²⁹ Elzenberg, "Czy tak zwany sens...", 378.

a situation, they lack **justification**. For Elzenberg, this was an important issue because the philosopher assumed that value provides a **reason** why one should act in a certain way and not another. Thus, purely conventional goals cannot give meaning to life. If, on the other hand, goals are not purely conventional, then one must ask whether they achieve something of absolute value or whether they are partly imposed by nature or society.

According to Elzenberg, the meaning of life is characterized by the axiological concept of meaning. The meaning of life is closely related to value because it is derived from value. "**Value creates meaning**, gives meaning; it **flows** from value".³⁰ When we talk about "giving" meaning to our lives, it means that we **voluntarily** "reach values or valuable goals",³¹ which in turn make our lives meaningful. So, it is not the case that our lives are meaningful by virtue of the very act of supposedly "creating values" by projecting them, as according to Nietzsche or Sartre, for example. Values are not "created" by the consciousness of the subject. The meaning of life is a derivative of the **factual** relationship between a person and a value. Man "gives" meaning to his own life in the same way that he warms himself when he approaches a fire. Without the decision to come closer, man would not warm himself, but the actual source of heat is the fire, not will.

The concepts of justification are common to meaning in the teleological and axiological sense, hence the following definition can be given: something is meaningful in the axiological sense if it is axiologically justified, i.e., justified by a specific relationship to values.

4. What is axiologically meaningful

Elzenberg's notes on the axiological concept of meaning were not published during his lifetime, and in many places, one can see a live movement of thought. The philosopher returned to certain themes, while abandoning others. This forces us to ask which aspects of his concept of the meaning of life can be considered permanently accepted by him.

Elzenberg emphasized the derivative nature of meaning. The meaningfulness of anything depends on values and axiological duties. In Elzenberg's two most important texts on this subject, we read that existence can be meaningful. This view has not been revoked anywhere.

³⁰ Elzenberg, "Aksjologiczne pojęcie sensu", 184.

³¹ Elzenberg, "Czy tak zwany sens...", 378.

Objects can be valuable, features can be value-creating, values themselves are certain states of affairs, and the existence of a valuable object is meaningful. Meaning in the axiological sense “is the axiological justification for the existence of something”,³² because it is value that makes the existence of a given object meaningful, constituting the **reason** for its meaningfulness. The applicability of the concept of meaning to facts and events is less clear, but the philosopher was inclined to accept this solution.³³ Since every event consists in the appearance of something (i.e. something begins to exist), the appearance of certain things may also be meaningful. Facts, it seems, can also be meaningful, but only existential facts, not facts concerning the relations between existing objects (e.g. that a bell is bigger than a dog).

It is much more problematic to determine what other categories of objects can be axiologically meaningful. Despite the sketchy nature of Elzenberg’s notes on this subject, it can be hypothesized that the philosopher came to certain conclusions regarding the range of objects capable of being meaningful – although it is difficult to speak of their “final” nature.

At the beginning of *The Axiological Concept of Meaning*, one can read that the concept of meaning applies to sets of acts. In order for this set of acts to be axiologically meaningful, it must be treated as a sum of acts, because when treated as a system, it is more appropriate to speak of teleological meaning. “This sum would be meaningful to the extent that the **individual acts in it were right or valuable**”.³⁴ It should be noted, however, that when later giving working definitions of meaning, Elzenberg no longer spoke of a set of acts, similarly in his later text *Can the So-Called Meaning Be Given to Life?* In the 1942 text, he clearly limits the scope of the definition of meaning to “existences and progresses”, while in the 1957 sketch, there is no mention of sets of acts (neither progresses). Does this mean that Elzenberg completely “eliminated” the theme of the sum of acts in his reflections on the meaning of life? Perhaps. However, the hypothesis that he retained this idea in some way seems more credible.

Firstly, let us note that there is no evidence in Elzenberg’s writings that he explicitly rejected this idea. Secondly, it seems more consistent with the philosophy of the author of *The Trouble with Existence* to recognize that the idea of a set of acts as something that can be meaningful has been “absorbed” by the idea of existence as something which can be

³² Ibidem.

³³ Elzenberg, “Aksjologiczne pojęcie sensu”, 181.

³⁴ Ibidem, 179.

described as meaningful. Elzenberg asked about the meaning of life, and life is a form of existence. The philosopher did not ask about the meaning of all life, but about specifically human life. From Elzenberg's manuscripts, we can deduce how he understood it: "[...] 'Life' here means 'conscious existence', such as ours, human existence".³⁵ Conscious existence, as conscious, lasts and proceeds in the intentional acts of man. Therefore, we can consider that human life constitutes a specific sum of acts.³⁶ On this basis, we can conclude that when we talk about the meaning of an individual's life, we refer to their existence and – which amounts to the same thing – to the sum of acts they have performed (*resp.* sum of acts fulfilled by group of people). Thus, it seems that Elzenberg did not exclude the sum of acts as something that can be axiologically meaningful, but it should be treated as a specifically human case of existence. The correct and precise answer to the question of what the concept of axiological meaning applies to is **existence** – whatever exists and is valuable at the same time has meaning, but not every valuable object is alive.

Three themes recur in Elzenberg's notes from 1942: 1) individual acts can be meaningful, i.e., acts positively directed toward perfect value;³⁷ 2) the existence of a world that is valuable or contains certain values in itself is meaningful;³⁸ 3) certain "progresses" can be meaningful, in which the value of one object is given to another, passes from one to another, or somehow causes the sum of values within a whole to increase.³⁹ Are these categories of objects capable of being meaningful that are fully apart from existence? The author of these words puts forward a reconstructive hypothesis that they are not.

To substantiate this hypothesis, it is necessary to quote the concluding passage of the essay *Can So-Called Meaning Be Given to Life?*:

Distinctions.

Subjective meaning: when certain values are subjectively considered objective.

Objective meaning: when these values are indeed objective.

Transcendent meaning: due to something beyond a given life, and what that life serves.

³⁵ Ibidem, 187.

³⁶ Antoni Płoszczyńiec, "Czy sens życia jest tym samym co cel życia? Rozważania aksjologiczne", *Analiza i egzystencja. Czasopismo filozoficzne* 37 (2017): 45–47.

³⁷ Elzenberg, "Aksjologiczne pojęcie sensu", 186, 179 (footnote 5).

³⁸ Ibidem, 185–186

³⁹ Ibidem, 187–191

Immanent meaning: what this life has (considered) in itself, as a closed system.⁴⁰

The fact that the philosopher used the above distinctions in his last work on the concept of meaning seems crucial, as it allows us to determine which themes in Elzenberg's philosophy "remained". It is very important that the content of the aforementioned draft was discussed at a university seminar in the winter semester of 1956/1957. This fact proves that the author himself considered the concepts, arguments, and distinctions contained therein to be important and well-thought-out enough to present them to the public. Therefore, he was ready to defend them. Significantly, in the same text, the definition of meaning is explicitly limited to the axiological justification of **existence**.⁴¹

It seems that when talking about subjective meaning, Elzenberg did not mean some subjective variation of meaning, but only the subjective recognition of something as meaningful. "Subjective" here functions as a modifying attributive that changes the meaning of the noun "meaning" rather than specifying it – just as the expression "subjective truth" does not refer to a certain class of truths, but to beliefs that are considered true.

Transcendent meaning and immanent meaning seem to constitute a kind of *modi* of meaningfulness, ways of realizing meaning: whatever is meaningful is transcendentally or immanently meaningful. In the case of transcendent meaning, meaning is attributed to the existence of some X, but due to a certain relationship between X and something that is valuable, exists outside of X and forms a certain whole with it. Immanent meaning, on the other hand, is the meaning that characterizes the existence of the valuable object itself.

If individual acts are meaningful, it seems that they can only be meaningful in a transcendent sense, because each act transcends what its intention is directed towards. Emotional acts can direct us towards value in a positive way, and if our life consists of a certain sequence of acts, it seems that not only such a sum can be meaningful. If we consider individual acts to be a "moment" of life or the "occurrence" of something in life, then the category of individual acts can be reduced to the category of existence. Elzenberg wrote that the meaning of life is gradable,⁴² and it is easier to understand the idea that human life can

⁴⁰ Elzenberg, "Czy tak zwany sens...", 379.

⁴¹ Ibidem, 378.

⁴² Elzenberg, "Aksjologiczne pojęcie sensu", 183.

be partially meaningful if we recognize that individual acts can also be meaningful.

There are two ways of talking about the meaning of the world. If we consider the world to be a whole that is more than the sum of its parts, and if we also consider that the world understood in this way has its own specific values, then the existence of such a world would make sense. It seems, after all, that the world has such properties,⁴³ which does not contradict the fact that there is a lot of evil in the world and that the world itself is (fundamentally) evil. The world makes sense, but not completely. Existence in a world that contains some values can also make sense, but only in a transcendent sense. All meaning is derived from value, and yet the meaning of the existence of X may derive from the value of an object outside X. Human existence may be meaningful, but as an existence incorporated into a certain whole. The world as a “place” where all valuable objects can appear is also meaningful. However, the meaning of the world’s existence as a “place” for everything that is good and beautiful is much more derivative in nature than the meaning of human existence in direct relation to values realized outside of itself.

As for progresses, i.e., certain progresses involving an increase in the amount of value, this option also seems to boil down to the answer that existence can be meaningful. First of all, let us note that when writing about the meaningfulness of progresses for the first time, Elzenberg touched upon this topic in a passage concerning the construction of the “strongest” concept of meaning or a situation that is maximally meaningful.⁴⁴ This suggests that what is at stake here is the question of the maximum realization of meaning, i.e. the extreme case of what can be meaningful **at all**. So even if some progresses were maximally meaningful, this does not rule out the possibility of reducing the category of progresses to some kind of existence. And such a possibility likely is. In 1957 text, the philosopher did not write about progresses, but progresses correspond to the category of transcendent meaning. However, what is at stake here is the certain existence and meaningfulness of the existence of a certain object in relation to something valuable. It can be argued that certain progresses are meaningful and that the creation of what is valuable has a meaning-creating character.⁴⁵ If events can be meaningful, progresses – as a kind of processes – should also be meaningful, because

⁴³ Henryk Elzenberg, “Stałe wartości świata”, in: Henryk Elzenberg, *MHE* 31, k. 2 r.

⁴⁴ Elzenberg, “Aksjologiczne pojęcie sensu”, 187.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 190.

they are both are a form of existence (the beginning of something's existence and the development of something's existence).

5. Summary: man as the beneficiary and bearer of meaning

The meaning of life is something valuable to everyone for many reasons. Perfect values make us "feel carried away in a meaningful world".⁴⁶ This means breaking through a certain isolation between the subject and the world. In "this world", beautiful and good things are susceptible to destruction, which can make the world appear evil due to its indifference to what is valuable. "More than by the law of death and transience, the cosmos is 'evil' because of its indifference to ethical categories".⁴⁷ For an axiologically sensitive individual who feels the need for meaning in life, such a world appears cold and **alien**. A world containing something valuable would appear familiar and would make participation in it give life some meaning. Elzenberg's concept clearly contained motifs of a tragic struggle for meaning in spite of the meaninglessness of the world, but it seems that the content of the unpublished works entitled *The Constant Values of the World* (1948) suggests that the world is valuable in some aspects and therefore world itself is somehow meaningful, even though it is not entirely good (like the cosmos of the Stoics) nor meaningful.

Besides, meaning is "our good" and, ultimately, we only desire meaning for our own existence⁴⁸. Why? Because, according to Elzenberg, no motivation can exist without a sense of meaning. If one feels the meaning of something, then that something becomes worthy of action for the subject.

[...] a sense of meaning [...] would be an **essential motivating factor** in all actions. Regardless of any other motives, an action would only be 'worth' undertaking in a meaningful world, and only if it is meaningful itself. The feeling of meaninglessness of the world is such a terrible misfortune because it removes this motivating factor – and man no longer wants to do anything.⁴⁹

It should be noted that meaning is objective in nature and cannot be reduced to the co-constitution of motivation. Meaning is not some-

⁴⁶ Ibidem, 184.

⁴⁷ Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem*, 313 (18 X 1942).

⁴⁸ Elzenberg, "Aksjologiczne pojęcie sensu", 185

⁴⁹ Ibidem, 189.

thing psychological, "but constitutes the basis of motivational force, its source".⁵⁰

An unusual theme emerging from Elzenberg's writings concerns the important relationship between the meaning of life and... asceticism. The philosopher wrote that a philosophical concept which makes the meaning of life dependent on perfect values arouses resistance on the part of human nature, and that this resistance must be overcome through ascetic practice⁵¹. When writing about asceticism, Elzenberg had in mind the practice of systematically overcoming universal human tendencies, i.e. human nature. Man, however, originally, "by nature", has a tendency toward self-centeredness, that is, relativizing all values to his subjective perspective: what is good "in general" is what is good "for me". According to Elzenberg's notes, this perspective stems from the biological dimension of his existence. Because a self-centered view of the world is characterized by the relativization of values to the subject (one's own or someone else's, or possibly collective), values in the utilitarian sense dominate in it, and man cannot, does not want to, or has considerable difficulty in perceiving perfect values. Awareness of the existence of values that are absolute in nature is the first condition for communing with them, loving them, and realizing them, and the meaning of life depends on all of this (and on the values themselves, of course). Asceticism, therefore, opens us up to the world of perfect values, as long as we overcome the one-sidedness of our tendencies that bind us to the purely biological sphere⁵² (common to other animals) and realize that what is truly valuable in life is not what is desirable and pleasant.

Life in the service of values obviously has meaning. The meaning of life, according to Elzenberg, **appears** primarily as a life that realizes values and a life that is positively oriented (through the acts of the subject) towards values. That is, as transcendently meaningful. We live a human life when we lead our lives in some way, and we lead them by pursuing certain goals. Importantly, by leading a meaningful life, we retain a certain **freedom**: according to the comments in the second part of this article, we have a duty to pursue certain values, but we can follow those that are closest to our hearts. So, by pursuing the meaning of life, I pursue **my** meaning.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, 190.

⁵¹ Henryk Elzenberg, "'Sens życia' (głos dyskusyjny o artykule T. Czeżowskiego)", in: Henryk Elzenberg, *MHE* 33, k. 7 r.-v.

⁵² Płoszczyniec, *Asceza i człowiek*, 225–227, 238–240.

On the other hand, meaningful in its original and paradigmatic sense is "the existence of the valuable object **itself**".⁵³ We are talking here about meaning in its immanent sense. Of course, transcendent and immanent meaning are not mutually exclusive: a person who pursues values and is positively oriented towards them acquires certain value-creating features (virtues, etc.), and thus become valuable themselves. However, meaning in the immanent sense should be recognized as the basic way of realizing meaning, and this particular variety of meaning should be placed at the very top, as this would be in line with the spirit of Elzenberg's axiology, according to which perfect value is objective, not relational. Since meaning saturates the existence of an object to which value is "given", *a fortiori*, it is even more meaningful is an existence of valuable object, which gives this value. One could venture to say that Elzenberg defined existence as something meaningful, as long as it was axiologically justified, whereby the existence of an object can be justified directly by the intrinsic value of the object or justified derivatively by the value of something outside the object.

In any case, by moving towards the universe of values, man becomes part of it. "The goal of life is to reflect as much of the cosmos as possible in one's small individual soul".⁵⁴

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⁵³ Elzenberg, "Aksjologiczne pojęcie sensu", 186.

⁵⁴ Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem*, 94 (16 XI 1915).

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Aksjologiczne pojęcie sensu życia w filozofii Henryka Elzenberga

Abstrakt

Celem tekstu jest rekonstrukcja koncepcji sensu życia polskiego filozofa Henryka Elzenberga. Do tego zadania wykorzystano metodę rekonstrukcyjną, analizę tekstów źródłowych, analizę pojęciową oraz analizę językową. Duży nacisk położono na metodę rekonstrukcyjną i analizę tekstów źródłowych, ponieważ najważniejsze zapiski Elzenberga na temat sensu życia znajdowały się w pismach niewydanych za życia filozofa. Polski filozof rozwijał aksjologię opartą na pojęciu wartości perfekcyjnych, bezwzględnych z istoty, które przysługują przedmiotom, które są takie, jakie powinno być. Sens życia według Elzenberga płynie z wartości, ponieważ sensowność polega na byciu uzasadnionym przez wartości. Do rezultatów badawczych niniejszego tekstu należy między innymi szerokie opracowanie kwestii, dlaczego sens życia należy według autora *Kłopotu z istnieniem* określać poprzez stosunek do wartości, a nie jako coś teleologicznie uzasadnionego. Ugruntowano hipotezę badawczą, że wszystko, o czym można orzekać sensowność, podpada pod kategorię istnienia czegoś wartościowego. Ponadto, w zakończeniu zwrócono uwagę, że na gruncie filozofii Elzenberga realizacja sensu życia wymaga ascetycznego przezwyćężania własnej natury.

Słowa kluczowe: Wartość, sens życia, cel życia, natura ludzka, Henryk Elzenberg, aksjologia, polska filozofia, etyka, perfekcjonizm, sens świata

The axiological concept of the meaning of life in Henryk Elzenberg's philosophy

Summary

The aim of this text is to reconstruct the concept of the meaning of life as presented by Polish philosopher Henryk Elzenberg. To this task, the reconstruction method, source text analysis, conceptual analysis, and linguistic analysis were used. Great emphasis was placed on the reconstruction method and analysis of source texts, as Elzenberg's most important writings on the meaning of life were found in writings not published during the philosopher's lifetime. The Polish philosopher developed an axiology based on the notion of perfect values, absolute in essence, which are inherent in objects that are as they should be. According to Elzenberg, the meaning of life flows from values, because meaningfulness consists in being justified by values. The research results of this text include, among other things, a comprehensive study of why, according to the author of *The Trouble with Existence*, the meaning of life should be defined through its relationship to values, and not as something teleologically justified. The research hypothesis that everything that can be judged to be meaningful falls under the category of the existence of something valuable has been established. Furthermore, in the conclusion, it was pointed out that, according to Elzenberg's philosophy, the realization of the meaning of life requires the ascetic overcoming of one's own nature.

Keywords: Value, meaning of life, purpose of life, human nature, Henryk Elzenberg, axiology, polish philosophy, ethics, perfectionism, asceticism, meaning of world