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Ethics as an empirical science

I. Individual primary judgements

It is a common view that whoever judges something to be good or beautiful is merely expressing their attitude towards it; in other words, that moral and aesthetic judgements are purely subjective, unlike perceptual beliefs, in which we grasp the objective existence of objects. Contrary to this view, one can point to a far-reaching parallel between perceptual beliefs and axiological judgements as cognitive processes – and, therefore, between the existence that is affirmed in perceptual beliefs,¹ and the good and the beautiful, which are affirmed in judgements: This parallelism supports the conclusion that, from an ontological point of view, the value of an object should be understood analogously to the existence of that object.

A perceptual belief is a belief in which the existence of a perceived object becomes established. The motive for a perceptual belief is the perceptual image of the object. However, not every perceptual image is connected with a perceptual belief, but only those that find themselves in the field of attention. Attention, as the cognitive attitude of the subject, is a necessary condition for the formation of a perceptual belief and, at the same time, a sufficient condition in the sense that a perceptual image that is within the field of attention acquires sufficient motivational force

¹ The author adheres to the so-called idiogenic (or, as others say, idiogenetic) theory of beliefs, which was advocated by Franz Brentano and which assumes that every belief is existential, i.e. it affirms or denies the existence of its object.

for a perceptual belief to arise. The mechanism of forming analytical beliefs based directly on concepts is similar to that of perceptual beliefs based on perceptual images. For example, the concept of a wheel becomes the motive for an analytical belief stating certain properties of a wheel when attention is directed to this concept as a cognitive attitude through which we become aware of the content of the concept. We then ascertain the existence of the properties contained in the conceptual content in the wheel.

Value judgements and aesthetic judgements arise, as one might suppose, in an analogous manner. Namely, the motive for making a judgement is always and only the presentation of the object being judged when the person making the judgement takes a specific evaluative, moral, or aesthetic stance towards the object. These stances, well known to moralists and aestheticians, are akin to attention as a cognitive stance; like attention, they are characterized by an intensification of their field at the expense of its narrowing. However, what distinguishes them from attention is their use of presentation as a motive for determining value, rather than for determining existence. This is precisely what distinguishes the content of an assessment from the content of a perceptual or analytical belief.

The assessments thus formed are individual, similar to perceptual or analytical beliefs, whose subject is taken in *suppositione formali*, i.e. in relation to the abstract object of the concept. They have either an empirical individual as their object, when the object of judgement is given imaginatively, or an abstract object of a general concept, as in the case where, based on an analysis of the concept of happiness, happiness is judged to be positively valuable. It should be noted here that we differentiate between the individual assessments referred to here and their generalizations discussed below.

Judgements, like all beliefs, are either affirmative or negative, and at the same time true or false. Namely, a judgement stating the value of an object is true only if the object is valuable: the judgement is false in the opposite case.

Turning to the next point in our comparison, we find that judgements are directly justified as perceptual beliefs, i.e. when determining the value of an object, we rely on the self-evident nature of the judgement, which – again, like a perceptual belief – cannot be proved; in other words, it cannot become the conclusion of deductive reasoning. However, judgement can be mistaken; mistaken judgements – like mistaken perceptual beliefs – are eliminated by verification, i.e. by repeating the same type of judgements in different conditions and comparing them

with each other. The ability to judge develops through practice, as does the ability to observe (in particular, for example, the ability to use a microscope or listen to murmurs in an internal examination). Gaining proficiency in judging makes it easier to eliminate erroneous judgements.²

In psychological considerations, judgements are usually linked to feelings, as they are part of aesthetic sensations and emotions. However, it would be incorrect to assume that these feelings are the motives for judgements. Judgements can be sufficiently explained by the assumption that the presentation of an object becomes the motive for judgement against the background of the judging attitude. Adopting this attitude presents the object in such a way that its representation acquires this motivational power. On the other hand, there is neither aesthetic preference nor feeling of value, i.e. emotion (such as joy, sadness, anger), without a more or less explicit judgement, so that judgement must be considered a precondition for pleasant or unpleasant preference or emotion. When it comes to aesthetic feelings, the presentation of the object of emotion together with an aesthetic evaluation is also a sufficient condition for aesthetic pleasure or displeasure. On the other hand, the arising of a feeling of value is additionally conditioned by the belief in the existence of the object of feeling (Meinong), which is not related in any way to the judgement of value, which may also arise in relation to a non-existent object. Therefore, the judgement is not conditioned by the feeling as the motive for its action, but on the contrary, both types of feelings associated with judgements, i.e. aesthetic feelings and feelings of value, are based on judgement – pleasure or displeasure arises against the background of making a judgement. The same is true in relation to perceptual and other beliefs; the formation of a belief entails the pleasure that characterizes so-called intellectual feelings. Thus, as far as the connection with the realm of feelings is concerned, there is no significant difference between judgements and perceptual beliefs.

Individual judgements – just like perceptual beliefs, can also be generalized in the same way as perceptual beliefs. This generalization leads to the establishment of evaluation criteria. Finding in a series of cases that the objects of judgement have a common feature is the basis for the generalization that every object possessing this common feature is subject to the same kind of judgement, i.e. it is good, bad, beautiful, tragic, sublime, etc. The criterion of judgement is always some empirical feature, while the value judged is not an empirical property of the object. Thus,

² Cf. H. Elzenberg, *Estetyka jako dyscyplina wartościująca*, „Pion” 1936, no. 10, Reprinted in: *Wartość i człowiek*, Toruń 1966.

for instance, we judge acts that bear the hallmarks of theft, fraud, etc. as bad, and acts that are prudent, creative, and self-sacrificing as good. The hallmarks of the first type are criteria of evil, while those of the second type are criteria of good. Similarly, beliefs that define criteria for existence in these generalizations are also generalized; for example, the empirical criterion of existence is stated in the sentence 'whatever can be perceived exists'; another sentence of the same type is the metaphysical principle 'whatever works exists'. In most cases, however, perceptual sentences are generalized in yet another way, leading to the statement of a relationship in the form 'if A exists, then B exists'. This form of generalization is also found in the field of judgement, where it forms the starting point for distinguishing between absolute and relative values. Generalizations here take the following form: 'if A is valuable, then B is valuable', with B usually remaining in relation to A as a means to an end or a part to a whole.

The above statements reveal a striking similarity between goodness and beauty, which are assessed in judgements, and existence, which is ascertained in beliefs. These are not terms that refer to objects or characteristics of objects. As regards existence, Hume and Kant had already stated clearly that an existing object does not differ in appearance from a non-existing object – the same applies to an object that we evaluate as good or bad, beautiful or ugly; the judgement adds nothing to its description. This, as is sometimes said, the 'meaninglessness' of judgements may be the source of the belief in their subjectivity, as well as in their connection with feelings. We do not represent existence, goodness, or beauty as characteristics of objects, but rather affirm them in beliefs or judgements. They belong to a group of concepts that were referred to in metaphysics as transcendentals, i.e. modifications of being that do not fit into any category because they cannot be determined by any category: adding them to determining characteristics or subtracting them from them has no effect on determination.

The terms good and beautiful are ambiguous. Good and beautiful have been juxtaposed with truth in the sense that they are the three most general goals to strive for. However, such a juxtaposition assumes different meanings for these terms; good is here a general term that covers all objects that we evaluate as good – beauty is, analogously, a term that covers beautiful objects; these are objects that meet the criteria of good and beauty – and, finally, truth is a general term for true beliefs. Anyone who proclaims that truth, goodness and beauty are the most general goals of striving is simply stating that these goals involve the unlimited multiplication of knowledge and the realisation of good and beautiful things to the greatest extent possible.

II. Ethical principles

The conclusions I intend to draw from the above analysis are an attempt to present the structure of ethical theories in a different light than is usually the case. By the term 'ethical theory' we mean a logically connected set of statements, including statements of duty or variously formulated ethical norms, or finally any other statements of a similar type; all of which boil down – with some additional stipulations – to general statements asserting that certain things are good or bad. For the purposes of further discussion, let us refer to general statements of this kind as ethical laws. Based on their conceptualization of ethical rights, ethical theories can be divided into two groups. Objectivist theories regard ethical rights as equivalents of objective good or evil, while subjectivist theories see them as a reflection of human desires and aspirations, whether individual or collective. Objectivist theories are simultaneously absolutist, while subjectivist theories are relativistic; the former defend the absoluteness of ethical laws, while the latter deny that there are any ethical laws that are absolutely valid, as all of them are conditioned in their validity by changing circumstances, either sociologically or psychologically. At the same time, absolutists consider ethical laws to be *a priori* statements. This situation seems similar to that which once prevailed in the natural sciences, when rationalist philosophers, led by Descartes and later Kant, defended the absoluteness of knowledge, seeking *a priori* principles as a guarantee of its certainty.

For the purposes of our discussion, we will divide ethical judgements of individual cases into two types: primary and secondary judgements. The judgements we discussed earlier are primary judgements. They arise from the very act of bringing the object of judgement to mind, if the subject takes the position of judging it. We therefore consider them to be subjective psychological reactions to the phenomena of the world around us, as direct as perceptual beliefs. Secondary assessments are the result of applying a previously established criterion in the case that is being assessed, and therefore occur in such a way that the case in question is subordinated to some ethical law. Primary judgements arise spontaneously, while secondary judgements are either the result of reflection or, in most cases, have become automated and are then applied stereotypically. The two must be distinguished from a direct, impulsive reaction to events, when there is no judgement, but only behaviour driven by blind (as they say) passions, fear, anger, lust, aggressive, or repulsive behaviour.

Primary judgements are subject (as already mentioned) to generalization, thanks to which evaluation criteria are established. General statements in which ethical judgement criteria have been established are ethical laws. Like all generalizations, they are uncertain and changeable, i.e. a criterion established in a certain area of moral experience may prove insufficient in a broader context, when even cases of primary judgements cannot be subordinated to it. The second reason for the variability of ethical laws is that the meaning of the general terms used to formulate them is subject to change. The meaning of terms such as fidelity, courage, heroism, lying, betrayal, and deception is constantly changing as customs change, and as a result, the content of sentences containing ethical laws must be reformulated. Finally, changes in social relations also require the criteria for evaluation to be adapted to them, if these are not sufficiently diverse to embrace the ever-increasing richness of situations.

Ethical laws in this light become a variation of empirical hypothetical laws and, like all laws of this kind, can only be justified by reductive reasoning, which refers to primary judgements as premises. It is not a priori ethical laws, but empirical primary judgements that play the role of ethical assumptions. The moral laws engraved in human hearts, referred to by apriorists, take on in this interpretation a dispositional character, not for the cognition of general ethical laws, but for the making of individual judgements; the 'moral sense' is a disposition to make individual moral judgements, just as sight is a disposition to make individual perceptions of colours and shapes.

The discussions that took place on the subject of judgements could not lead to a conclusion because of the failure to distinguish between individual judgements of a primary nature and their generalizations defining the criteria of goodness; for either the intuitiveness of individual judgements was transferred to generalizations, demanding for them a certain obviousness that they did not really possess, or, on the contrary, the uncertainty and variability of generalizations was extended to the original individual judgements.

Once the distinction has been made, the question of whether a particular thing is objectively good or bad should be understood in the same way as the question of whether an object that we see as red is objectively red. An idealist and a realist will give different answers to this question, but the construction of a physical theory describing the world of colours does not depend on accepting one answer or the other, but on whether the empirical material of observations in a given field is appropriately selected and established for the construction of the theory. The same seems to apply to the construction of ethical theories. Such a theory will

be properly grounded regardless of how judgements are interpreted in epistemological or metaphysical terms, as long as these judgements provide sufficient material for making generalizations and testing them.

The same can be said about the question of the objectivity of judgements: do all people judge in the same way, regardless of the differences in the conditions in which judgements are made, and what factors influence the formation of judgements? If we ask a similar question, whether all people perceive objects in the same colours, the answer will certainly be negative; it suffices to cite the examples of colour blindness and jaundice. However, this does not prevent us from constructing a theory of the visual world, and it would not be an obstacle to the construction of ethical theories if it were found that judgements vary in different circumstances. At that point, it would suffice to introduce appropriate reservations into the theory in order to maintain its validity.

The prerequisite for constructing an ethical theory, therefore, is neither the assumption of objectivity nor the assumption of the absoluteness of judgements, but something else. The point is that judgements should be intersubjectively communicable and verifiable or, to put it more simply, that different researchers should be able to agree with each other on how they judge and whether their judgements are congruent. Undoubtedly, methods of evaluation are much less developed in this respect than methods of sensory perception. However, it seems that everyday experience in the field of assessment does not show such far-reaching differences compared to everyday experience in the field of sensory cognition as to predict any insurmountable difficulties in developing methods for determining and verifying ethical assessments that are sufficiently accurate for the purposes of theory building. In general, even people from very different cultures, when they relate to each other 'humanly', forgetting the struggles and differences of interest that divide them, are able to find a common language in their views on good and evil. Certain simple ethical principles are so enduring and widespread that they demonstrate the reliability of the judgements on which they are based, which is close to absolute certainty. When we make mistakes in our judgements, we can correct them. We are capable of developing ethical sensitivity, i.e. improving our ability to make judgements. The verification of judgements is carried out in the same way as the verification of perceptual judgements, by repeating them several times in similar or modified conditions by the same or different people. In more complex cases, we are able to analyse judgements by breaking them down into their components and evaluating them separately. Finally, just as experience in the physical world is constantly enriched by observations

of phenomena that were once unknown or inaccessible, experience in the field of ethical judgements is also enriched by the fact that we make them in ever new conditions of life and human relations.

Perhaps an objection will arise here, directed usually against authors who attempt to formulate ethical laws by investigating people's beliefs about what is good. The objection criticizes these authors for confusing two different things: what people believe to be good and what is good; stating that the fact that something is believed to be good does not justify the claim that it is good. Therefore, to claim that primary judgements should serve as premises for constructing ethical laws is, as one might think, to refer to human opinions as the basis for justifying those laws. However, in our case, this objection is based on an obvious misunderstanding. Properly formulated, this objection is directed against reasoning in which a certain claim *P* is justified by referring to the fact that *P* is the substance of a belief that is more or less widespread among people. There is no logical relationship between the claim *P* and the claim '*P* is the content of someone's belief' that would allow the former to be justified by the latter. In this case, however, in order to justify *P* in the form of a general statement, we refer to individual judgements *p*, which are subalternate to *P*, and we assume as true, not that *p* is the content of someone's belief, but *p* directly, as in any case of justifying general laws.

We have assigned the property of truthfulness to judgements, and therefore they constitute knowledge. We have concluded that we make judgements about individual objects in the same way that we make judgements about individual objects in our perceptual beliefs; that they arise in the same way as perceptual beliefs and that, in the same way, they are directly justified and verifiable. It seems appropriate, therefore, to refer to the knowledge contained in judgements as empirical knowledge and to speak of axiological empiricism, just as one speaks of natural or psychological empiricism. At the same time, we are aware that this is a specific type of empiricism and that when we talk about axiological empiricism, we are extending the scope of the concept of empiricism beyond that accepted in the natural sciences and psychology. Generalizations of individual judgements yield hypothetical axiological laws, which must again be assigned an analogous cognitive value as generalizations of empirical sciences in general. Just as empirical scientific theories, based on the laws and hypotheses of these sciences, are constantly evolving, so too are ethical and aesthetic systems, based on the criteria of evaluation provided by axiological generalizations. In addition to individual evaluations and axiological laws, axiological theories – like all

others – include considerations of a definitional nature, leading to the establishment of the meanings of terms, distinctions, and analytical relationships. Thus, in this respect, an analogy can be drawn between the structure of theories based on evaluations and the structure of theories based on the results of natural observation.