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Remarks on ethics as an empirical science

Prof. Ossowska's article "Main models of ethical 'systems'" (*Studia Filozoficzne*, 1959, no. 4, pp. 3–21) in the section entitled "A few remarks on induction in ethics" contains several lines (pp. 17–18) criticizing the views I presented in my lecture "Ethics as an empirical science" (*Kwartalnik Filozof*iczny, vol. 18, no. 2, 1949; reprinted in *Odczyty filozoficzne*, 1958, pp. 59–67). The author has no pleasure in being misunderstood, and since I believe that this has happened in this case, I would like to contribute to the clearing up of misunderstandings with the following explanations.

I refer to ethics as an empirical science because I believe that its subject matter consists of ethical facts established in ethical judgements. However, not every empirical science is inductive. Two main methods of research exist in empirical sciences: analytical and inductive (which can also be called experimental, as induction is usually based on experiment) . The first is represented in the history of science by Galileo, the second by Bacon. The difference between them is that the analytical method formulates its general statements as so-called principles, axioms, or definitions, often using mathematical apparatus, while the second method formulates them as so-called inductive laws. Inductive laws explain the facts that fall under them and allow us to predict future facts of the same kind; the role of ethical principles, on the other hand, is not limited to explaining ethical facts or predicting that someone will judge and act in a certain way. Like the principles of mechanics, which idealize the phenomena of motion, ethical principles describe an idealized world of ethical facts, abstracting from its imperfections. Propositions obtained by analytical methods are, like inductive laws, tested against statements

about facts and corrected if necessary, but theories constructed by analytical methods always retain the character of deductive theories. To my mind, this is the nature of all ethical theories or systems when they start with some general principles and then derive normative guidelines from them.

I asked myself about the nature and justification of these fundamental principles. There are usually two answers to this question: the first is that these principles are definitive, self-evident assumptions, inherent in human nature, so to speak; the second is that they are conditioned by subjective emotional responses to various situations. Neither answer is satisfactory to me. The first suggests that ethical principles, with their authoritative nature, correspond to the equally authoritative assumptions of mathematics and mathematical natural science as understood in rationalist scientific theory; however, this theory had to give way to an empiricist theory, which understands mathematical sciences as hypothetical-deductive systems whose assumptions are explicit or implicit definitions and whose applicability to explaining facts is a separate issue that can only be resolved through empirical testing. It can be assumed that ethical systems that deduce their assertions from fundamental assumptions are analogous to hypothetical-deductive systems.

The explanation of the structure of these fundamental assumptions, if one refuses to accept them as absolute, is – as I mentioned above – sought in emotional reactions, and thus reaches into the field of psychology. I believe that here, too, certain reservations and distinctions are necessary, primarily with regard to the research method and its starting points. When talking about the method of psychology, a distinction is usually made between the introspective method and the objective method, with the introspective method being considered an outdated stage that must give way to the objective method. Both methods are used in experimental psychology and do not exhaust the tasks of psychological research, which is generally forgotten. Before proceeding to study the relationships that experimental psychology seeks to detect, it is necessary to analyse in their entirety the elements of mental life between which these relationships occur.[1] This work of conceptual demarcation

[1] Por. J.S. Mill, *System of Logic...* Book III, chapter 7. § 1, *Of Observation and Experiment*: „The mental analysis, however, must take place first... for the observer is not he who merely sees the thing which is before his eyes, but he who sees what parts that thing is composed of. To do this well is a rare talent. One person, from inattention, or attending only in the wrong place, overlooks half of what he sees; another sets down much more than he sees, confounding it with what

in the field of cognitive and emotional mental phenomena continued for many centuries, from Aristotle to Kant, and in the 19th century it was systematically pursued by Brentano and his successors in the form of what is known as descriptive or analytical psychology. It was carried out using analytical methods, developing conceptual distinctions to serve as a point of departure for experimental research, and modified as needed for that research. When the philosophical sciences, theory of cognition, logic, and ethics refer to psychological concepts, they primarily find them in descriptive psychology.

In ethics, this psychological concept is the concept of judgement related to the feelings of value distinguished by descriptive psychology. Analysis reveals a set of simpler components in them, including these judgements and elementary experiences of pleasure or pain. Value judgements are part of ethical principles, so anyone who sees the source of ethical principles in emotional reactions makes value judgements dependent on experiences of pleasure or pain. I believe that the opposite is true, namely that value judgements are a necessary condition for the emergence of emotional experiences, but they can arise without them. As I have tried to show in my lecture quoted above, the only sufficient condition for them is a specific attitude on the part of the person making the judgement.

I distinguish between primary and secondary judgements. Primary judgements arise, in my opinion, in the same way as elementary perceptual judgements. Both are based on a perceptual image in which an object with certain properties is given: in a perceptual judgement, the existence of an object is stated, while in a judgement, its value, and this is how they differ from perceptual judgements. Value, like existence, is not a property of an object, i.e. it does not belong to its representation; Aristotle and medieval metaphysicians already distinguished between the properties of objects and modifications of being, such as existence, necessity, possibility, and goodness: Hume and Kant were also familiar with this distinction. The sentence '*a* exists' has a structure different from the sentence '*a* shines'; it means 'for a certain *x*: *x* is identical to *a*'.[2]

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he imagines, or with what he infers; another takes note of the *kind* of all the circumstances, but being inexpert in estimating their degree, leaves the quantity of each vague and uncertain; another sees indeed the whole, but makes such an awkward division of it into parts, throwing things into one mass which require to be separated, and separating others which might more conveniently be considered as one..."

[2] Cf. W. C. Kneale, *Is Existence a Predicate?* [in:] H. Feigl. W. Sellars, *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, New York 1949.

Similarly, the sentence '*a* is good' expands to 'it is good that *a* exists' (or 'it would be good if *a* existed'), i.e. 'it is good that for *a* certain *x*: *x* is *a*' and similarly for sentences about necessity and other modifications of being; it would be nonsense if someone wanted to expand in a similar way a sentence in which a feature is asserted, e.g. '*a* is square'.

I consider these primary judgements to be as intuitive as perceptual judgements. They are the point of departure for the definition of goods, i.e. objects that meet the criteria of goodness. Individual objects or events, judged in primary judgements as good, have certain characteristics that distinguish them from other objects or events: they are good because they are such and such. This such and such becomes a criterion of goodness through a generalization of the form: 'such and such things are good'; this generalization is used as an ethical (or, more generally, axiological) principle, leading deductively to norms and judgements that I call secondary: something is such and such, therefore it is good.

The considerations summarized above do not constitute the construction of an ethical system, but rather an attempt to analyse systems of normative ethics that establish certain fundamental ethical principles: it is, so to speak, a meta-ethical consideration. The study of ethical systems can be conducted (like any other empirical study) in two ways, as mentioned above, either by the analytical, Galilean method or by the Baconian method, whereby sometimes – as is the case in the so-called descriptive or historical sciences – research conducted according to the latter method stops at the purely descriptive stage, limiting itself to the description of individual examples or types and their classification, without seeking general dependencies to explicate the reality being described. I have used an analytical method in my considerations: my aim is to explain the structure of normative ethical systems, and I present this explanation in the form of statements that are not inductive: I believe that these statements outline the characteristics of any normative ethical system. It is therefore a complete misunderstanding when Prof. Ossowska writes, referring to the content of my arguments, "This programme of ethics, unsupported by any example that could serve as a sample and a foothold for discussion, raises the most far-reaching doubts, and it does not seem to be a coincidence that no one in the course of centuries of ethical inquiry has left behind such a construction, while there is no shortage of ethical systems built *more geometrico*".[3] I am not presenting an ethics programme that is supported by examples, but

[3] M. Ossowska, op. cit., p. 18.

rather analysing ethical systems, including those that are constructed *more geometrico*.

The author then compares the sentence 'a is good' with the sentence 'a is green' to conclude that the former can only mean 'a is what people consider to be good'. This comparison is flawed, as I have attempted to demonstrate by analysing the primary judgements. According to this analysis, the sentence '*a* is good' means 'it is good that for *a* certain *x*: *x* is identical to a', and the sentence '*a* is green' means 'for *a* certain *x*: *x* is *a* and *x* is green'; both sentences have different structures, because 'green' is a predicate, and 'good' is not a predicate, but a functor analogous to modal functors. The analogy between observational sentences and primary judgements, which I emphasize, consists (as I have tried to demonstrate) of something else.

Perhaps there is an error in my analyses; perhaps someone else will reject the methodological assumptions on which I base them; I do not pose my claims as dogmas. However, I believe that they can only be undermined by criticism based on their proper interpretation.[4]

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[4] I wrote more extensively about the analytical method in the chapters *On the Method of Analytical Description* and *Aristotle, Galileo, Bacon* in the book *Odczyty filozoficzne [Philosophical Lectures]*, Toruń 1958, and about feelings of value in the book *Główne zasady nauk filozoficznych [The Main Principles of Philosophical Sciences]*, Wrocław 1959.