



Tadeusz Czeżowski

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Axiological and deontic moral norms

Textbooks and introductions to philosophy divide ethical norms into teleological and formal, with the division being based on the distinction between definitions of ethical conduct: according to the teleological norm, conduct is ethical if it seeks to achieve a moral good, which, for the perfectionist, is self-improvement, and for the eudaimonist, happiness, whereas, according to the formal norm, conduct is ethical if it conforms to a moral norm. This differentiation conceals yet another contrast: the teleological norm governs conduct directed towards its ends, i.e. towards states of affairs or objects which the conduct is, in keeping with the norm, intended to achieve. Thus, for example, in Socratic ethics and various ancient ethical systems descended from it, moral virtues are regarded as the ends of moral pursuit; whereas in the utilitarian system, the overarching norm indicates the goal of conduct as the promotion of well-being, understood as 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people'. Formal norms include: in Kant's ethics, the categorical imperative, which prescribes conduct whose principle could become a law binding on all people; in Christian ethics, the commandment to love one's neighbour; in Schopenhauer's ethics, the norm prescribing compassion for every sentient being; and in the ethics developed by Czesław Znamierowski, the norm of universal benevolence. None of the formal norms cited as examples specifies the goal of conduct, yet all of them link moral conduct to adherence to them. Furthermore, they all concern the relationship of the ethical agent to other people or even animals, as in the ethics of Buddha and Schopenhauer, so that this feature should be regarded as characteristic of formal norms.

Teleological norms are introduced depending on moral judgements that identify goods as the ends of moral conduct: the judgement that 'this and that is morally good' establishes the norm that 'this and that is precisely what one ought to choose as the end of one's conduct', with the additional proviso that, of the various ends, one must always choose the best. Teleological norms therefore define duty through the good; namely, the ethical duty is conduct that aims to maximize moral good. A formal norm, on the other hand, takes the concept of duty as primary, wherefrom it follows that by acting in accordance with duty as dictated by the norm, we accomplish moral good. In view of this difference between teleological and formal norms, we will call the former axiological and the latter (following Prichard and Ross) deontological¹.

Deontological norms fall into two categories. One type encompasses all those norms that contain the postulate of equal rights: everything that is due to me under certain conditions is also due to everyone else when they satisfy the same conditions; or, in other words: what I demand as a right for myself in certain circumstances, I grant to everyone else under the same circumstances. This postulate is contained in the norm of the categorical imperative, which refers to a universal law to which everyone should submit; it is also contained in the commandment to love one's neighbour, which demands that one treat every human being as one would treat oneself, and is likewise contained in the other deontic norms cited above. Let us designate these norms as egalitarian. On the opposite pole are norms that negate the egalitarian postulate, granting greater privileges to selected individuals or communities, to the detriment of others. We can refer to them collectively as elitist, distinguishing between individual elitism and group elitism, the latter focusing on the rights of one's own society or social group and placing them above the rights of other societies, groups, and outsiders, and even individual members of one's own group. Individual elitism is the elitism of Nietzsche's

¹ In the chapter "Conflicts in Ethics" from the book *Philosophy at a Crossroads* (Warsaw 1965, p. 126), I referred to the deontic norms as principles, given their a priori nature. I do not uphold this term in such a usage, reserving it to denote propositions obtained by generalizing elementary judgements, i.e. propositions defining criteria of the good, in accordance with the determination set out in the chapter "Ethics as an Empirical Science" of the book *Odczyty filozoficzne* [Philosophical Readings] (Toruń 1958, 63); I do so because these generalizations of elementary judgements become what are known as moral principles as components of moral character. They guide moral conduct, inclining one towards actions consistent with the criteria of the good, and restraining one from those that oppose these criteria (cf. *Główne zasady nauk filozoficznych*, 3rd ed., Wrocław 1959, 215).

Übermensch or, in practical life, the selfishness of the social exploiter. Collective elitism governs the self-serving policies of states in international relations, but it also manifests itself as the self-interest of national, class, and professional groups in domestic politics. Group elitism implicitly underlies utilitarian ethics, which balances the general welfare even at the expense of individual members, if this contributes to the increase of the general welfare.

Alongside the egalitarian and elitist positions, a third possibility is theoretically conceivable, whereby one prioritizes the rights of others over one's own. This third postulate can be combined with either of the two previous ones, creating, in the case of egalitarianism, a sort of higher degree of self-sacrifice in favour of the rights of others, whilst otherwise maintaining the egalitarian postulate in the sense that under no circumstances should the rights of others be subordinated to one's own. As for the combination with the postulate of elitism, this third case takes the form of the subject's voluntary submission to an elite individual or group.

A comprehensive system of norms needs to define the set of goods that constitute the goals of ethically positive conduct, as well as behaviour towards other people as fellow ethical agents; it should therefore include both axiological and deontological norms. This is the case in Christian ethics, where, alongside the commandment to love one's neighbour as a deontic norm, other Gospel teachings contain axiological norms of conduct; the same is true of the ethical system devised by W. D. Ross². In various ethical systems where only one type of norm is explicit, the other type of norm is contained *implicite* within the overarching norm; thus, in ancient ethical systems of an axiological nature – virtues, particularly the virtue of justice – regulate interpersonal relations according to the principle of either egalitarianism (as in Stoicism) or elitism (as still found in Aristotle). In utilitarian ethics, the determination of whose rights prevail in the event of a conflict – the rights of the general public or the rights of this or that individual – is made according to the principle that priority is given to those rights which yield the greatest increase in the general welfare. In Kant's deontological ethics, however, axiological norms must be derived from the content of the principles falling under the categorical imperative; among these principles are, *inter alia*:³ to patiently endure

² Cf. S. Soldenhoff, *O intuicjonizmie etycznym – obowiązek i wartość w systemie W. D. Rossa* (Warszawa, 1969).

³ Based on the examples given in: *Uzasadnienie metafizyki moralności*, Biblioteka Klasyków Filozofii (Warszawa, 1953), 51 et seq.

adversity, keep promises, perfect one's own abilities, and assist others in misfortune.

In establishing moral norms, axiologists and deontologists alike have justified them from a psychological perspective, i.e. they have cited the motives that lead to their adoption, whilst generally neglecting to examine them from a logical perspective, either because they held the view that judgements and norms are not propositions in the logical, i.e. that they do not possess the logical values of truth and falsehood, or – if they were regarded as propositions in the logical sense – their logical nature could not be properly determined owing to the lack of a sufficiently developed logical analysis.

Axiological norms are reduced (as mentioned above) to moral judgements, amongst which, as elementary forms, one can distinguish individual judgements made in specific cases, such as in the biblical story of the Good Samaritan. Such elementary judgements arise in a manner analogous to perceptual judgements, provided that an evaluative attitude is adopted (corresponding to an attitude of attention during perception), and the sentences in which these judgements are formulated have a structure analogous to natural observational sentences; the distinction lies in the fact that observational sentences assert existence, whereas evaluative sentences (or, simply, judgements) assert the value of the object;⁴ value, like existence, belongs to the category of so-called *transcendentals*, i.e. predicates that do not determine the subject of the sentence, as they cannot be represented in images or concepts, but may only be stated in sentences. Such judgements, like observational sentences, are subject to verification through repetition; reasoning that occurs in this case is reasoning by analogy. They are also often generalized by induction in cases where elementary judgements recur, attributing value to things, properties, or events of the same kind. Thus, for example, if we positively evaluate acts of charity in a given set of observations from a moral standpoint, we obtain grounds for the generalization that charity is morally good. This generalization allows us to regard charity as one of the criteria of moral good, i.e., as a feature that qualifies all acts of charity as morally good. However, criteria of the good cannot be equated with the good (value); anyone who did so would commit an error, termed by E. G. Moore the naturalistic fallacy, because charity is a descriptive, i.e. natural, feature, whereas value, as a *transcendentale*, is not a descriptive feature.

⁴ Cf. "Ethics as empirical science", *Odczyty filozoficzne* (Toruń, 1958), 59 et seq.

Elementary judgements and their generalizations are therefore empirically justified, just like natural scientific observational statements, with the difference, however, that in this case the justification refers to a specific form of axiological empiricism. Axiological norms, defined by judgements, are likewise justified. Some axiologists view judgements as *a priori* and general, imposing themselves upon intuition, which detects them in individual cases. But they too must admit that axiological empiricism provides us with only elementary judgements, in which these *a priori* judgements are apprehended, and that only these elementary judgements can serve to verify such intuitive data; thus, this view differs from the one previously presented solely in terms of the origin of judgements, and does not concern their justification. The situation is different, however, with regard to deontic norms, which can be illustrated by the example of Kant's categorical imperative. Kant introduces it with the following statement: "Finally, there is an imperative which commands a certain conduct immediately, without having as its condition any other purpose to be attained by it. This imperative is categorical... This imperative may be called that of morality."⁵ This sentence contains a nominal definition ("we will call it") of morality by the categorical imperative; similarly: „All moral concern consist solely in respect for the law"⁶, i.e. "act according to a maxim which can likewise be valid as a universal law",⁷ namely one that could become a common law. The definitions of the primary terms of a deductive theory – and in ethics, the term 'morality' is such a term – constitute its axioms. By analogy, we shall call the proposition defining moral conduct through the categorical imperative, from which Kant deduces individual moral duties, an axiom of his ethics; by an axiom we mean the proposition that we accept as true in order to define a primary term of a theory or system (i.e. to give it meaning). This result generalizes into other cases of deontic norms, which in various systems are introduced by reference to variously understood intuitions that do not provide them with the empirical justification we have seen for axiological judgements and norms: all such deontic norms, from the point of view of logical analysis, are posited as axioms of an ethical system. Another particularly clear example can be found in Znamierowski:⁸ "The judgement of universal benevolence is called

⁵ *Uzasadnienie metafizyki...*, p. 43.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 69.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 69–70.

⁸ C. Znamierowski, *Rozważania wstępne do nauki o moralności i prawie* (Warszawa, 1964), 36.

a moral judgement. The sole source of this moral judgement is universal benevolence; this is what sharply and clearly distinguishes this judgement from others". Elaborating on the mental shortcuts contained in the above statement, we may rephrase it as follows: moral conduct is always and only conduct guided by universal benevolence. An ethical system based on this premise – despite the psychological terminology in which it is framed – is an axiomatic deontological system.

The two types of norms are therefore reflected in two types of normative ethical structures. Ethics based on axiological norms has a structure analogous to that of empirical theory. Its premises are elementary judgements, which through induction yield general laws providing criteria of the good; with their help, axiological norms are formulated: theft and murder are wrong, and so one ought not to steal or kill; helping the needy is a good thing, and thus one ought to do so. Deontic ethics, constructed axiomatically, has the structure of a hypothetical-deductive theory. As such, it provides an abstract model of the community in which it applies. The relationship between such an ethics and the empirical community to which it applies is analogous to the relationship between a legal system and the society in which that system applies, or – to seek further analogies – the relationship between a theory of physics *and* the domain of facts described by that theory. Such a theory is idealized; it describes facts approximately, allowing for deviations from the theory within certain limits; the same applies in the fields of legislation and ethics; the precepts of the law are broken, but if this occurs within limits that do not undermine the system, the law continues to apply; the same holds true in ethics. The fact that the norm still applies despite being breached raised the question of the nature of this binding force; a contradiction of the same kind was perceived here as that between a general proposition and a particular proposition subordinate to it; as is well known, Lotze introduced the term '*Geltung*' to distinguish the relationship between a norm and its application from the relationship of contradiction between a general and a particular proposition; the term '*Geltung*' corresponds in English to '*validity*' and in Polish terminology to '*walor*' or '*ważność*'; in the case of a contradiction between a true particular proposition and a general proposition, the latter becomes false; in the case of a contradiction between a norm and an act falling under it, the norm does not cease to apply, i.e. it retains its validity, that is, it continues to be applicable. The matter is, however, much simpler if the deontic system of norms is likened to a hypothetical-deductive axiomatic system. Within such a system, its propositions possess a truth that is relative to the system itself, referred to, following Kant's example, as formal truth.

The norms of deontic ethics preserve their formal truth within the system, even though, in cases where they are transgressed, they lose their material truth in the world of their application, known as the system's semantic model. The difference between these two types of truth, however, is a matter of syntactic category; that is, propositions belonging to the syntactic category of elementary propositions - i.e., propositions about individuals and facts - are materially true; general sentences, i.e. sentences about abstract objects - and this is precisely what sentences in axiomatic hypothetical-deductive systems are - belong to a different syntactic category, and their formal truth must, according to this, be distinguished from material truth.

The point of departure for the above considerations was the distinction between two types of ethical norms and the systems built upon them; the question these considerations sought to resolve was: what is their logical structure? Assuming that judgements and norms are propositions in the logical sense (which I sought to justify in the article "*Dual Norms*"⁹), it became apparent that axiological systems of norms have the structure of empirical theories, whilst deontic systems of norms have the structure of hypothetical-deductive theories. These considerations also sought to draw a clear distinction, on the one hand, between heuristics in the field of morality - that is, various methods of discovering and formulating moral norms - with reference to moral experience, self-evidence, and other psychological motives, and, on the other hand, the logical justification of the system, which in axiological systems refers to individual judgements as the primary premises, whilst in deontological systems it has axioms as the primary premises.

Moral norms and their systems vary across different communities; the morality of knights differed from that of merchants; the morality of a schoolboy convinced of it being acceptable to cheat in school meets with opposition from a teacher guided by a more refined moral code. Axiological norms evolve over time, and these changes are linked to development and the growing complexity of social relations; concepts of criteria for good and evil, such as courage, justice, betrayal, and lying, are subject to change depending on shifting circumstances, and this in turn influences the content of the norms that refer to these criteria. This variability is not always apparent, for there is a wide range of relatively fixed norms that unite people from different cultural circles - norms that are,

⁹ "Ethics" 1, 1966; reprinted in: *Odczyty filozoficzne*, 2nd ed. (Toruń, 1969).

in this sense, universal. Axiological systems are an inductive elaboration of the moral relations existing in the relevant communities.

In empirical theory, statements about empirically established facts are subordinate to principles – that is, to the general propositions of the theory in question – in a relationship of subordination. The principle states: ‘Every charitable act is good’, so my charitable act is also good; the conviction expressed in this sentence becomes a guide for me to perform this charitable act as a duty. When, however, someone refrains from performing such an act in certain circumstances, then – setting aside psychological complications, hesitations, lack of will, insincerity, etc. – they deny that mercy is a good thing in the given circumstances, and thus modify the principle by limitation.

The propositions of the hypothetical-deductive theory, which are justified axiomatically, are not, however, dependent on statements of fact in this way; they are linked to empirical reality, not through subalternation, but through interpretation. If an act considered moral in a given community falls under Kant’s concept of a moral act, then that community serves as a semantic model for Kantian ethics – otherwise, it is not such a model, or is so only approximately; yet Kant’s system, as a hypothetical-deductive theory, retains its formal validity.

Thus, the distinction between axiological and deontological moral norms is a special case of a very general distinction: theories constructed either from the bottom up – empirical – or from the top down – hypothetical-deductive. This distinction recurs in various forms across many fields of scientific research; it is useful to note that it also manifests itself in ethics.