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The structure of independent ethics

1. The concept of independent ethics emerged in European philosophy in connection with the development of freethinking movements, which primarily criticized three characteristics of religious ethics, i.e. that a) it is authoritarian, as it imposes ethical norms through commandments based on the authority of a divine legislator, b) it is confined to the community of followers of a given religion, and c) it covers a very wide range of social relations, encroaching upon the realm of politics and the private lives of the adherents. Independent ethics aims to free itself from the constraints in all three of these respects, that is, to replace the authoritative source of ethical norms with their rational justification, to formulate universal ethical norms applicable to all people regardless of religious differences, and finally to separate the realm of morality, governed by ethical norms, from the realm of law, customs, hygiene standards, and other areas governed by the precepts of religious ethics.

2. Alongside religious ethics, philosophical ethics emerged as early as antiquity, linking ethical norms to ideological premises. Contemporary ethics has emerged from the body of knowledge comprising philosophical systems and stands alongside other similarly distinct branches of philosophy, such as logic, psychology, and others, becoming a fully independent discipline; like any science, it is also bound by the duty to justify its claims and define its concepts.

3. Ethical theories have been built upon two fundamental concepts: the concept corresponding to the predicate 'good', from which the abstract

term 'goodness' is derived (just as 'beauty' is derived from 'beautiful'), and the concept of moral duty. Axiological ethics is based on the concept of goodness, whilst deontological ethics is based on the concept of duty; in the former, duty is defined by goodness, and in the latter, goodness by duty. Axiological ethics defines as obligatory conduct that aims to maximize good things, i.e. goods; in deontological ethics, conduct consistent with duty is morally good.

4. The point of departure for axiological ethics is axiological empiricism, which provides premises in the form of individual elementary judgements such as 'this or that is good'. Such judgements are analogous to perceptual judgements, differing from them in that they assert not the existence, but the value of the object being judged. These are generalized: the observation, across a series of cases, that objects receiving the same judgement share a common attribute forms the basis for the generalization that every object possessing this common attribute is subject to a judgement of the same kind, i.e. that it is good or that it is not good. This common feature becomes the criterion of goodness. Such a criterion is always some empirical property, whereas the value established in the judgement is not such a property (it belongs to the so-called modes of being *modi entis*, such as existence, necessity, possibility, etc.). Another type of generalization of elementary judgements consists of sentences along the lines of 'if A is valuable, then B is valuable', where B stands to A as means to an end or part to a whole; B is then good because of A; this is how relative and absolute goods are distinguished, i.e. those which are good not because of some other good, but solely because they fulfil the criterion of goodness.

5. Deontic ethics is often structured in a manner analogous to a hypothetical-deductive axiomatic system. Its fundamental proposition is an axiom defining a moral obligation. Unlike axiological ethics, it is linked to the empirical realm: it employs a method of analytical description, the generalizations of which are not inductive laws, but axiomatic definitions. In deontic ethics, this method serves to construct a model (referred to as abstract or ideal) of a moral community in which relations consistent with the model prevail and to which empirical communities more or less approximate; the transition from theory to empiricism occurs through the interpretation of theoretical propositions within a given empirical domain.

6. Axiological and deontological ethical systems differ, not only in structure, but also in the content of the norms they set out. Axiological ethics identifies goods as the goals of moral conduct; it therefore regulates behaviour directed towards objects or states of affairs that should be realized. Deontological ethics, by identifying duty, regulates interpersonal relations, since the concept of duty is a relative one; that is, a duty is an obligation towards someone whom the norm simultaneously entitles to receive the mandatory service. Deontological ethics is either egalitarian, if it grants equal rights to all, or elitist in the opposite case. A complete system of norms should encompass both deontological and axiological norms. In various ethical systems where only one type of norm is expressly mentioned, the norms of the other type are contained in them implicitly.

7. Ethical norms are verified by examining their applicability, which is hindered by conflicts arising when a norm is false. The norm states, 'one ought to do such and such'; if applying the norm leads to a conflict, then it is not true that one ought to act in that particular way. A conflict arises between a norm and an elementary judgement when the latter negatively evaluates the behaviour recommended by the norm in the given case; the norm must then be narrowed so as to exclude the given case from its scope. When two norms are in conflict, resolving the conflict requires limiting one or the other norm, so that the conflicting case falls under only one of the two norms. Particularly difficult to resolve are personal conflicts arising from competition in the pursuit of goods, where the claims of some competitors must yield to others. The only way to reach a just resolution is through a reasonable compromise, based on the egalitarian principle. Elitist ethics will not resolve the conflict; it will provoke a sense of injustice in the disadvantaged party and a reflex of objection, to which the privileged party will respond with the use of violence. Physical force, which is the antithesis of moral principles, will replace moral norms as a factor regulating interpersonal relations.

8. We arrive, in these considerations, at the scope of an independent ethics which would fulfil the postulates mentioned in point 1; it will derive its premises from axiological empiricism, delivering the criteria of the good as defined by generalizations of elementary judgements. As an axiomatic assumption, also based on empiricism, but derived by analytical methods, the principle of egalitarianism will be indispensable. This principle will lend independent ethics a universal character. The

separation of the field of ethics from other normative fields, meanwhile, will find its basis in the distinction between absolute and relative – that is, instrumental – goods. The standards of law, technology, and hygiene serve to ensure public order, prosperity, and health – that is, goods subordinated to the ideal of human life, however it may be defined, as the overriding goal. The actualization of this ideal is the task of ethical norms, which at the same time govern those other norms in the sense that the norms of law, technology, and hygiene cannot be incompatible with the norms of ethics. Thus understood, independent ethics is not static, but develops alongside the development of social relations, as the criteria of the good undergo change, constantly guided by an expanding axiological empiricism.

9. The independent ethics of Tadeusz Kotarbiński is a deontological ethics. The abstract model of a morally positive act is constructed within it on an empirical basis, using an analytical method and the concept of the 'reliable guardian': the moral value of the act depends on the extent to which the motives for the act derive from its defining characteristics. This ethics is an egalitarian ethics. The model of the reliable guardian is not an elitist model in any respect: a) it has no distinguishing privileges, b) the guardian's efforts apply universally, though they are directed primarily towards those in the immediate vicinity, c) guardianship is not an asymmetrical relationship; guardianship duties may therefore be mutual, as in a reciprocal friendship, obliging both to help in defending against evil and in striving for the good. What is good and what is evil is determined by empirical criteria of good and evil. The ethics thus combines deontological and axiological premises into a single framework amenable to multifaceted analysis.

10. What is required for the system of independent ethical norms to become a model for the global community? This will be facilitated by the spread of globalization and the associated cultural interdependence on an international scale, forming common ethical norms that only independent ethics can provide. A favourable circumstance is that various religions have developed ethical systems with content similar to one another and to what independent ethics might encompass. This common ethical heritage will ease the path to the consensus that independent ethics seeks to achieve.