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Henryk Elzenberg as a theoretician of ethics

Henryk Elzenberg's reflections on ethics crystallized in his two books published at the end of his life: *Value and Man* and *Attempts at Contact*.¹ Remarks on ethical topics are also scattered throughout the non-poetic parts of both books and in his previously published collection *The Trouble with Existence*;² the essay *Marcus Aurelius*,³ on the other hand, belongs to the history of ethics.

Elzenberg's view of the world was bleak. When he was a young man, he was struck by "an almost overwhelming thought of death as absolute annihilation": this was accompanied by other "worries as old as human thought [...] the transience of everything, the impending destruction

¹ *Value and man, dissertations on humanities and philosophy*, Scientific Society in Toruń, 'Works of the Faculty of Philology and Philosophy', vol. XVIII, issue 1, Toruń 1966; chapters - I. The concept of perfect value; II. On the difference between beauty and goodness; III. Moral beauty; V. Aesthetics as a valuing discipline; XII. The ethics of renunciation, what it is and how it is justified; XIII. Duty and command; XIV. Against hedonism; XV. Practical realism in ethics and the fundamental values of human life; XVI. The ideal of salvation on grounds of pure ethics. *Attempts at contact*, essays and critical studies, Znak Publishing House, Krakow 1966; chapters - 1. Concern and thought (on the beginnings of my philosophizing); 7. Brutus, or the curse of virtue; 8. Ahimsa and pacifism, a thing about Gandhism; 9. Gandhi in historical perspective.

² *The Trouble with Existence*, aphorisms in chronological order, Znak Publishing House, Krakow 1963.

³ *Marcus Aurelius, from the history and psychology of ethics*, Philosophical Library edited by W. Heinrich, published by Księgarnia Polska B. Połonieckiego, Lwiv and Warsaw 1922.

of humanity, the powerlessness of the human spirit in the cosmos, the meaninglessness of human life in such conditions"; "The world itself has no meaning and is hostile to all sense";⁴ in this alien and hostile world, man is alone.⁵ The path towards overcoming this pessimistic attitude, Elzenberg finds in ethics, which he understands "as a war waged on the world by an individual".⁶ For even if "the world itself has no meaning and is hostile to all meaning, one can still shape oneself, and in particular one's inner content, to be able to oppose it as something that will always be meaningful and preserve its value".⁷ In this sense, ethics is the science of courageous behaviour towards existence.⁸ Ethics, writes Elzenberg,⁹ is a discipline based on axiology that deals with the question of how we should behave. It considers value-creating characteristics in terms of the reasons why knowledge of these characteristics can influence our behaviour in one way or another.

Hence, the most important question for ethics is what value is and how we come to know it. Let us again refer to the text, which states: "The terms 'value' and 'valuable' are used, as a closer look reveals, with two completely different meanings: In one of them, a 'valuable object' is an object that corresponds to someone's desires or needs, or more generally to desires, needs, tendencies, aspirations, abilities, or even the conditions of existence and permanence of someone or something [...]. Value thus understood is relative by definition; it is always a value for someone or something, and if it is for someone, it does not mean 'in someone's eyes' or 'in someone's opinion', but whether for someone or for something, it always indicates a certain adaptation, a certain usefulness. If it were possible to free the term 'utilitarian' from its hedonistic connotations, it would be the most convenient term for describing value as understood here; however, it cannot really be avoided. Other terms have been tried: for example, J. Laird [...] speaks of elective values, i.e. 'by choice'. [...] The situation is different with the second meaning of the word 'value', which must be clearly distinguished from the first. The author of *Letters to Lucilius* had this in mind centuries ago when (LXXI, 33) he distinguished and contrasted two categories of good things: those that have *pretium* (are valuable) and those that have *dignitas* (dignity); he also added that

⁴ In the essay *Concern and thought*, in: *Attempts at contact*, p. 129.

⁵ *The trouble with existence*, in: *Attempts at contact*, p. 235 et seq.

⁶ *Attempts at contact*, p. 130

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *The Trouble with Existence*, p. 143

⁹ *Value and Man*, p. 24

we do not grant dignity to what is *necessarium* (necessary) or *in diem utile* (currently useful). Have we been able, since Seneca's time, to articulate this contrast more precisely? The words perfection or nobility, like the word *dignitas*, can only serve as a preliminary orientation [...]. In Polish, one could perhaps [...] say '*szacowność*' (respectability), but the best purely technical term – emotionally neutral and unbiased – would probably be the 'perfect value'. However we express it, one fact is clear: judgements about perfection – whether dignity, respectability or perfect value – are certainly not the same as judgements about utilitarian or elective value".¹⁰ The author states further that perfect values are more important than utilitarian values, at least in two respects. 1) They are absolute, while the latter are relative; 2) "...there is a relationship between perfect value and that which is most authoritative *de iure* for human conduct, which we call duty or obligation, that clearly does not exist between the last-mentioned concept and the concept of utilitarian value". Value based on satisfying needs or desires will never in itself justify any obligation; needs and desires are often contradictory, and if we accept that one should be satisfied, then the other, which is contradictory to it, should not be; that is, we cannot say: 'it is necessary, so it should be'. Judgements of perfect value, on the other hand, serve as a fully sufficient justification for judgements stating that 'it should be this way' or 'it must be this way'. A given perfect value, whether it can be actualized or not, should in principle be actualized. For the time being, this obligation is, in itself, only theoretical; However, if a conscious agent is found who is capable of actually realising it, then for that agent (taking into account various real situational factors that complicate the matter) a specific obligation arises, in time and place, to actually achieve the desired state of affairs. Thus, "[...] human behaviour is entirely subject to norms resulting from the fact that perfect values do exist and are binding. And this is also the main advantage of the perfect value over the elective value".¹¹

The author distinguishes between two types of perfect value: beauty and goodness. The question of their mutual relationship is examined in the treatise *On the Difference Between Beauty and Goodness*.¹² In order to find the answer, the author first removes possible ambiguities regarding the use of both terms, "for nothing is more deadly to art than its subordination to points of view in the trivially social sense of the word 'ethical', and nothing more disastrous in life than judging events and people solely in

¹⁰ Ibid., chapter "The concept of perfect value", p. 9 et seq.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 10

¹² Ibid., p. 13-24

terms of their 'beauty', from which the aestheticism of defeat or crime so easily arises".¹³ Then, by eliminating various hypotheses about the construction of both concepts and their relationship to the concept of value, he concludes that there is no objective difference between them, but that they differ in "our own attitude towards value when we call it beauty or good. [...] We seem to call something beautiful, first and foremost, when we evaluate it as valuable and, at the same time, with a clear awareness of its value, contemplate it or experience it contemplatively. By contemplation, I understand a kind of prolonged observation, namely such in which we do not delve further cognitively into the object being observed, but rather maintain its previously recognized elements and characteristics in our field of consciousness; all other properties commonly attributed to contemplation, I would rather refer, in my terminology, either to an evaluative attitude, as partial aimlessness, or to certain forms or levels of contemplation, as self-forgetfulness and losing oneself in the object. Contemplative experience is the experience of all those emotional states that arise and develop in us as we contemplate an object and thanks to the fact that we contemplate it. It is with these two processes that the use of the word beautiful is connected. The further we move along the scale from simple prolonged observation, through contemplation, to contemplative experience and its peak intensities, the more forcefully this word comes to mind in place of the dry, factual term 'valuable.' The word 'beautiful' then means exactly the same as 'valuable', but at the same time it expresses my state of contemplation or contemplative experience; in addition to its semantic function, it fulfils a certain expressive and lyrical function – and this lyrical revelation of the contemplative state of the soul often finds its musical accompaniment, so to speak, in the intonation with which we pronounce the word".¹⁴ This specific use of the word 'beautiful' extends to cases in which contemplation is recalled in memory, or anticipated, or finally only recognized as possible. The term 'good' is related to desire: if, "as is inherent in the concept of value given here, it is true that some objects should be such and such, then it is also true (this claim is axiomatic for axiology and is the basis of its normative role) that a being capable of understanding this statement should – if it is endowed with will - want them to be such and such. A valuable object is therefore not only an object 'as it should be', but always also an object "as a rational being endowed with free will should want it to be" – except that the latter characteristic, as a derivative, does not need to be specified

¹³ Ibid., p. 12

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 19, 20

when defining value. This second property of a valuable object is not present *explicite* in our consciousness when we say that it is valuable, just as when we say 'sea' we do not have *explicite* in our consciousness that it is rough; however, we focus our attention on it and draw the attention of others to it, i.e. we emphasize it when we call it good. It is as when Homer, speaking of the sea, instead of simply saying *thalásse*, says *polýphloisbos thalásse*, with the difference that instead of adding a new word, we replace the original word with another, more complex one that fulfils both functions. However, we do not add any new features to the content covered by the term 'valuable', just as – assuming that every sea roars and that we know this – *polýphloisbos* adds nothing to the content of the noun. Therefore, we must not be tempted to say that 'good' means "valuable and such as a rational and volitional being should want it to be". Not at all; the difference between 'good' and 'valuable' remains subjective here: 'good' means 'valuable' and expresses focusing attention on the feature in question. [...] The term 'good' in deontological usage is fitting in ethics... The term 'valuable', on the other hand, should be used primarily when I simply make a positive judgement about something, i.e. I say that 'it is as it should be' and I do not claim or express anything else: in short, when my attitude is purely evaluative.¹⁵ When discussing the obligation to create culture as a set of valuable things, 'as they should be', the author asks himself: "[...] are such independent values something that really exists? If not, then the conclusion regarding their implementation collapses; and who knows, perhaps we will have to agree that such a negative answer is the one most commonly heard in philosophical circles today. However, despite everything that its supporters can cite in its favour, it seems that the affirmative answer has stronger arguments behind it. I cannot cite them here, nor, least of all, examine their strength; let me only state, as necessary for the continuation, that there is no question of any proof of the negative thesis, and that in the worst case the matter is merely doubtful. And that is quite enough for us, because – contrary to the well-known and otherwise reasonable principle of practical wisdom – doubt is sufficient grounds here to create what we are after: a command not to hold back, but to act. [...] If we make an effort, there is a chance of creating culture; if we hold back, there is no chance at all".¹⁶

The cognition of values differs from the cognition of specific sciences in the nature of fundamental propositions. "In science", writes the author, "these propositions are either perceptual-sensory, perceptual-in-

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 22 et seq.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 152

trospective, or, finally, *a priori*; in evaluative thinking – apart from this or that auxiliary axiom, which is *a priori*, but not a judgement – they belong to a completely different category, which does not fit into any of the three mentioned above. They are not *a priori*; on the contrary, in a broad sense they could be called empirical: on the basis of contact with a thing, they determine that it is such and such, good or bad, beautiful or ugly. However, they are not perceptual, in either of the two possible variants: values are not determined either by the senses or by introspection. There is nothing else left but to use a term that is unsatisfactory, but capable of providing at least some rough orientation, and call them intuitive. Intuition lies at the basis of valuation; establishing and strengthening the foundations of a valuation discipline means developing not observations or introspective data, or even – for the most part – *a priori* data, but intuitions. The principal activities of the mind, required in science on the one hand and in judgement on the other, are therefore different; and this difference is deepened by the numerous experiences accompanying thinking, which shape two independent, clearly distinct varieties, not only of intellects, but of people”.¹⁷ This matter is discussed in more detail in the chapter *Aesthetics as a value-judging discipline*, in which the author discusses, not only aesthetic, but also ethical valuation (i.e. “judging that this or that feature gives value to objects that possess it”¹⁸) and judgement (i.e. “judging that this or that object is valuable”¹⁹). The author argues that fundamental claims in the field of values are verifiable, writing, “What, then, is verification in the sense that I have in mind and which, as I see it, is possible in the field of evaluation? That, thanks to certain procedures, we learn whether a given judgement is true or false? Not necessarily; it is enough for us to learn whether, and to what extent, it is more justified than its negation. Therefore, in order to be able to say that a certain type of judgement is verifiable, it seems that only two things are needed: that it is possible to meaningfully speak of its greater or lesser justification, and that its degree of justification can be determined by some additional measure. And so, contrary to the doubts of some, the ‘evaluative aesthetician’ – let us add that this also applies to the ethicist – assumes that judgements of value meet both of the above requirements. First and foremost, he considers it untrue that one value judgement cannot be more justified than another. It can be justified to a similar extent as an observational judgement. As with ob-

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 154

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 33–42

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 34

servational judgements, where the degree of justification depends on whether the conditions under which they were made were more or less favourable, the same applies to value judgements. If two witnesses give different numbers for a passing car, the judgement of the one who was standing three steps away is, *ceteris paribus*, more justified than the judgement of the one who was standing thirty steps away; likewise, if two judges issue conflicting assessments, the judgement of the one who, presumably, was impartial and unbiased and examined the subject thoroughly is, *ceteris paribus*, more justified than the judgement of the one who examined it superficially and, moreover, was biased. And although both of them may well be wrong, we have a reasonable reason to opt for the informed judgement of, say, John rather than the capricious opinion of James. This is more or less how an aesthete understands the fulfilment of the first requirement. However, in his opinion, the next requirement is also fulfilled: because the conditions that come into play, such as impartiality or in-depth knowledge of the subject, are facts that are sometimes easier and sometimes more difficult to ascertain, but essentially always verifiable. This result, it must be admitted, is modest. An opponent, not without some justification, will point out that even the most justified judgement of value within these limits is still so weakly justified that it is better to withhold one's approval. One could question this, but that is beside the point. But, an aesthete would say, we know of higher and more perfect degrees of justification that can be achieved here. How many of our beliefs, even in science, are based on that 'final authority' we argue about, on the agreement of observations made by all, without exception, independent observers working under appropriate conditions. In the event of such agreement among all independent judges of value working under appropriate conditions, would we not have a reasonable reason to accept their observations as our own? But this very agreement, an opponent would say, we have never been able to establish. That is true, because we have never tried to place a certain number of observers in the right conditions and compare the results obtained. Hence, if one wishes to be scrupulous, one must not say that verification is impossible; one may only say that it has never really been carried out. [...] Incidentally, it is not even necessary to establish full consistency. A serious justification would be the reduction of discrepancies as the conditions for passing judgement approach the appropriate ones; to some extent, this reduction is already supported by our ordinary, unsystematic, everyday observations. These observations – no one denies – require the strictest scrutiny. However, as things stand, it can be

said with absolute certainty that we have not only no clear evidence, but also no serious argument against this assumption. Contrary to the absurd proverb and the scepticism of those who are reluctant to believe it, it seems that honest discussion, leading gradually from ill-considered to well-considered judgements, also leads from inconsistent to less inconsistent ones; and it is largely to this fact, and not only to the thoughtlessness of sociological processes, that we owe such phenomena as the gradual elimination of many works of art, initially considered beautiful, the establishment of a good opinion of others, and the creation of a certain hierarchy, subject to constant revision, but not capricious. All these revisions, rehabilitations, etc. should be viewed from a broad perspective as moments in a great discussion that has been taking place throughout history. All this would be utterly insufficient if it were to justify the claim to equate evaluative aesthetics with disciplines that offer a high degree of certainty. Meanwhile, it suffices to refute the accusation of unverifiability in itself. In fact, all we have here is the verification of less than perfect results. This criticism can be directed not only against evaluative aesthetics, but also against a multitude of inquiries that are completely untouched by this plague of evaluation; and yet we pursue these inquiries and find progress in many of them".²⁰ At the end of his argument, the author offers a beautiful characterization of aesthetics and, more generally, of an evaluating and judging axiologist, as opposed to a 'positivist' scholar: "He knows very well that he faces hundreds of pitfalls; that his personal chances of failure are greater than his chances of success; he is acutely aware of the uncertainty of his results, their constant threat from the criticism of others and himself, in short: the constant risk. This risk is, in fact, his joy, because, as a psychological type, he has and must have something of the adventurer in him, and his attitude towards the 'positivist' is a little like that of a sailor who knows that he can go down at any moment, as opposed to a landlubber, who faces no such threat. In its own way, this is also satisfying, but it is not what determines his behaviour in matters of cognition; what determines it is that he does not want to go down. And that is why he is, before all else, and quite naturally, cautious. [...] He knows well that his subject is vague and elusive, and that what he discovers in it eludes adequate definition. So although, as I said, he is a *sui generis* rationalist at his starting point, it is easy to find a trait in him that is contrary to strict rationalism: a tendency to treat concepts and judgements as merely a vari-

²⁰ Ibid., p. 39 et seq.

ation of highly imperfect symbols of a reality that resists human thought. Therefore, he does not offer anyone the chiaroscuro in which he sees things as full light, nor does he commit himself to this or that verbal formula, or even to this or that discursive expression of his intuition. He has – yes, he! – something from the spirit of empiricism in the sense that he understands his progress into the depths of a subject as a series of attempts and reversals, as coming into contact, as gradually becoming familiar with reality. Consequently, he is characterized by criticism of his own achievements, conscious smoothing of the edges of his assertions, readiness for change and correction, and, above all, restraint and, once again, restraint”.²¹

The two types of values, utilitarian and perfect, correspond to two types of normative ethics: hedonistic and perfectionist. Elzenberg offers detailed analyses of both. He formulates the hedonistic thesis in the following words: “People should be guided in their conduct solely by hedonistic values, that is, by pleasure (in the sense that they should strive to increase its sum in the world) and by pain (in the opposite sense: that they should strive to reduce its sum). This is so that the overall balance is as favourable to pleasure as it is unfavourable to pain”.²² This thesis is derived from another, more radical axiological thesis, namely: “there are no values other than hedonistic ones, or, to elaborate, there is no other ultimate positive value than pleasure, nor any other ultimate negative value other than displeasure, or possibly suffering as a higher degree of displeasure; and there is no other positive instrumental value than the property of something that contributes to the realisation or maintenance of some pleasure, or to the prevention of some displeasure, or possibly its cessation once it has arisen”.²³ This thesis is justified by a hedonic reduction, which states: “[...] we make judgements that seemingly assign non-hedonic values to people or things, but the value assigned is really always and in all cases hedonic. The person making the judgement succumbs to a kind of illusion; a closer analysis dispels this illusion”.²⁴ The author argues against this view by analysing its various possible meanings and shows that it cannot be justified in any of them. He concludes with the remark: “Certain results in the polemic with hedonism seem to have been achieved. However, this is not a victorious conclusion, not only of some general campaign against hedonism, but even of the dis-

²¹ Ibid., p. 41 et seq.

²² Ibid., p. 119

²³ Ibid., p. 119 et seq.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 121

cussion on the hedonic evaluation itself. For [...] it can be argued that non-hedonic evaluations are indeed being made, but that they are [...] meaningless, because it is not known and we are unable to explain what the non-hedonic value postulated in them would be (what its ontological status would be). But here the discussion shifts, and with it the front line of battle: the thesis of the meaninglessness – or, in a less aggressive version, the non-predicative nature – of non-hedonic judgements is shared by hedonists, axiological nominalists, nihilists, and some subjectivists. What concerns only classical hedonists in the matter raised ends here”.²⁵

This line of thought is continued in the reflections entitled *Practical realism in ethics and the fundamental values of human life*.²⁶ The position of practical realism in ethics, represented by Tadeusz Kotarbiński, Elzenberg characterizes as follows: “When I have more than one course of action to choose from, the reasonable choice is always the one that prevents or averts some kind of evil. However, if at least one [...] of the alternative choices would be one that would bring about some good, then (this conclusion is inevitable) the choice to introduce some good is not a reasonable choice. Since there is no situation in life in which there is no evil to be fought within our sphere of influence, this rule applies, in principle, to all moments in life in which we have a choice; in this sense, therefore, it is universal. The only exceptions are, so to speak, moments or hours of desired respite [...], outside of which a reasonable person will devote oneself exclusively and completely to the fight against evil. In the context of practical realism, ‘evil’ is destruction, illness, physical pain, misery, dilemma, feelings of impairment, any kind of defeat, i.e. everything that, from a subjective point of view, we commonly refer to as suffering”.²⁷ The author’s criticism of this position points to the paradoxical consequences for life and culture resulting from underestimating the ethical significance of the creative realisation of positive cultural values.

The author devoted a historical monograph on Marcus Aurelius to perfectionist ethics, which is linked to reflections entitled *The Ethics of Renunciation: What It Is and How It Is Justified*, and a study entitled *The Ideal of Salvation on the Grounds of Pure Ethics*. The same topic is also addressed in the essays *Ahimsa and Pacifism and Gandhi in Historical Perspective*. In the final chapter of the monograph²⁸, the author provides a general characterization of Marcus Aurelius, while also approving of

²⁵ Ibid., p. 127 et seq.

²⁶ Contained in: *Value and man*, p. 129 et seq.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 130

²⁸ *Marcus Aurelius*, p. 95 et seq.

his Stoic ethical traits: “[...] as a living manifestation of inner strength, his energetic asceticism and merciless, beyond measure, eradication of emotions are admirable. Through them, the Stoics created one of the most complete, exemplary and unrivalled forms of life known to cultural history. It is difficult for anyone not to agree with such guidelines as courageously enduring suffering, practising endurance and continuous readiness for suffering; not attaching importance to material goods and getting by without them, calmly accepting disappointments, and at all times being prepared for the possibility of not being able to fulfil one’s desires. Finally, and above all [...], the cult of good for good’s sake, belief in the self-sufficiency of values with its contempt for pleasure and pain, indifference to results and indifference to permanence, [...] great ethical exaltation, finding its highest tension in the rejection of all rewards. This is something that cannot be overestimated, an ethical trait which, when encountered in life or in the world of theory, shocks a person most powerfully and most directly [...], bringing them face to face with the whole meaning of their existence. It is this contempt for reward that brings something of beauty to the dryness of Kantian ethics, illuminates Spinoza’s rationalism, and, in the Indian Bhagavad-Gita, where it reigns undividedly, makes it perhaps the most sublime ethical work of all nations and times. Thanks to it, the Stoic doctrine ceases to be a mere, albeit differently weighted, balance of losses and gains, equivalent to Epicureanism, and becomes something fundamentally different and higher. And in this superiority of Stoicism, Marcus has his full share”.

The author’s interest in renunciation as a constituent of morality is reflected in his reflections, in which he classifies different types of renunciation according to their content, objects, and goals; he then seeks an answer to the question of how the imperative of renunciation tends to be justified, emphasizing that this concerns logical reasons rather than psychological motives. As such reasons, the author lists five alternative judgements of value: 1) The reason is a negative judgement, a) the object is bad, b) possession is bad, c) pursuit is bad, d) desire is bad; 2) the reason is a positive judgement, e) renunciation is good. Each of these reasons is then discussed in detail.

In the study *The ideal of salvation on the grounds of pure ethics*, a particular type of perfectionist ethics was analysed; the author refers to salvation from moral evil in a strictly ethical sense, omitting both any metaphysical and religious connections and hedonistic moments. The author calls this moral attitude a soteric attitude. *Homo ethicus* is a person with ethical will who desires to realise good in himself and avoid evil; he may adopt one of two attitudes: melioristic, when he is primarily

focused on realising good in himself, or soteric, when he primarily aims to avoid evil. Both attitudes are essentially equal; the analogies and differences between them are the subject of detailed analysis.

To conclude this – admittedly exhaustive – paper, I would like to draw attention to the author's arguments concerning the relationship between norms and commands.²⁹ The author shows that in cases where duty seemingly arises from a command, it is in fact not the command itself, but certain accompanying values that are the source of duty.

Henryk Elzenberg was not a prolific writer. He did not seek publicity and believed that anything intended for publication should be thoroughly researched in every respect; as a result, many of the fruits of his intense intellectual labour remained in his notes, while others may never even have been written down. However, what did appear in print is impressive in terms of the breadth of knowledge, depth of analysis, precision of expression, accuracy of reasoning, and wide horizons, and will remain a lasting achievement in philosophical research.

Henryk Elzenberg As A Theoretician Of Ethics

Summary

The article exposes the main theses of the ethical theory of Henryk Elzenberg (1887–1966), an eminent Polish philosopher and ethicist. The author outlines Elzenberg's conception of ethics, the two types of values he differentiated, namely the "perfective" and the utilitarian, and the two ethical systems, the perfectionistic and the hedonistic, which characterize these two values. Finally, the author discusses the differentiation between goodness and beauty as the two perfective values as proposed by Elzenberg.

²⁹ *Value and man*, p. 113 et seq.