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The Ethics Of Renunciation

Its Nature And Justification

The question which this paper seeks to address is: how is the imperative of renunciation, found in certain ethical systems, justified? In other words: what rationale and arguments can be put forward in favour of renunciation? Consideration of this issue necessitated prior agreement on the meaning of the terms “renunciation” and “ethics of renunciation” – hence the first part of this discussion, devoted to defining concepts. Its intentions, as far as I can see, should leave no room for ambiguity. The second part is perhaps a little different. Given that there are a whole range of possible reasons, and that I have tried to exhaust at least the most obvious ones in my list, a certain – albeit deliberately not entirely correct – classification of systems of renunciation ethics has emerged, wherein the principles of renunciation provided by these systems have become the basis for division. However, I emphasize most strongly that it would be wrong to assume that I considered classification to be the goal and chose the closest reason as the principle of division among many other equally possible principles. My aim was to become aware of the reasons; classification was only a means to ensure that I did not overlook any of the closest possible arguments, and my interests were rather theoretical. However, since I can expect that only a few readers will have similar interests in this particular issue, I would like to point out that my topic may also be of interest to historians or, by extension, to any researcher who takes a descriptive approach to ethics. Questions about where to place a given ethical view and how to present its often implied

justification arise at every step for such a researcher, and as far as the ethics of renunciation are concerned, they are undoubtedly significant given its great importance in the history of culture. Analyses such as the one given below, provided they combine logical correctness and a sense of reality in reasonable proportions, might facilitate the answer to such a question.

The Concept of Renunciation and the Ethics of Renunciation

1. *A formal definition of the ethics of renunciation.* By the ethics of renunciation in the historical sense, I mean ethics containing the precept: "man ought to renounce" and, in the systematic sense, this precept itself together with the whole set of imperatives (i.e. commands and prohibitions) derived from it. Should this definition be narrowed down by listing certain additional conditions? I think so, but to a lesser extent than one might assume at first glance. Therefore, according to my understanding of the term, the system of ethics of renunciation does not have to be based on the axiology of renunciation, i.e., on the statement: "renunciation is the ultimate value"¹ (and even less so: "the only ultimate value"): limiting the term to such types of systems would be inappropriate, as the nature of a given ethic is not determined solely by its axiology. Thus, we will include in the ethics of renunciation those systems for which renunciation is a derivative value, in which the precept of renunciation is not self-standing, but dependent on another precept. Nor will we limit the term to those systems in which the imperative of renunciation is universal, that is, which say: "man should renounce everything"; such systems do exist, but they are few in number, and among them none are commonly regarded as classic examples of the ethics of renunciation. On the other hand, however, we can only call a system ethical if its implementation gives life a certain specific character; this is impossible if the obligation to renounce applies only to trivial things, or even to things of some relative importance, which are very few in number. Therefore, it is necessary that the objects of renunciation be of a sufficient degree of importance, and if they are not quite so important, then the imperative must be quite

¹ With certain reservations – which I do not have space to discuss here – I understand ultimate value in a way that corresponds to the following definition: A has ultimate value if there is no non-A, whose value would constitute the reason for the value of A. I contrast the concept of ultimate value with that of derivative value.

universal. These are the additional conditions that must be met. Once we agree upon them, the line between the ethics of renunciation and what is not renunciation becomes blurred, and the renunciation character of various ethics begins to represent differences of degree, but this is precisely what corresponds most closely to common sense.

The substantive definition of the ethics of renunciation naturally depends on how we understand renunciation itself.

2. *The concept of renunciation: external renunciation.* The meaning of this word in everyday language seems to be twofold.

The first, more colloquial meaning, in a provisional and as yet too general formulation, would be as follows: "To renounce is to voluntarily give up of something, if we possess² it, or, also voluntarily, to stop (or possibly not to start) pursuing it,³ if we do not possess it, but are confident or have a chance of obtaining it". It is clear that "giving up a thing" is a higher degree of renunciation than "ceasing to pursue it" or "giving up the chance to obtain it"; but I will not consider this difference in degree (like many others) anywhere here, and in the future, when I say "give up things", I will always have in mind the unspoken addition: "or the chance of obtaining them".

As I said, this definition is too broad. Strictly speaking, we do not consider it a sacrifice if someone gets rid of something they "do not care about". It is not a sacrifice to get rid of old, unnecessary clothes or to give up your portion of cream with dessert if you do not like the cream. Renunciation is only giving up something we "care about", that is, something we desire to possess if we do not already have it, or to keep if we already possess it. Taking, as many moralists do, a somewhat broad view of the term "desire" (not only as the desire to possess, but also as the desire to keep, the so-called 'attachment'), we will therefore define "something we care about" as "something we desire". And recognizing desire as a necessary condition for renunciation, we will supplement our original definition as follows:

² The word 'possess' is used here in a sense that is, of course, quite different from 'own'. I would define this highly imperfect term, which corresponds to a not entirely clear concept, as follows: "to experience the effects of a given thing", to which one should probably add "to a degree exceeding a certain minimum and in a manner that is not too indirect". In relation to a good thing, possession understood in this way is enjoyment.

³ By 'pursuit', I do not mean a mental state, but an action aimed at achieving a specific thing.

"Renunciation is voluntarily giving up something we desire, if we possess it, or, also voluntarily, ceasing (or not beginning) to pursue it, if we do not possess it, but are confident or have a chance of obtaining it". In short: "voluntarily giving up something we desire or the chance to achieve it".

This definition requires one more comment. *Sensu strictissimo*, renunciation should be understood only as giving up something we desire at the moment of renunciation. However, the very possibility of such precise simultaneity may seem doubtful; it cannot be confirmed or denied by ordinary observation (and only such observation has determined the formation of the common concept of "renunciation"). Therefore, it is common to speak of renunciation even if someone desired a given thing before disposing of it. Accordingly, in this essay, I will not shy away from using the term to denote this type of renunciation in the first, stricter sense, as well as in the second, somewhat broader sense.

Renunciation thus understood is an act that puts an end to possession or pursuit, i.e. it changes the state of affairs not in our psyche, but in the external world: It can therefore be called external renunciation. A smoker who denies himself a cigarette; a rich man who bids farewell to the world to go to a hermitage; a soldier who volunteers for a deadly expedition – as long as they desire (or desired) the goods they are abandoning in this way – they are performing an act of external renunciation.

3. *Internal renunciation.* The concept of renunciation discussed so far is contrasted with another, slightly less common, but all the more important concept in the world of ethical and religious concepts. It is no longer about parting with a desired object, but about desire itself, and its definition (which I will not build up gradually, as in the previous case) would be as follows:

"Renunciation is, when possessing something, to destroy in oneself the desire to keep it, or, when not possessing it but having the chance to obtain it, to destroy in oneself the desire to obtain it". Employing, as in the previous paragraph, the term desire in a broad sense, one can simply say that "to renounce something is to destroy ('eradicate') the desire for it within oneself".

Renunciation of this type, as opposed to external renunciation, consists in a certain change taking place in one's mental life. In poetic and religious language, the term often used to describe it is "renouncing something in one's heart". We may therefore call this renunciation inter-

nal. A person who has forced himself to be indifferent to material goods; a sage who no longer desires to live or die and calmly surrenders to fate; or even the smoker I mentioned a moment ago, if he has overcome his passion, are performing an act of internal renunciation.

4. *Substantive definition of the ethics of renunciation.* If we now substitute the first and then the second meaning of the term “renounce” in the characteristic imperative of the ethics of renunciation, we arrive at the following two imperatives:

The imperative of external renunciation states: “man should rid himself of the things he desires”.

Whereas the imperative of internal renunciation commands: “man should extinguish his desires”. Any ethic that contains one of these two imperatives is, to the extent that it meets the conditions set out in the first paragraph, an ethic of renunciation.

However, not only any such ethic. Suppose that some ethic contains the precept: “a person should renounce all A” (without asking whether these A are desirable or not) – and it turns out that these A are indeed desirable, then for all those who desire these A, this ethic becomes an ethic of renunciation, even though it does not contain an explicit command to renounce. And we will have the right to call it “the ethics of renunciation” without reservation, as long as it commands the renunciation of things that the general public or a significant majority of people actually desire. Thus, we must add the following to external renunciation:

“The ethics of (external) renunciation is also any ethics that contains any sufficiently significant command to renounce, as long as the thing that is commanded to be renounced is desired by the general public or a significant majority of people”.

By speaking of a “significant majority”, we introduce yet another degree of fluidity between the ethics of renunciation and what is not. But extreme cases are clear and unambiguous. An ethic that prohibits engaging in rational investigations in the field of metaphysics (such systems have existed) is not an ethic of renunciation, as it affects the desires of very few individuals; but an ethic that commands the disposal of wealth or absolute sexual abstinence is, of course, an ethic of renunciation. Hence, the term “renunciation” itself is often used in colloquial speech in the wrong sense: “giving up something desired by the general public”, even if the one who gives it up never desired it.

5. *The ethics of external renunciation and the ethics of internal renunciation constitute, in practice, the same general ethics of renunciation.* However, this means that instead of one phenomenon corresponding to the term “ethics of renunciation”, we have two: should we therefore discuss each of them separately and talk not about one, but about two different ethics of renunciation? Admittedly, anyone who wanted to consider only formal logical considerations would do so. But there are also opposing considerations. Some of the arguments for external and internal renunciation are common, so that we would have to repeat many of them in both categories. In one very important case, the concept of renunciation in general is employed, encompassing external and internal renunciation as its types; we will examine this possibility in the appropriate place. Even if all these circumstances did not exist, there is still another, quite common circumstance that speaks against this formally valid method, namely that, in general, whoever prescribes external renunciation also indirectly prescribes internal renunciation, and vice versa. I say ‘in general’ because there is no necessity here, even practical. Each of the renunciations can, not only theoretically, but also in practice, occur without the admixture of the other. I can voluntarily give up an object that I continue to desire: go to a monastery without ceasing to desire worldly pleasures; allow myself to be killed while still wanting to live; not light a cigarette even though I feel like it: this would be purely external renunciation. And vice versa: I can cease to desire without ceasing to strive, cease to be attached without ceasing to possess. So: to become indifferent to cigarettes, and yet to smoke them in company; to wealth, and yet not give it away to the poor; to life, and yet defend it in war or in a duel; this will be pure internal renunciation. Seneca provided striking formulas for this in *De vita beata*.⁴ Hence, it is entirely logically possible to command one renunciation without the other; moreover, one may be commanded and the other directly forbidden – and such cases do indeed occur. A classic example of this is Krishna’s *Bhagavad-Gita*: Arjuna should not desire vic-

⁴ Unfortunately, they are drowned in personal apologia and torrents of superficial amplification, and an additional difficulty is that Seneca does not think in the terms we use here, but in the terms of Stoic teaching about *proegmena*. Nevertheless, a number of useful formulas can be extracted. Generally speaking, on commonly desired things: “*Ait [philosophiae studio- sus] ista debere contemni: non, ne habeat, sed ne sollicitus habeat*” – On life: “*Inter longius tempus et brevius nihil interesse iudicat* [and according to the Stoic, such a judgement automatically leads to a lack of attachment]: *tamen, si nihil prohibet, extendit aetatem*”. – On riches: “*Non amat divitias [...]; non in animum illas, sed in dornunt recepit [...]* *Non eiciet eas e domo [...]* *Quae, etiamsi apud me, extra me tamen sunt*”.

tory and dominion, and at the same time should not cease to fight for victory and dominion. I therefore insist strongly that there is no necessary connection here, nor any universal law. But instances such as those in the *Bhagavad Gita*, and even instances of the command to renounce one thing without – at least implicitly – the command to renounce another, are, after all, exceptions; in practice, we are most often dealing with combined commands to renounce both the external and the internal; and the conceptual distinction we have made here often remains unconscious.

This correlation stems from the fact that the direct command to renounce one thing entails the indirect command to renounce the other; this is because each of the renunciations, when taken separately, has certain negative aspects that can be removed by additionally renouncing the other.

For purely external renunciation, i.e. giving up an object without extinguishing desire, these shortcomings are as follows:

- a) giving up an object without extinguishing desire causes suffering;
- b) it exposes one to falling back into the former state, since unrooted desire can easily turn into renewed pursuit, which in itself is the end of external renunciation; moreover, the pursuit may be crowned with success, i.e. lead to possession.

Therefore, for external renunciation not to cause suffering and to achieve its goal in the long term, it is advisable to supplement it with internal renunciation. Then the suffering ceases and the danger of returning to the former state disappears.

Purely internal renunciation, i.e. the extinguishing of desire without disposing of the object, has the following drawbacks:

- a) constant contact with the object (in the case of pursuit rather than possession, this contact is imaginary) exposes one to the rebirth of desire;
- b) for outside observers always, and for the renouncer himself quite often (due to the great difficulties of good psychological self-knowledge), doubt remains in these instances as to whether the destruction of desire has actually taken place. Therefore, those who only renounce internally, without relinquishing the relevant objects, expose themselves to the accusation of hypocrisy, and may suspect themselves of it. External renunciation is therefore intended to serve as confirmation and proof that internal renunciation has taken place. Strictly speaking, it will never be proof, because, as we have stated, external renunciation can exist without internal renunciation. But the general public, which in its accusation

of hypocrisy proceeded from the mistaken assumption that “he who keeps, desires”, assumes here the equally mistaken assumption that “he who desires, keeps”, and therefore “he who does not keep, does not desire”. – and those who renounce succumb with immense force to the suggestion of these false assumptions. Thus, this argument, which is logically equal to zero, in practice plays an enormous role. Moreover, it can be mentioned that external renunciation, while not constituting proof of internal renunciation, is nevertheless a valuable test for the renouncer himself: for if desire is truly destroyed, then letting go of things should be easy and painless; if not, it should be painful and difficult. And this reasoning is very real, not based on any illusion.

To ensure that internal renunciation does not risk the rebirth of desire, that it is not questioned by the general public, and that the renouncer himself can assess its reality, it is advisable to complement it with external renunciation. Then the danger of desire reawakening is greatly reduced, the doubts of the general public disappear, and the actor himself sees clearly within himself.

Thus, even where direct reasons speak only for one kind of renunciation, it is most common for both kinds of renunciation to be required together: and in this purely practical sense, it is justified to speak of a single common ethic of renunciation.

6. *The ethics of renunciation and eudaimonism.* At this point, at the end of the general section, it may be worth recalling in a few words that the widespread belief that there is some incompatibility between the ethics of renunciation and eudaimonism or even hedonism is a misunderstanding. The ethics of renunciation may not be eudaimonistic, but it may very well also be such. Renunciation, in principle, can be directly considered a source of happiness or pleasure; in fact, it is often considered an indirect condition for them, in particular an indispensable factor for a favourable hedonic balance, as, for example, in Epicureanism, and all the more so in modern utilitarianism.

We have thus answered the first question in the subtitle: “what is the ethics of renunciation”. We may now move on to the second: “how is it justified”.

How Is the Imperative of Renunciation Justified?

1. *Introductory notes.* Moving on to the second part, I would like to make two quick comments.

Firstly, I am clearly referring to logical reasons, not psychological motives. These motives may or may not be identical in content to reasons, that is, what is evaluated positively or negatively by logical reasoning may or may not be the same thing that I actually want to achieve or avoid through the act of renunciation. An analysis of motives would be an important and very significant part of a comprehensive study of the ethics of renunciation, but it would be quite different from what I would like to present in this paper.

The second point is that, when listing the various possible reasons, I only intended to provide an exhaustive list of the most immediate reasons (or rather, those treated as the most immediate), and that I did not intend to take into account all the complications and ramifications that arise when, having given the closest reason, in turn, we ask about the reason for that reason. Therefore, the second-order reasons I have cited will, as a rule – I will not point out any possible exceptions separately – only serve as examples, and their selection will be guided solely by the philosophical, practical, or historical significance of the systems that put them forward.

I will now proceed to list the most immediate reasons.

2. *Reasons in favour of renunciation.* Any statement such as “a person should” is based, on its own merits, on certain value judgements. The same applies to the statement: “a person should renounce”. What value judgements can serve as reasons here?

Of course, this judgement will, in principle, always be: “renunciation is a positive value”, or, in shorter terms (within the scope of this essay, I treat these phrases as synonyms): “renunciation is good”. And, strictly speaking, immediate justification for the imperative of renunciation can only ever be this particular judgement. However, we can obtain several justifications if we treat the justification of this particular judgement as the immediate justification.

One type of justification would look like this: renunciation is good because it is positively good,⁵ whether as an ultimate value (“in itself”)

⁵ I say that A is positively good if it is either a positive ultimate value or a derivative value whose reason is the positive ultimate value of some *non-A*. –

or as a derivative. Beyond that, however, renunciation is an act with very serious negative consequences: it removes certain things from existence or does not allow them to exist. And this gives us the second type of justification: renunciation is good because the things it removes from existence or prevents from coming into existence are bad. This is a fundamental division.

What, then, are these things removed from existence? We have listed three: in the case of internal renunciation, desire; in the case of external renunciation, pursuit and possession. As a result, we have the following possible reasons: on the one hand, a positive judgement about renunciation as a positive good, and on the other hand, a negative judgement about desire, pursuit, or possession. Four reasons in total, one on the positive side and three on the negative side.

The above division is, by my intention, to be a systematically correct one. However, in order to adapt it to empirical reality – whose forms and natural boundaries must be carefully taken into account in historical sciences – we will now make a certain exception: in addition to the three negative reasons, we will introduce a fourth, which is in fact a further reason. This is clearly incorrect, but it will allow us to isolate, within the scope of systems of renunciation ethics, a certain group that is highly specific and whose specificity is empirically obvious. Namely: a negative judgement about desire, striving, or possession may, *inter alia* (based on the assumptions below), have its justification in a negative judgement about the object of desire, pursuit, or possession. If we now isolate all such cases into a separate group and place this group on an equal footing with the other three, we obtain not three but four negative reasons, resulting in the following final table:

- 1) The negative judgement is correct.
 - a) The object is bad.
 - b) Possession is bad.
 - c) Pursuit is bad.
 - d) Desire is bad.
- 2) The positive judgement is correct.
 - a) Renunciation is good (positively).

I have arranged these five judgements in such an order that each of them can be justified by one or more of the preceding ones. Possession, for example, may be wrong because the object possessed is wrong; pursuit because of possession; and so on. However, this relationship is not,

A negative good is always only a derivative value, namely one that has its reason in the negative ultimate value of some other thing.

of course, mandatory; otherwise, we would not be able to speak of five different independent reasons. So, an object may be good, but its possession may be bad; the object and its possession may be good, and the pursuit may be bad; the first three factors are good, and the desire is bad; finally, the object, possession, pursuit, and desire can all four be good, and renunciation may also be good. That all these cases actually occur in the ethics of renunciation will be demonstrated later, when considering each of the reasons individually. At this point, let us just note that the statements "a given factor is good" and "a given factor is bad" should always be understood as "good or bad enough to outweigh the possible value of other factors that speak to the contrary". It is not enough, for instance, that renunciation is good; it must also be better than what we are giving up, and there are more similar cases. I do not intend to discuss all the complications that arise from this; however, I will briefly mention some of them. I will completely omit the opposite cases, where not one, but two or more factors speak in favour of renunciation: they can be constructed mechanically from simple cases.

3. *Reason one: the object is bad.* (Renunciation out of condemnation of the object). If the object is bad, then both external and internal renunciation is required. External renunciation is based on an assumption that plays a kind of axiomatic role in ethics (not in the sense that it cannot be justified, but that it is actually accepted without justification): namely, that "possession of a bad thing is, as such, a bad thing (just as "possession of a good thing is, as such, a good thing");⁶ and if possession, then also the pursuit, not as a pursuit in general, but as the pursuit of that very possession: for in the latter sense and within those limits, every goal gives every means its own value, as a derivative, and the pursuit is precisely the sum of a certain kind of means (namely, actions) that have possession as their goal. Internal renunciation is commanded on the basis of the assertion, also treated as indisputable, that "the desire for evil is, as such, evil", whether as a manifestation of "evil will" or as the result of an erroneous judgement of good and bad. Furthermore, internal renuncia-

⁶ In the previous paragraph, I noted that possession can be bad, even though the object is good. However, there is no contradiction with what I am saying now, because in those cases possession is not bad as such (i.e. regardless of the circumstances accompanying it): See details in paragraph 4. As for the possible justification of the "axiom", I would like to note that I have defined "possession" of something as "experiencing its influence on oneself", and therefore "to possess something good or bad is to experience the influence of something good or bad on oneself".

tion can be treated as indirectly commanded by external renunciation, for desire has pursuit as its natural consequence; so if pursuit is evil, then so is the desire that leads to it. There is a theoretical possibility that possession, pursuit or desire as such, and independently of the object, would be things so good that their intrinsic value would exceed the negative value borrowed from the object; with regard to the pursuit in particular, it is often claimed that as a so-called action it has its own value, which is very high and independent of the goal. Of course, anyone who concludes from the condemnation of the object that there is a command to renounce it implicitly opposes all such claims.

An example of a clear ethic of renunciation of this type, with a very high degree of significance and universality, is the claim, which recurs quite often in Christianity, that "all earthly things are evil". But can such ethics become universal in the literal sense? Theoretically, undoubtedly, because it is entirely possible to claim that all objects are evil, and therefore to impose the imperative: "all objects must be renounced". Consistently applied – because one of the evil things is then life itself – such ethics leads to the imperative of non-existence, becoming the ethics of self-destruction. For this reason, its actual existence, and especially its prevalence among larger groups of people, could be considered impossible. That this consideration is not decisive, however, is proved by the Buddhist precept of nirvana, understood, if not always, then often, as something more than the suppression of all desires and the will to live itself: as actual annihilation. And although the judgement that "all objects are evil" is not the main or most strongly emphasized value judgement that makes Buddhism an ethic of renunciation, it undoubtedly plays a certain role in it as the source of the commandment of nirvana understood in this way.

Contrary to certain established oppositions, this view is perfectly compatible with eudaimonism or even hedonism. The negative value of each item individually, or of the world as a whole, may lie in the fact that they are a source of unhappiness or that, on balance, they give less pleasure than pain. This was the position of Hegesias of Cyrene in ancient times, and of Hartmann in more recent times.

4. *Reason two: possession is bad. (Renunciation due to the necessity of choice).* I move on to the second case, in which, as we have said, the object is good, but possessing it is bad. Not as such, of course, because possessing a good thing cannot be bad as such, but because of certain circumstances inherent in it (why I avoid the term "consequences" will be explained by the explanation of the state of affairs).

Let us suppose that object A is less good than object B, and that possessing A excludes possessing B and vice versa. Let us further suppose that I “must choose” between A and B, that is, at a certain moment I have the opportunity to come into possession of either A or B, but not both at the same time.⁷ I choose A. Since I could just as well have chosen B, by acquiring A I “deprive myself” of B, I “lose” B. My act of choice has indeed brought me into possession of a certain added value v , but by depriving me of B, it has deprived me of a greater value $(v + n)$, which means that I lost more than I gained, and the act of acquiring object A proves to be a bad deed,⁸ not as such, but owing to the circumstances inherent in it. If now, already possessing A, I have the further possibility of choice at any moment (now in the form of exchange) and I do not take advantage of this possibility, remaining in possession of a less good thing and deprived of a better one, then this continuing possession is as bad as the first acquisition. In this sense, it can be said that possession is bad. And choosing B at the expense of A will be mandated on the basis of the unquestionable assertion that of two good things, one should always choose the better. If I now desire A, then choosing B at its expense means renouncing it; that is, for those who desire A, the command to choose B constitutes, in relation to A, a command to renounce it – i.e. naturally an external renunciation.

Renunciations due to necessity of choice are, beyond all else, the most common thing in the world. For dessert, there is compote or pudding; one evening I feel like going to a concert and to the theatre; for the same money I can buy books or go to the seaside: everywhere, choosing one alternative, I have to give up the other, and these events are so commonplace that in this sense it is no exaggeration to say that life, being a series of choices, is also a series of sacrifices. When studying the genetic development of the instinct of renunciation, it would probably be necessary to look for the conditions of its origin. However, these acts of renunciation can be made on a case-by-case basis, according to the mood of the moment, without justifying them with judgements of value and not as compliance with certain permanently binding imperatives (today I choose A rather than B, tomorrow the opposite). They only take on an ethical character if we exchange once and for all certain objects or categories of objects that, when given a choice, must always be pre-

⁷ By “I must choose”, I do not mean, I emphasize, the compulsion to take possession of at least one of the objects, but the possibility of taking possession of only one.

⁸ Cf. further in this volume (*The Ideal of Salvation...*), p. 146.

ferred over others; this happens automatically when we establish any comparative scale of values. This is what every ethic does; but it only becomes the ethics of renunciation if the objects that it does not allow us to choose are generally desirable. This is very often the case, even where one would not expect it; to a certain extent, even Epicureanism is the ethics of renunciation, insofar as it requires us to deprive ourselves of some pleasures for the sake of others.

Ethical imperatives of this kind always state: "A person should renounce A if they have to choose between A and B, which is better than A". They are therefore always conditional, depending on one state of affairs or another in terms of facts; and for this reason, the relevant systems could be perceived as systems of ethics of renunciation in a secondary sense. However, this impression would not be entirely correct: these systems can achieve a high degree of universality and significance, and shape life in a direction of renunciation no worse than systems whose precepts are unconditional. Admittedly, they can never achieve complete universality, *ex hypothesi*. For while the command to renounce A is always justified in this case by the existence of some B that is better than A, such a command is impossible where A is the best object, or one of many best objects that are equal to each other. The maximum universality here is therefore: all objects except one, namely the best one, which provides a reason for renouncing all others. These limits are, as can be seen, still extremely broad. Let us suppose that a given ethic really mentions only one supreme good, and that the necessity of choosing between it and all others arises at every step: the whole of life is shaped by such an ethic in the direction of renunciation. Let us consider, for instance, the enormity of daily sacrifices resulting from, say, the much proclaimed principle that knowledge is the highest good: all ethics of this type, unless mitigated in some other way, are ethics of renunciation to a very high degree. Or consider the following example. In Christianity, the view that attributes a certain value to some earthly things seems to be more common than the view that considers all earthly things to be evil. However, this value is small compared to the value of one thing: salvation; and if a moralist assumes that one must choose between salvation and earthly things at every turn, then his conclusions will, in practice, be no different from those of someone who professes this second view.

However, these systems differ very clearly from the universal systems of the first group: those were pessimistic (their common position could be called objective pessimism); these are not. On the contrary: the stronger their imperative of renunciation, the stronger its roots lie in the praise of at least one value.

5. *Third reason: pursuit is wrong.* Renouncing the necessity of choice can take a slightly different form than the one discussed thus far. It may be the case that possessing the lesser good A does not preclude possessing the greater good B, but that striving for A precludes it. Let us say, for example, that the lesser good A is wealth, and the greater good B is poetic creativity. Those who possess wealth can create perfectly well, but those who do not possess it and, in their pursuit of it, devote their time and energy to it, cannot: possessing wealth does not preclude poetic creativity, but striving for it does. Therefore, possessing wealth is not a bad thing in the sense in which we used the term in the previous paragraph, but striving for wealth is; and I should not renounce the wealth I already possess, but I should renounce that which I can acquire through my efforts. Instead of poetic creativity, let us now substitute some value, say, a religious one, such as communion with God, and let us recognize that the pursuit of earthly things hinders this communion, and we will obtain a clear ethic of renunciation, although the mere possession of earthly things will not be considered evil. As in Sep Szarzyński's sonnet:

Oh power, oh delight, oh treasures of diligence,
Even if they were not free, they would still be harmful,
For they divert our greed from our own happiness
(which we call God).

Therefore, it is not the lack of wealth, power, or pleasure that deprives us of a higher good, but the pursuit (or "diligence") of them.

This case is only a variation of the one discussed above. But other cases are also possible. Striving for something good, for example, can be bad because of its unintended, but inevitable consequences. and it is not absurd to say that every action – and therefore every 'pursuit' – has some unintended consequences that are bad, and that unintended evil often, or always, outweighs intended good. Such a view, unless counter-balanced elsewhere, takes the form of "all pursuit is evil" and leads to systems that can be called quietistic. Renunciation of this type, like the previous one, is of course always, *ex definitione*, external renunciation.

6. *Reason four: desire is evil.* Desire can be evil because the object, possession, or pursuit is evil; however, it can also be evil even though all those things are good: this is our fourth possibility. "To renounce" here will mean "to free oneself from desire", that is, it will be about internal renunciation. There are countless forms of such renunciation.

First of all, there may be a renunciation of the necessity of choice. It may happen that neither possessing an object nor striving for it precludes possessing a more valuable object, but that desire precludes them. Moralists, for example, like to argue that sensual desire clouds the mind and prevents clear thinking and rational behaviour: therefore, those who value clear thinking and rational behaviour more than the object of sensual desire must suppress sensual desire. The following example may be more interesting. According to a certain classical theory in aesthetics, the aesthetic enjoyment of a beautiful object is only possible to the extent that we suppress our desire for that object. Therefore, those who value the aesthetic enjoyment of an object more than the object itself must suppress their desire. In systems of so-called ethical aestheticism, this point of view can play an important role, as it leads to the consequence that those who consider aesthetic contemplation of the world to be the highest good or one of the highest goods must renounce the world internally.

However, more numerous and historically more significant seem to be cases where desire is considered evil as such, regardless of the necessity of choice. In these cases, unlike the previous ones, the imperative of renunciation is absolutely universal. It is even achieved more often than in the case of renunciation based on condemnation of the object, because it is more difficult to distinguish between groups of desires than between objects, and therefore the conviction that "desire is evil" spreads quite naturally to all possible desires. However, there is a great danger inherent in such universality, as along with desires it removes all natural motives for action from life. To avoid this consequence, many moralists limit the universality of the precept by establishing certain groups of desires and condemning only those groups as "excessive", "unreasonable", etc. I will not discuss these distinctions here, as the universal commands themselves provide more than enough material.

Here are a few examples out of many. Desire can be considered an extremely ugly thing, as it destroys the harmony of the soul and reveals its shortcomings: in ethical aestheticism systems, this is enough to condemn it. It can be argued that it is inherently unstable and, by carrying us in ever-changing directions, introduces great evil into our lives: inconsistency. One could argue – and this is a more valid position – that those who desire are inclined to consider what they desire to be good, rather than what is truly good, therefore, by indulging in their desires, people fall into such a great evil as the inability to objectively distinguish between good and evil. However, there are two types of ethics that are of particular historical significance and deserve closer discussion. Both are clearly eudemonic, even hedonistic, in nature, although

the hedonistic nature of at least one of them, in its most classical form, is denied most vehemently.

7. *Desire as suffering.* The first of these doctrines briefly states that desire is suffering; it justifies this claim by pointing to the acute awareness of deprivation inherent in all desire. Assuming, on the other hand (a thesis that can already be considered moderately hedonistic) that suffering is evil, it concludes that desires should be discarded. This is Schopenhauer's position, as well as the fundamental position of Buddhism: for it is mainly in this sense that the second of the four "holy truths" (about the source of suffering) should be interpreted, and given the significance of this factor, the element of pessimism about the object, which we discussed above, becomes secondary. 5. However, this ethic necessarily requires, as a supplementation, the consideration of other factors, which, as we have noted, is sometimes unavoidable. For what if desire, which is evil in itself, leads to the enjoyment of a good whose positive value exceeds its own negative value? This possibility can be denied by our systems in two ways (unless they wish to invoke the complete unattainability of objects, which we will discuss in a moment). They can claim that the object is not bad, but that it is always a lesser good than desire is evil (this time a blatantly hedonistic claim: for if the object is a non-hedonic good, it means that no non-hedonic good can outweigh the hedonic evil that is desire).

Or they can say the same thing about the use of the object, the most interesting and typical form of which for these systems is the claim that it lasts for an infinitely short time, because once desire is satisfied, it instantly resurfaces, turning to a new object.

Doctrines of this kind could be called doctrines of subjective pessimism.

8. *The unattainability of objects of desire.* The second of the doctrines I mentioned has much in common with the first, but differs from it in one important respect. It states: "Desire is the source of suffering because it does not achieve its object; and such unattainability is always suffering". The difference is that in the former, desire was, at every moment, suffering, while here the cause of suffering is the ultimate unsatisfaction of desire, the realization of the unattainability of the object. In other words, desire is the source of suffering (and therefore evil) because it leads to painful disappointments.

In order for this thesis to be generally valid, i.e. "desire is always a source of suffering", it would have to be based on the assertion that "de-

sire never achieves its object", which is clearly false. And yet the imperative of renunciation, based on this, is sometimes taken quite generally. This happens as follows. It is a fact that desire often does not achieve its object; it is also accepted as a fact that in no particular case do we know in advance for certain whether we will achieve it or not. Therefore, we always expose ourselves to suffering; and if we do not want to expose ourselves, we should rid ourselves of desires. If this commandment is taken unconditionally, it contains the additional premise that we should never expose ourselves to evil – in this case, suffering. This premise implies a further assertion that the positive value of an object is always less than the negative value of the possible suffering caused by disappointment. Let us assume – again, this is a kind of ethical axiom – that the strength of a given command,⁹ that is, its ability to prevail over other commands, is determined solely by the value of the thing commanded. If the value of the object were greater, then with equal chances of achieving or not achieving it (and even more so with favourable chances), the command to strive for the object would prevail over the command to avoid painful disappointment. In fact, however, it is argued that one should not take risks, even when the chances are favourable; this means that the command to avoid suffering is stronger than the command to pursue the object; and so that the object (even the best one) has less positive value than suffering (even the smallest) has negative value.

The disproportionately high assessment of the negative value of suffering characterizes this position even more than the previous one. The above doctrine plays an important role in Stoicism; its classic representative is Epictetus. In its historical form, it is complicated by the fact that Stoicism establishes a sphere of objects (of a psychological nature) that are always attainable and therefore permissible to desire: condemnation of desire is therefore not universal in this doctrine. The fact that I did not hesitate to describe it as hedonistic will, I suppose, come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the intimate, sophisticatedly contradictory structure of Stoicism, especially late Stoicism, and the enormous role played in it by hedonism, at least in its negative form, i.e. that which considers suffering to be a great evil and the absence of suffering as a great good.

A variation of this doctrine is the thesis that replaces the "unattainability" of objects with their "perishability", i.e. the possible imperma-

⁹ Seen in isolation from the specific human beings to whom it is addressed, it is therefore a command of the type "man ought to".

nence of their possession as a result of their disappearance or loss. It is wrong, it is said here, to desire what may one day be lost. This argument gains particular force when it cites the death of the owner as the cause of the future loss of the object: for here the loss is not merely possible, but certain in relation to earthly goods: it is universal. An additional source of suffering is the tendency to imagine this loss in advance; and hence the old argument: "do not desire, for you are mortal" has drawn its main strength for centuries.

9. *Reason five: renunciation is good (positive). First variant: renunciation for the sake of renunciation.* The forms of renunciation ethics discussed up to now, which base their imperative on a negative judgement, are opposed by those which base it on a positive judgement, namely that renunciation is good in a positive sense, "good" without further reservations. Good and, of course, better than what we give up or put an end to: if it were not better than the object, the object should be kept; if it were not better than possession, pursuit, or desire, one should persevere in these states. The universality of the precept is possible here because renunciation can be the highest value, but it is not necessary because there may be values higher than renunciation. Two cases are possible here, depending on whether renunciation is to be the ultimate value or a derivative. Let us discuss each of them separately.

If renunciation is to be good "in itself", that is, to be an ultimate value, then the question "why is it good?" means: what is the quality that makes it good? Assuming that we consider this question to be legitimate and want to answer it, we will encounter a type of justification that we have not yet encountered and a state of affairs that we have not yet considered. Thus far, we have treated external renunciation and internal renunciation simply as two meanings of one and the same term, without considering whether it might be possible to construct a broader concept that would encompass both as two varieties of the same kind. As it turns out, this is possible; the most commonly mentioned quality that determines the positive value of renunciation is precisely that which is common to both external and internal renunciation – with one caveat, however: that external renunciation is understood more narrowly and strictly as the abandonment of something we desire now and have desired before. Thus, we have here a variation of ethics that is not the ethics of external or internal renunciation, nor both in parallel on the basis of different reasons, but the ethics of renunciation in general, without distinction. This concept of renunciation in general, which includes both types of "giving up something desired" and "extinguishing of desire", can be defined as

follows: "behaving towards a previously desired thing in a way other than that which would have occurred if our previous desire had determined it"¹⁰ – in short: "resisting one's desire", "overcoming desire".

This definition applies to internal renunciation based on the additional assumption that desire at the present moment has its natural continuation (*nisi quid obstat*) in desire at the next moment.

This overcoming of desire is, in turn, something more universal, namely self-overcoming in general. In addition to overcoming desire (which could be called negative self-overcoming), self-overcoming also includes a positive form, namely overcoming the lack of desire, or behaving as if one desires something even though one does not; in other words, forcing oneself to act. A common definition of both forms of self-overcoming would generally refer to behaving differently from what would result from our previous "desire relationship" (i.e., desire or lack thereof) for a given thing.

Self-overcoming is often considered a value, and a fundamental one at that. In particular, as one of the greatest possible efforts, it is recommended on the basis of the ethics of effort, ethics which, in a broad sense, borders on heroism; it is a good, as one of the most obvious and clearest forms of heroic behaviour. If, in addition, it is regarded as the ultimate supreme value, it will be one more possible reason for universal renunciation, the only one we have encountered that is devoid of pessimism or at least tinged with it. And perhaps that is why it is the one that, when brought to light with sincerity, appeals most strongly to outside observers and arouses the greatest sympathy for those who practice renunciation.

10. *Variant two: renunciation for positive purposes* – Renunciation as a derivative value is sometimes prescribed on account of its beneficial effects.

Of course, this effect, i.e., the thing for which we renounce, must be of greater value than the thing we renounce. For this reason, one might want to equate this variation with renunciation out of necessity of choice, because in that case, too, we renounced some less good A in order to achieve some better B. However, there is a difference in that there, A and B were two alternatives to choose from, meaning that anyone who wanted to achieve B had to renounce A, and A specifically, not anything else. Here, however, there is no such compulsion; there is no A whose possession would exclude the possession of B and would therefore be

¹⁰ This definition applies to internal renunciation based on the additional assumption that desire at the present moment has its natural continuation (*nisi quid obstat*) in desire at the next moment.

“bad” in the sense in which we used the term in paragraph four; on the other hand, among things less good than B, in order to achieve B, one must renounce any of them, not because it is an obstacle, but because the means to achieve B is the act of renunciation itself. This includes all “ascetic” positions in the etymological sense of the word, where renunciation is an exercise, gymnastics, discipline, and the choice of its objects is conditioned only by considerations of practical expediency. They are recommended for a variety of reasons: biological, social, religious, cultural, and others. They can even be recommended for eudaimonic or even hedonistic reasons, claiming that acts of renunciation lead to happiness or pleasure. Renunciation of this type, needless to say, can never be universal.

“Przegląd Filozoficzny”, 1925