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Henryk Elzenberg's Analytical Existentialism

Elzenberg – alongside Kotarbiński – is one of the two greatest Polish philosophers of the first half of the 20th century. In contrast to the spirit of their time, both left behind systematic works – unique and of world-class calibre – while simultaneously embodying the age-old philosophical antagonism between Plato and Democritus. Both also set unparalleled standards of rationalism in their respective forms. However, the overwhelming dominance of the latter in contemporary humanities blurs their opposition – and, paradoxically, due to the absence of a rational buffer against naturalism, pushes philosophy toward irrationalism. This process, for instance, undermines Christian thought. This destructive hegemony is expressed today in statements such as: “*Naturalism has rendered people powerless against evil*”.¹ All the clichéd “lacks of good”, “banalities of evil”, or “the so-called evil”, along with the abolition of the death penalty, serve as evidence of this trend. Elzenberg did not take the easy road of optimism. Like no other philosopher in the 20th century, he sought to deeply investigate: What are values? And he boldly proclaimed what they truly are. He constructed an unparalleled ontology of goods (and evils – thus, a *formal axiology*) and also provided an unconventional *substantive axiology*. His philosophy remains, in the most straightforward sense of the words, the pinnacle of realism.

¹ Words of Prof. Damian Leszczyński. It is not so much naturalism itself, because it can be cosmocentric, but its anthropocentric, contemporary and simplistic variety.

On the 50th anniversary of Henryk Elzenberg's death (1887–1967), *Przegląd Filozoficzny* organised a major conference at the University of Warsaw, resulting in a volume of over 500 pages.² Few of our philosophers today can boast such interest from students writing theses, doctoral dissertations, and habilitations. However, the main organiser of the conference made a telling statement – declaring that Elzenberg was “more of a poet than a philosopher” (rather than someone “consistently constructing a position based on argumentation and aimed at describing the truth”).³ Why such disparagement of content – when the form of Elzenberg's writings, their artistry, is undeniably beyond question? This stems from an idiosyncrasy – a clear rejection of Elzenberg's understanding of philosophy, that is, an aversion to Platonism. Indeed, Epicurus might have described Plato in a similar fashion, referring to him as a “poet” (in fact, he persistently remained silent about him).

Elzenberg can be considered a textbook example of the innateness of genius. He blossomed into a great mind not “from his mother and father” but from his “own seed”, overcoming significant challenges throughout his life, including being orphaned by his mother at the age of one and by his father at twelve. He studied at the Sorbonne under the guidance of Bergson and Rauh;⁴ however, he was soon caught up in the turmoil of war and his homeland, becoming a soldier in Piłsudski's Legions and fighting against the Bolsheviks in 1920. During brief periods of respite between these struggles, he translated Leibniz's *Monadology* and analysed Leibniz's philosophy. In 1921, he earned his habilitation, and in 1936, he became a professor of philosophy in Vilnius, thanks to the recommendation of Twardowski and Kotarbiński, who were his professional adversaries (a reflection of the academic customs of the time!). From 1946 to 1950 and again from 1956 to 1960, he served as a professor in Toruń, with a period of exile during the Stalinist era in between. Elzenberg published only six books: prior to World War II, he wrote about Leconte de Lisle,⁵ Leibniz and Marcus Aurelius; and after the war, he

² *Przegląd Filozoficzny* 4 (2017).

³ Jacek Hołówka, “Poezja i filozofia”, *Przegląd Filozoficzny* 4 (2017): 489; 491.

⁴ Frédéric Rauh (1861–1909) – French philosopher, author of *The Essay on the Metaphysical Foundations of Morality* (1890), *Moral Experience* (1903) and *Moral Studies* (1911). “My professor in Paris”, says Elzenberg in *Trouble with Existence* (25.10.1923). In Poland, he is entirely unknown and not translated. However, the University of Warsaw Library holds his three books.

⁵ Charles Marie Rene Leconte de Lisle (1818–1894) – an outstanding French poet, the founder of Parnassism, the guiding influence on Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Verlaine, and also Rilke.

published *Trouble with Existence, Value and Man*, and *Attempts at Contact* (*Trouble with Existence* is one of the most important Polish books of the 20th century (!), translated into German in the 21st century). He wrote approximately 130 articles, with about 60% of his legacy remaining in manuscript form. Both his published and unpublished works continue to inspire a small but dedicated group of followers across four successive generations. His unpublished writings are gradually being edited and published.

In his doctoral dissertation entitled *The Feeling of Religion in Leconte de Lisle* (1909), Elzenberg wrote:

"[...] If a person reads thirty, fifty, or a hundred books, there will be one among them from which they draw a crucial element of their philosophy – likely because their mind holds an inclination, a need that this book fulfils, while others do not".⁶

Elzenberg's mind possessed a strong Platonic inclination, which he revealed by quoting the French poet:

"Faith in another world is a very powerful support, and I pity those who lack it".⁷

For those who do not find *Trouble with Existence* to be a "resonant book", Elzenberg's thought – or, more broadly, the tychistic rationalism he represents – will always remain beyond their reach. They will be left with either positivism or the outright rejection of rationalism. After all, it is far more difficult to grasp fate than to simply believe that "things should be good". This is the first lesson of the "Elzenberg's phenomenon" – a lesson in philosophical aristocratism. There are those in philosophy who are entirely incapable of grasping human genius. And today, in an egalitarian society, it is they who dominate.

Elzenberg constructed a philosophical system that, while not as broadly conceived as Kotarbiński's (he only hinted at a general metaphysics), was essentially limited to axiology and anthropology. Its foundations rest on two axioms: **axiological absolutism** and **anthropological pessimism**. A century ago, both were widely dismissed as "obstacles to progress". (Yet even within the Lwów-Warsaw School, thinkers like Tatarkiewicz and Czeżowski showed inclinations toward absolutism

⁶ Henryk Elzenberg, *Odczuwanie religii u Leconte de Lisle'a*, trans. P. Bobowska-Nastarzewska (Toruń 2013), 23.

⁷ Ibidem, 49.

and cognitivism – the idea that ethical and aesthetic judgments can be true or false. This was the legacy of Polish Romanticism, which only needed to be refined using the tools of modern logic).

Elzenbergism, following Wolniewicz, could be described as *analytical existentialism*. This may sound like an oxymoron, but the paradox disappears when we clarify that while its subject matter is existentialist, its method is analytical. The level of rationality in Elzenberg's thought is undoubtedly higher than in Heidegger or Jaspers. Elzenberg avoids empty verbalism and instead embraces rigour in language. His style is both beautiful and precise yet underpinned by solid logic – honed through intellectual duels, for instance, with the Lwów-Warsaw School. His rationalism is subtle and integral, though limited in scope. It stands in sharp contrast to the dominant irrationalist and scientific currents in contemporary philosophy, which the author collectively referred to as *rabulist philosophy*,⁸ attributing to it a "blindness to value".⁹

According to Elzenberg, values are concrete entities that exist objectively (contrary to subjectivism – "value resides in things, not in the mind"). However, they appear in two forms, which he described as *perfect* and *utilitarian*. The former is absolute (binding for everyone), while the latter is relative (dependent on the subject). Perfect values manifest in nature, but their value originates beyond it – given in the very possibility of their realisation, as an *ontological duty*. (One might argue that God determines this, although Elzenberg was neither a Christian nor a theist. His "religion" was, in fact, a *religion of values*). In cases where two people have a mutually exclusive disagreement about assessing a perfect value, one of them must be mistaken. In contrast, there is no disagreement when it comes to utilitarian matters; there are only individual biological preferences ("one person may prefer brunettes while another prefers blondes").

The distinction between two types of values was already known to Seneca, who divided goods into those with a price and those with dignity (*pretium* vs. *dignitas*). Anselm also acknowledged this distinction, differentiating between beneficial goods (*commoda*) and just goods (*iusta*). Later, Kant reaffirmed this division, aligning with Seneca's ideas. This distinction is also well known in everyday language – we speak of "spiritual, intrinsic, autonomous, transcendent" values in contrast

⁸ Cf. Henryk Elzenberg; *Kłopot z istnieniem. Aforyzmy w porządku czasu* (1963), Note (2) of 9 VII 1961.

⁹ Cf. his article "Nauka i barbarzyństwo" – published in AMP (<https://deliberatio.eu/pl/archiwum-mysli-polskiej/nauka-i-barbarzynstwo>).

to “utilitarian, vital, practical, natural” ones. However, no one before Elzenberg had justified this distinction – not Scheler or Moore. This, among other things, constitutes Elzenberg’s contribution to world philosophy.

It is easy to provide examples of goods of both types: a perfect value (W^P) could be a Shakespearean sonnet, while a utilitarian value (W^U) could be raspberry liqueur or a piece of clothing. However, defending this distinction is challenging. After all, clothing or a drink can be perfect, just as a sonnet can be treated in a utilitarian way. This was precisely the outcome of Elzenberg’s initial characterisation of values – a paradoxical loop. Consider the following:

$W^U \approx$ that which satisfies a need or desire;

$W^P \approx$ that which evokes respect and reverence.

But “need” can be either utilitarian or perfect, just as respect and reverence can be directed toward both perfect and utilitarian matters. However, everything falls into place if we refine the first quasi-definition by specifying a *natural need* – one that constitutes a necessary condition for biological life for any human being (Elzenberg understood “desire” as something secondary to need, as “its satisfaction at a specified level”). In a specific situation, without drink or clothing, anyone would eventually perish. The same does not apply to a sonnet – not everyone would die without it (in fact, very few would). The second characterisation (W^P) is flawed because it is psychological – it relies on feelings, which, while their causes may be objective, are subjective in their manifestations. Therefore, it is necessary to refer to some objective attributes, and the only such attribute is the *ontological duty*, which indicates *what must be done* (as opposed to the subjective *duty of action*, which dictates what *I am to do*).

Thus, after revision, we arrive at the following characterisation of the two types of values:

W^U = that which satisfies a natural need.

W^P = that which is as it ought to be – by the judgment of *ontological duty* and in the eyes of an *autonomous subject*.

Natural needs are strictly defined by human biology (they are of various orders and branches, ranging from broad categories, such as nourishment, reproduction, sleep, and body regeneration, to more specific ones like eating, drinking, breathing, and entertainment, etc.). Satisfying these needs is a guarantee of life and also provides pleasure (though ordinary hedonism derives pleasure from “higher levels” of satisfaction,

while negative hedonism, or asceticism, stems from avoiding the lack of satisfaction). However, the pleasure derived from the realisation of perfect values is of a different nature – non-natural. This pertains to an individual's character.

An *autonomous subject* is reason freed from natural needs through asceticism – it is an axiological consciousness and intention. Elzenberg argues that we perceive perfect values through *axiological intuition*. However, this intuition is the result of a complex life process. When an individual's theoretical reason encounters a critical juncture, their practical reason assesses – based on socially instilled patterns and logic – whether a particular state of affairs should exist. At this point, someone's character determines whether they will pursue values or block anti-values (Elzenberg, like Kant, did not consider evil characters – those who act against their own practical reason; instead, he believed – like the Gnostics – that the conflict existed solely between character and nature, or between “spirit and matter”).

What might a naturalist say to this? They could deny the existence of an *ontological duty*, which is assumed by the anti-naturalist. If this were the case, the debate could end there: these are two *ultima ratios*, revealing the limits of finite reason (human). Although there are naturalists (such as Stanisław Lem or, in the past, the Epicureans) who acknowledge the “*autonomy of values*”. They then become entangled in a contradiction, trying to justify this autonomy from nature in a naturalistic way (for example, by adaptation).

How can one escape the “perfection of liqueur” and the “utilitarianism of the sonnet”? In simpler terms, only the “liqueur itself” or the “sonnet itself” can be considered perfect, while their applications are utilitarian, that is, other (broader) entities. For instance, someone might read Shakespeare for entertainment, for the simple joy of rhyme, regardless of the perfection of the work, and a liqueur can be perfect independently of its use (nothing in its recipe can change without ruining it). However, specific perfection (duty) cannot be justified – it is only felt and fulfilled, resonating with similar subjects. The pantheons of human masterpieces are slowly built over time, and into them, one by one, through an unbroken succession of generations of admirers, enter pyramids, sonnets, and deeds born of courage like those at Thermopylae.

Just as in his axiological absolutism, Elzenberg drew upon Plato and Augustine, in his anthropological pessimism, he followed primarily Augustine – though not without reservation. He espoused a form of historical pessimism (concerning the collective: “Things are bad, and they will

not improve"¹⁰) as well as substantial and personal pessimism. In his view, "the Third Reich was not an aberration in the history of humanity, but its vanguard";¹¹ and the human being, at best, is "not a devil, but a swine".¹² He rejected Socratic ethical intellectualism (characteristic of the Greeks in general), as well as Rousseauism, maintaining that one may consciously commit evil but does so merely by virtue of their animalistic nature – by disregarding moral duty (a view of evil akin to that found in Gnosticism). He did, however, reject the notion that people possess a love of evil (he dismissed the idea of predestination, the Manichaeic worldview). He also rejected the two main beliefs of the Western man: faith in God and faith in Progress (both in its liberal and socialist forms). In his view, true humanity (as opposed to mere anthropoid existence) can only be realised through the pursuit of perfect values. It is only through achieving these values that a person's life can attain meaning.

Elzenberg's philosophy of the human being bears a distinctly aristocratic character. However, true aristocratism – one might say – is poly-disciplinary: champions can be found in virtually every profession. (The exceptions are three anti-domains: prostitution, begging, and informing.) Thus, most people possess some form of talent and can realise perfect values at a level suitable for them. In this lies the only innate fulfilment of the "idea of equality" (apart from the established equality before the law). Even otherwise average individuals occasionally exhibit a willingness to sacrifice their lives for their homeland – one of the greatest perfect values.¹³ There also exist, on the margins of the population, purely "animalistic" types – nihilists. "They would have wives, children, eat, drink, and then drop dead – what good is any of it to anyone?"¹⁴ – says Elzenberg. "Having wives and children", after all, is a vast realm for the doing of good. Only when limited to mere reproduction and consumption would it be a testament to the lack of humanity, and in fact, it is such a testament solely through irreparable harm. Such is often the case, but the aesthetic undertone of Elzenberg's philosophy stems from his auto-centric perspective.

Elzenberg exhibited a "split personality" (in the words of Wolniewicz): his intense desire for rationality, reminiscent of Leibniz, and his

¹⁰ Elzenberg, *Kłopot...*

¹¹ Cf. Bogusław Wolniewicz, *Filozofia i wartości* (Warszawa 1993), 74.

¹² Cf. Ulrich Schrade, *Nurty filozofii współczesnej* (Warszawa 1997), 36.

¹³ Cf. Henryk Elzenberg, "Naród i wojna" – text in AMP. <https://deliberatio.eu/pl/archiwum-mysli-polskiej/narod-i-wojna>.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

conscience clashed with a pronounced sense of moral solipsism or auto-centrism (“self-sufficiency” of Stoic provenance). This is why the author has two distinct camps of admirers, symbolised by the names of two of his notable students: Wolniewicz and Herbert. Autocentrism is an innate way of living that places one’s own affairs in the foreground (a milder form of egocentrism, which recognises only one’s own concerns). Its opposite is heterocentrism. It is likely that, as an autocentric individual, Elzenberg never truly loved anyone. Consequently, his religiosity remained “personal”, arising solely from individual dread, without any root in the despair of losing loved ones. Hence, there is an estrangement from Christianity in him and a syncretic (Stoic-Hindu) garb for the cult of values. Elzenberg did not fully realise that without the influence of Christian ideals (still present, albeit weakening, in Western civilisation), axiological intuition falters.

Elzenberg did not explicitly write or say everything mentioned above. It was his students – Bogusław Wolniewicz, Zbigniew Musiał, and Ulrich Schrade – who articulated these ideas. Nevertheless, they would not have done so without him, and Polish culture would have been immeasurably poorer.

Translated by Marek Kądzielski

Summary

Elzenberg constructed a philosophical system that, was essentially limited to axiology and anthropology. Its foundations rest on two axioms: axiological absolutism and anthropological pessimism. Elzenbergism could be described as *analytical existentialism*. This may sound like an oxymoron, but the paradox disappears when we clarify that while its subject matter is existentialist, its method is analytical.

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Keywords: Elzenberg, anti-naturalism, tychistic rationalism, perfect and utilitarian values, anthropological pessimism

Egzystencjalizm analityczny Henryka Elzenberga

Streszczenie

Artykuł interpretuje system filozoficzny Henryka Elzenberga jako odmianę egzystencjalizmu analitycznego: egzystencjalistycznego ze względu na przedmiot, analitycznego zaś ze względu na metodę. Jego podstawę stanowią dwa aksjomaty – absolutyzm aksjologiczny i pesymizm antropologiczny. Autor rekonstruuje Elzenbergowskie rozróżnienie wartości perfekcyjnych i użytecznych. Pierwsze mają charakter absolutny i obiektywny, a ich podstawą jest powinność ontologiczna ujmowana przez podmiot autonomiczny; drugie są relatywne wobec naturalnych potrzeb i służą podtrzymaniu życia biologicznego. Analiza prowadzi do charakterystyki antynaturalizmu Elzenberga, jego arystokratyzmu duchowego oraz przekonania, że sens życia może urzeczywistnić się wyłącznie w realizacji wartości perfekcyjnych. Drugim biegunem systemu jest pesymizm antropologiczny i historiozoficzny, wyrażający się w odrzuceniu zarówno sokratejskiego intelektualizmu etycznego i rousseauizmu, jak i wiary w postęp. W zakończeniu wskazano napięcie między racjonalizmem filozofa a jego autocentryzmem oraz znaczenie jego uczniów dla rozwinięcia tej interpretacji.

Słowa kluczowe: Henryk Elzenberg; antynaturalizm; racjonalizm tychiczny; wartości perfekcyjne i użyteczne; pesymizm antropologiczny