

MORAL EXPERIENCE, ETHICS AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN THE THOUGHT OF TADEUSZ STYCZEN

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Abstract

The paper argues that, from a philosophical point of view, moral experience as an autonomous source for Ethics, can be the preamble to the experience of Faith. I divide the paper in three sections. First, I make some biographical remarks on the life of Tadeusz Styczen, whose philosophy is studied here. Secondly, I try to state the main aspects of the Personalistic ethics in order to show the autonomy of Ethics as a discipline. At last, I will try to show how moral experience, in its relation to the experience of truth, is the first step to the Philosophy of the Advent.

Keywords: Ethics, Event, Moral Experience, Truth, Wojtyła.

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EXPERIENCIA MORAL, ÉTICA Y FE CRISTIANA EN EL PENSAMIENTO DE TADEUSZ STYCZEN

Resumen

En este trabajo se muestra que, desde un punto de vista filosófico, la experiencia moral como una fuente autónoma de la ética puede ser el preámbulo de la fe. Para ello divido el trabajo en tres partes. Primero hago algunos apuntes biográficos sobre la vida de Tadeusz Styczen, cuya filosofía es estudiada aquí. En segundo lugar trato de establecer los aspectos más importantes de la ética personalista para mostrar la autonomía de la ética como disciplina. Por último, intento mostrar el modo en que la experiencia moral, en relación con la experiencia de la verdad, es la primera vía para una filosofía del acontecimiento.

Palabras clave: acontecimiento, ética, experiencia moral, verdad, Wojtyła.

In his approach to ethics –and more generally the Philosophy of man–, Tadeusz Styczen develops a vision, which was drawn up by his master Karol Wojtyła. In the introduction to his masterly work *The Acting Person* –almost defying the so-called masters of suspicion and all those who proclaim “the end of the subject”– Wojtyła writes: “Yet there is something that can be called the experience of man” (Wojtyła, 2003: p.832). *The Acting Person* is nothing less than the exploration of this experience that starts from the fact that man acts. If, however, in *The Acting Person* ethical problems are, as Wojtyła himself says, “put outside of the brackets”(Wojtyła, 2003: p.844), in its rich philosophical work Tadeusz Styczen seeks to address the problem of man just starting from the moral experience, convinced that it constitutes the privileged point of departure to reveal the essence of the human subjectivity. In this conviction Styczen is close to the philosophical proposal of Emanuel Lévinas. It is interesting to note that in the contemporary philosophy these two authors see ethics as first philosophy (Lévinas, 1989).

In his reflection Styczen wants to go “to the thing in itself”, to what is essential in man, looking –as he says– to “split the atom of the self”, that is, to analyze this moment when the person is revealed and constituted as a person. Styczen sees this moment in the experience of the normative power of truth that once it is known and recognized by the person becomes at the same time the norm of his/her action. In my brief reflection I would like to give first some biographical information on the person of Tadeusz Styczen, then I will discuss the philosophical environment in which he developed his philosophical position and in the end I will try to expose the nodal points in his Ethical personalism in its openness to the religious dimension.

Some Biographical Remarks

Tadeusz Styczen was born December 21, 1931 in Wołowice, a small village near Kraków (Poland). During the Second World War he began to attend the secondary school of the Salvatorian Fathers in

Kraków, which operated underground, and after the war he decided to enter the novitiate of the same congregation. The experience of the war has left an indelible memory of the contempt for the human person. He himself recalled a strange smell (which –as it turned out later— was a smell coming from the crematoria) that sometimes came to his village from Oswiecim (Auschwitz). Perhaps this experience made him especially sensitive to any violation of the dignity of the human person, and led him to the study of Ethics, just to convey this conviction to others. We must not forget that even after the end of the war the systematic violation of human rights in Poland was not over, only that the criterion of race had been replaced by that of the class. Responding once to the question: What is the role of moral philosophers in society? Styczen defined it in two words: “to reveal the person”, that is, to reveal to the others who is the person —in conviction that once one has seen the truth about the person, then at the same time one will see that the only right attitude in front of him/her is the attitude which consists in the affirmation of his/her dignity. This vision of the role of Ethics and of a moral philosopher puts it very close to the figure and teachings of Socrates, who not by chance many times comes back in the writings of Styczen. Socrates himself compared the task of the philosopher to that of a midwife. The philosopher does not want to impose a certain vision of the world on his disciple –and in this he differs from an ideologue— but he wants to help his student to see with his own eyes what he teaches and verify the truth of his teaching in his own lived experience. In other words, philosophical knowledge must be born in the interiority of the student, because only then it maintains its personalistic value. We find the same idea in Plato’s philosophy, according to which the most important things in philosophy cannot be confided to the writings, because their nature is such that they must be exposed in interpersonal (and sometimes intrapersonal) dialogue and once seen by the student they will not be ever forgotten. For this reason I think that the way of philosophizing of Tadeusz Styczen can be called Socratic (which of course does not mean that our philosopher shares, for example, the ethical intellectualism of Socrates).

Styczen began his philosophical and theological studies at the Jagiellonian University of Kraków, where the Communists have not yet expelled the faculty of Theology (they will do this during his studies). At first he was interested –and here is another affinity with Socrates– in the Philosophy of nature, attending the seminar of prof. Kazimierz Kłosak, a scholar who was looking to bring together the Thomistic philosophy with the results of Modern science according to the model proposed by the school of Louvain, and on this basis criticized the so-called scientific materialism propagated by the Marxists. At the Jagiellonian University he attended a course on social ethics proposed by prof. Karol Wojtyła. He appreciated it so much that after his ordination he decided to follow Wojtyła, who in the meantime became professor at the Catholic University of Lublin.

This desire has found the consent of his superior. So between the years 1955-1963 Styczen studied Moral philosophy at the Chair of Ethics directed by Karol Wojtyła, who – seeing the gifts of his student – asked him to become his assistant. Under the direction of Wojtyła, Styczen prepared his master thesis devoted to the analysis of the concept of virtue in the philosophy of Nikolai Hartmann. In 1963 Styczen defended his doctoral thesis entitled *The Possibility of Scientific Ethics in John Locke*. Finally, in 1971, he presented his habilitation thesis: *The Problem of the Possibility of Ethics as a Theory of Morality Universally Valid and Empirically Founded*. In it he presented his original vision of Ethics as a theory, which is at the same time normative and empirical.

Since 1963, Styczen was working first as an assistant and then as an associate professor at the Chair of Ethics directed by prof. Wojtyła, who –increasingly busy as the bishop and cardinal of Krakow– entrusted him with the lessons and the care of the seminar on Ethics. After the elevation of card. Wojtyła to the Chair of Saint Peter, Styczen became his successor as director of the Chair of Ethics at the Catholic University of Lublin. In 1982 at the same university he founded the John Paul II Institute, which exists until today. The Institute focuses on the study of the thought of John Paul II, as well as it looks to get into dialogue with contemporary culture through the magazine *Ethos*. In 1981, together with the professors Josef Seifert

and Agustín Basave, Styczen founded the International Academy of Philosophy, whose first site was in Dallas (USA). The Academy seeks to deepen and develop the ideas of Realist phenomenology, realizing thereby the project of Wojtyła to combine Phenomenology and Metaphysics into a coherent philosophical theory. Tadeusz Styczen died on October 14, 2010.

At the Roots of the Personalistic Ethics

The ethical problems are not invented by philosophers, but posed by life itself. In Poland, after the war, the most urgent challenge was posed by Marxism as an ideology and political system imposed by force to the nation. In practice, the communist system despised human rights, arguing that any abuse in this field is justified by the higher laws of history, of which the Marxists themselves were the bearers. On the road towards the ultimate goal –a communist society– it would be justified to sacrifice individual persons, especially if they somehow hold back the march. In the field of theory Marxism argued that ethics is merely the expression of the self-consciousness of a particular social class, there is therefore no ethics universally valid for all. Even Christian ethics was seen as the expression of the interests of a certain social class, and its commandment of love was considered to be quite harmful, because –it was said– it softens social tensions, which should be rather exasperated to stimulate in this way the revolutionary potential present among the people.

During the repression of the fifties the theological faculties had been expelled from universities and Marxist philosophy had been imposed on the philosophical faculties. Those who refused to accept it would be relegated from the university (this happened for example to the famous phenomenologist Roman Ingarden). The Catholic University of Lublin (abbreviation: KUL) has become the only place in which Philosophy was not subjected to ideological restrictions (so that jokingly it was said, “From Berlin to Seoul, Philosophy is only at the KUL”). In these years the young prof. Karol Wojtyła begins his teaching at the KUL and brings with him his interest in Ethics and

philosophical anthropology analyzed with the help of the phenomenological method.

As we have said, the challenge of Marxism related to the methodological and epistemological status of Ethics. The question was: Is Ethics necessarily bound to a certain philosophical system or a certain view of the world? What is the relation between ethics and religion? If one does not share the Christian belief, it is inevitable that he does not share its ethical message either? (It is not difficult to see that in the sixties the same problem was discussed within the Catholic moral theology; it concerned the so-called *proprium cristianum* of morality. In other words: Is there any special Christian content that faith adds to morality?) Tadeusz Styczen was to develop a coherent proposal of ethics that is both epistemologically autonomous of Philosophy and Theology and at the same time methodologically open to their contribution.

In his search of an ethical theory that finds its basis in moral experience Styczen met the proposal of the so-called autonomous Ethics developed within the famous Lvov-Warsaw School, especially by Tadeusz Kotarbinski and Tadeusz Czezowski (Kotarbinski, 1959: pp.3-14; Wolenski, 1989).

Kotarbinski –whose philosophical position was one of the most consistent forms of materialism— claimed that ethics as such is not tied to any confessional *proprium* –not dependent neither on philosophy nor on theology, nor on religion. According to Kotarbinski, as we do not speak of Christian Mathematics or Christian Physics, we must not add any adjective to the substantive “Ethics”. Ethics has its own experimental basis, that is, there exists something like moral experience, which in principle is accessible to every person, regardless of his or her religious or philosophical beliefs. Ethics as a scientific discipline is in this sense independent, autonomous. For the same reasons, ethics is independent of other empirical disciplines such as Sociology or Psychology. Another philosopher of the same school, Tadeusz Czezowski, showed how ethics is independent of Psychology, with which it was often linked (Czezowski, 1969: pp.27-30).

The arguments of the philosophers of the Lvov-Warsaw School could not fail to arouse interest in those who wanted to defend

Ethics against the ideologisation made by Marxism. The proposal of Kotarbinski and Czezowski had still another advantage: the Ethics that starts from the moral experience is free from the accusation of committing the so-called naturalistic fallacy, i.e. the error which consists in making a logically illicit passage from “is” to “ought”.

In the famous passage of his *Treatise on Human Nature* (III, 1, 1) David Hume observes that any ethical system, which is deducted from the more general metaphysical system (we could add: from any descriptive theory, either philosophical or empirical), commits a logical error because in its conclusions appear normative terms, which were not present in the premises. But if Ethics –as proposed by Kotarbinski and Czezowski– starts from the original moral experience, then already in its point of departure there are premises of normative nature.

For these reasons Styczen expressed his solidarity with the proposal of independent ethics made by Kotarbinski and Czezowski, but at the same time believed that it could not be accepted without some correction (Styczen, 1980). According to Styczen, to interpret adequately the independence of ethics we must first distinguish three levels present in the structure of moral judgment: the level of moral obligation (moral goodness), the level of moral rightness and the existential dimension. To the question: “Is ethics an independent science?” we cannot give an equal answer on all these levels, because the answer is different depending on the level of moral judgment to which it is related. So, on the level of moral obligation, that is, on the level of perception of the very moral fact (on the epistemological level), Ethics is an independent science, because it has its own experiential basis, which puts it in direct contract with the moral value. In other words, the moral experience as such is a part of common human experience. The common man must not expect that philosophers tell him what is morality in its most general sense; he/she perceives it in his/her conscience even if he/she does not know anything about Philosophy. In this sense, Ethics is nothing else than an interpretation of the moral fact that is given in conscience. It does not create its object nor derives it from a more general theory, but finds it as already given in experience.

On the other hand, if the task of ethics ran out in the reflection on the moral fact that exists independently of it, then they would be reduced either to meta-ethics or to ethology (in the sense of the study of human customs), that is, it could not say anything about the issues of the right moral conduct, but should be limited merely to the analysis of what people say and think of morality. For example some philosophers from the analytical school reduced ethics to the analysis of moral language. This is not the position of Styczen. According to him ethics has also something more to say about our moral conduct, in the sense that it can answer the question: "Is a given way of acting right or wrong?" But doing so it is no longer independent, because in this moment it refers to a certain vision of man, it adopts a certain anthropology. To explain it better let us make an example. At the door of a hospital two friends discuss, whether or not they should say the truth about the state of health of their friend, whose illness is terminal. One of them says "yes", whereas the other one says: "no". But one thing is certain: both want to do a right thing for him, that is, their dispute does not take place on the level of moral obligation. Indeed, they can disagree only because they agree on a more fundamental level; they both agree that they should do something that will be good for their friend. Their dispute concerns the "how" of their act, the form of the actual affirmation of his person. We will not go here into the substance of their debate, we just want to ascertain the fact that the agreement on the first level of moral judgment does not solve all our moral problems, so that ethics, which attempts to answer the questions that life puts to us, must seek for an anthropology that is appropriate to its needs. So we can say that if in its point of departure ethics are epistemologically independent, because they have their original experimental basis, then at the level of the rightness of the moral act ethics become methodologically dependent on anthropology.

In the context of the example of moral controversy mentioned above Styczen answers also another question. What is the first motive and the first reason for moral action? The reason of action of these two men, who want the benefit of their friend, is certainly not their happiness (so the theory of ethics and the theory of happiness

are for Styczen two different theories, although they are certainly related). On the other hand, the reason for their action is not the order of some authority (divine or human) either. The only –necessary and sufficient– cause of moral action lies in the perception of the value of the person –his/her dignity that calls to be recognized in practice. This way Styczen comes to the formulation of the first norm of all moral order, which reads: “the affirmation is due to the person as a person.” In other words: *Persona est affirmando propter seipsam*. I do not think it is a chance that Styczen has chosen here the word “affirmation”, that is, the term that belongs to logic. In this way Styczen wants to emphasize that we are dealing here with the discovery of a specific truth –the truth about the person who asks to be recognized in our actions.

In moral judgment, however, we identified yet another dimension, namely the existential dimension. The moral duty is a duty, which obliges us just because it is a real duty, because it exists. We would not feel bound by anything if it was not real. The statement: “moral obligation exists”, is then an existential judgment and as such belongs to Metaphysics. So, if Ethics try to explain the moral fact in an ultimate way, it has become the Metaphysics of Morals. For this reason, at the existential level of moral judgment, ethics become methodologically dependent on Metaphysics.

Ethics as the Philosophy of the Advent

Further research of Styczen is devoted to the analysis of the originality of moral experience in the context of its openness to the supernatural dimension. The philosopher of Lublin was struck by the words from the introduction to *The Acting Person* of his master Karol Wojtyła: “the experience of everything located outside of man is always associated to his own experience. And he will never experience something outside of himself without somehow also experiencing himself” (Wojtyła, 2003: p.831). What does this mean for our interpretation of moral experience? It means that the person is involved in every free act and therefore the moral dimension is intrinsic to

every human act. So, following the insights of Wojtyła, Styczen discovers the roots of moral experience already in the simple act of affirmation of any truth. Wojtyła writes: “The moral obligation is nothing else but the experiential dependence on truth” (Wojtyła, 2003: p.1028). How is this dependence lived by the subject? Styczen shows that in every judgment there is a moment of assertion (“I believe that things are like that”), so that the person not only asserts a truth, but at the same time –by means of this very assertion– is constituted as a witness to this truth. From this moment the person cannot deny the truth that he/she got to know without thereby betraying himself/herself, without hitting what constitutes the very subjectivity of the person. Once stated, the truth becomes normative for the subject. Styczen describes this process as a passage from self-information to self-imperative. From here comes a new proposal of the formula of the fundamental moral norm: “I can not deny (the moment of self-imperative) what I myself have affirmed as true (the moment of self-information)”. The ethos of the person is thus the ethos of witnessing to truth. A person who experienced this normative power of truth discovered by that very fact the essence of morality and at the same time has awakened –on the experimental plan– as a moral subject. The ethics thus acquires the status of first philosophy in this sense, that the moral dimension is present in every cognitive activity –even the most theoretical one– of the person. All truth –even the most trivial one– can reveal its normative power, even if in the beginning we were not aware of it. When Peter is asked: “Do you know that man?” and he denies it, we can assume that he was not aware that the simple fact of knowing Jesus would once become so decisive for his own identity.

But the experience of Peter shows us, at the same time, that we are not always faithful to the truth that we know and recognize. Styczen calls this experience “the problem of Ovid,” recalling his famous phrase: *video meliora proboque deteriora sequor*. The fact that these are the words of a pagan poet (although we also find a similar statement in Saint Paul) confirms that the experience is universal. A person can deny the truth that he himself recognized –and this, according to Styczen, is the essence of his moral drama. Who did it –as in the

case of Peter— may regret the fact of doing it, but he cannot cancel it. Peter feels his guilt, but he himself is not able to forgive himself. Forgiveness can only come from the Other. At this point ethics—or the very moral experience— open themselves to religion. In the words of Styczen, ethics become the philosophy of the Advent, showing to the person the dimension of his drama and thereby disposing him for the reception of the message of salvation. The experience of moral guilt is therefore the privileged point of passage from ethics to moral theology. It turns out that what ethics finds on the level of human experience, finds its solution in the encounter with the proposal of redemption, which comes from religion. In this way the religious dimension is not imposed on the moral experience as something foreign to it, but it is lived as a response to its intrinsic requirement.

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