
CONCRETENESS OF LIFE AS THE CONTEXT OF THINKING IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF JÓZEF TISCHNER

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Abstract

The philosophical thinking of Józef Tischner, a Polish priest, which focuses on the philosophy of the human being, did not emerge only as a result of a scientific interest, but mainly from a more general reflection on human life, and a desire to help contemporary humans in a time of crisis of hope. The encounter with evil is one of many instances when we are challenged to think about religion. In fact, all our actions may be understood as a part of the interplay between humans and God. Religious thinking is not to be associated with a system of Theology; it should be understood instead as the most authentic manifestation of the fundamental situation of human beings, who try to find truth about themselves, while striving for salvation. For Tischner, this type of thinking and this problem are at the centre of his philosophy.

Keywords: concreteness, life, other, dialogue, Lévinas

1. Wrestling with the question: ‘What is Philosophy?’

Thinking about the essence and significance of Philosophy, as such, forms a part of philosophical reflection. Thinkers such as M. Heidegger, K. Jaspers, V. E. Frankl and John Paul II dealt intensely with this issue, as well as J.M. Bochenski, who asked the most difficult philosophical question: What is Philosophy? Discourse on what Philosophy is, led to the revelation of certain essential features of philosophical thinking. J. Patočka, a famous Czech phenomenologist, declared that Philosophy cannot be only a cabinet matter; K. Wojtyła said Philosophy is the thinking associated with practical life; and A.N. Whitehead compared Philosophy to a flight by plane, where take-off and landing represent links with everyday life. Professor Sia, in the article ‘Faith, Reason and Metaphysical Thinking: A Process Response to Fides et Ratio’ [1], characterizes philosophical thinking also through ‘the concreteness of life’. These are specific life-situations, but they are not completely subjective nor are they entirely

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particular instances; ones such as these do not see any resemblance to other situations. The concreteness of life serves as the starting point for our reflections.

2. Philosophical thinking as meditation and communication

At the time of totalitarian indoctrination in Central Europe, Józef Tischner boldly introduced philosophical thinking as meditation and simultaneous communication, which is critical in nature, and is derived from the concrete life. The aim of this paper is to present the anthropological character of the philosophy of Józef Tischner, where a significant role is played by the reflection on the dialogical nature of thinking, which can be understood as the starting point for our reflections. Tischner's concern for man did not stem only from exact scientific interests, but also from authentic pastoral care during the quickly changing conditions when human actions really did have an impact on the whole Earth. At the turn of the millennium, in the context of experiences of the world wars, death camps, terrorist actions and confrontations with the possibility of nuclear, ecologic as well as economic catastrophe, man suffers from the loss of hope [2, 3], being forever haunted by the legacy of the infamous "death camps of the 'Dritte Reich'" [4].

Tischner wanted to help contemporary man because he was aware of the fact that contemporary man had entered a period of deep crisis of hope [5-7]. The crisis of hope is a crisis of foundation, which, according to Tischner, forms the basis of philosophical thinking. "There were times when the source of philosophy was admiration for the world (Aristotle). Then it was doubt (Descartes). And now, in this land of ours, philosophy is born of pain." [8] Despite subconscious awareness of the critical situation, Tischner was an optimist who believed in the meaning of human life. Moreover, it is important to note that, unlike positivists, pessimists and minimalists, he believed that existence of this meaning can be justified [9]. According to him, the task of Philosophy is to lead man to understanding of his own self through meditation on existence in its deepest roots. Like Socrates and Patočka, Tischner believed that Philosophy deals with everything that is related to the destiny of man [10]. Similarly, as the ancient author of the dialogue *Thaitetos*, Tischner pointed out the elusiveness of sense – logos, which is so strived for but always slips away from our hands.

The Polish thinker referred to the European philosophical tradition in order to verify its way of thinking and find new perspective in which the man capable of contact with reality and his own dignity would appear. In order to make his primary knowledge as clear as possible, he freely paraphrased the phenomenological method [11]. He confronted his ideas with philosophers such as Hegel, Husserl, Ingarden, Heidegger, Marcel, Scheler and Lévinas. Tischner criticized Thomistic philosophy [8, p. 201-223] and based his philosophical studies on experience, the experience of the others, and man's experience of God, referring to Gabriel Marcel, the philosopher of hope, for whom Christianity

is light on the way to self-knowledge. Marcel made a distinction between a problem and a mystery, between being and having. The problem is something that is before man and stands in his way. It appears in the level of 'to have'. The mystery involves man. It is the order which is above man and is expressed in the level of 'to be'. Existential openness to others strengthens spiritual possession of man's own self. According to Marcel, the relation between man and God includes hope which also appears in relations between people; by encountering someone, man encounters God [8, p. 162].

3. Tischner and Lévinas on experiencing the 'other'

Similarly, as Emmanuel Levinas tried to deepen the knowledge about the concept of experiencing the presence of Other [8, p. 169], Józef Tischner saw the encounter with man as a condition for the encounter with God. Thanks to the Other, man realizes that there is something above himself. The Other presents himself through his face, which calls for response or responsibility [12]. "The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy" [12, p. 191]. The asymmetry does not mean that someone overwhelms me because this heterogeneous relation occurs thanks to transcendent revelation. "The first word of the face is: 'Thou shalt not kill'" [12, p. 179]. It is an imperative which contains not only sovereignty of the commander – "There is a command, meant in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me!" [12, p. 179] – but also expression of otherness – "... it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all" [12, p. 179]. It is the poor, stranger, as someone absolutely Other, who does not belong to the sphere of home, of myself, but it is someone whom I can accept and create relationship with. The face in which someone absolutely Other is personalized does not commit violence, but it presents a transcending subject – me able to accept it, which is the main precondition of all human relations. According to Lévinas, when we accept the Other we accept God to whom freedom is subordinate [13].

The philosophy of dialogue was initiated by Ebner, and then developed predominately by Buber as well as Lévinas and later in the 1980s-1990s also by Tischner. The philosophy of dialogue presents the dialogue as a separate relational reciprocity which essentially exceeds and determines everything what happens within or through it. Thus, dialogue also exceeds and determines separate philosophizing and thus philosophy of dialogue becomes philosophy in relation and from relation [14]. The study of person became a subject of philosophical reflection with the arrival of Christianity [15], but in the 20th century, the explanation from the point of view of *I* and *You* represented a complete novelty. Even Fichte notices the particularity of personal knowledge and the importance of interpersonal relation for justice and dignity: "Man [...] becomes a man only among men – if in general there are to be men, there must be a plurality of them" [16]. It is not a Socratic-type dialogue where "the primary stress was not laid on the spiritual relation between I and You and

between me and other, but it dealt with something else – the hermeneutic process of gradual maturing of the communicated sense, the immanently philosophically deepened understanding of some content. This old approach to how to make dialogue again monologized and suppressed the original life-spiritual interpersonal relation.“ [17] Therefore, the novelty lies in the fact that a person cannot constitute himself monadically on the basis of the ontological thinking of his own, but only dialogically through active and concrete relation with *You*. “In contrast to a self-enclosed monad, each human being is endowed with a ‘moral starting point’ that steers him/her to certain goals and practices and away from others. Of utmost importance, then, is for one to be aware of the particular traditional narrative that (to a large extent) constitutes his identity and to carry on the moral and philosophical argument...” [15].

4. The biblical roots of Tischner’s dialogical thinking

Even if the philosophy of J. Tischner contains parallels with other philosophies, the genesis of his dialogical thinking lies in the Bible. It is Philosophy which “wants to see the beginning of philosophical searching in the interpersonal dialogue and dialogue with God which simply cannot be left out of I“ [18]. It is how philosophy without etiquette was born. As Tischner himself said, his Philosophy focuses on “what one can as well as needs to think about. However, what we need to think about reaches us not from the pages of books, but from the face of man anxious for his destiny.” [8] He called his own philosophical effort the philosophy of drama. It is a drama of the philosopher searching for the truth while it is obvious that it is not a system because drama is not a system. From the very beginning, the philosophy of drama avoids the suspicion that aims to lock man into a system like Thomists or Marxists or that of ‘scientism’ with its “a distinct, materialistic philosophy of reality, promoted dangerously as the only viable - that is, the ‘objective, scientific’ - account of reality” [19]. Even if it is based on certain unsystematicness [20], it does not mean that it is illogical. It ascribes a certain, specific kind of logic to human existence; it is a dramatic logic, a special kind of dramatic logic [21]. Tischner’s philosophical effort is aptly characterized by Professor W. Zuziak, who claimed that “if we want to understand Tischner, we must go beyond his books. It can be said, with a full sense of responsibility that Tischner’s texts do not correspond with Tischner’s search. While employing rigorous methodological principles, Tischner hoped to find and explain more than he could. Therefore, he looked for inspiration among thinkers who either managed to ‘cross’ the methodological boundaries or brought methodology to the border of absurdity – beyond which there is a sphere of freedom.” [9]

While explaining difficult constructions of thoughts, exact sciences also make use of metaphor. However, in Philosophy, just like in Science, by making use of a word in a figurative meaning, the metaphor indicates not only methodological but also epistemological boundaries [22]. Our failure to embrace them leads inevitably to despair [23]. This boundary, where epistemological as

well as methodological principles are shaken, was reached also by Tischner. In his thinking about man, he used the following metaphor: “Man is like a song passing through time. Who plays this song? Man himself is the instrument and the artist here” [24]. Man, who continuously creates himself, proceeds like an artist who looks at the score and builds a melody out of the sounds belonging to it. This metaphor presents a dispute between the substantial and the existential concept of man. Expressing it in simplified terms, according to the classical substantial conception, the essence of man is something given and unchangeable. All changes are only accidental in nature, and man is unable to change his own essence. Nevertheless, contemporary Philosophy claims that a person is not a thing, substance, or object, and the most representative formula comes from M. Heidegger who claimed in *Sein und Zeit* that man’s essence (*Dasein*) lies in his existence. Thus, there is no man as such; he only creates himself through being, that is, by freely taking this or that action. In a way, Tischner tried to reconcile these two traditions, claiming that man is shaped by exposing himself to the influence of values. Yet, he represents a special material which shapes, as well as is shaped. The song metaphor seems closer to the existential conception of man. Still Tischner emphasized the important role of the ‘score,’ which represents a substantial supplement. Values are that substantial score by which man plays himself out and Tischner thought about man ‘in values.’ *Thinking in Values* is not just the title of one of Tischner’s books but also a common denominator of his philosophical accomplishments. (According to M. Heidegger, thinking in values is the greatest madness. Tischner did not blame Heidegger for axiological nihilism, but he presented his own ideas claiming that the key terms of Heidegger contain certain axiologization and Heidegger knows how man looks like, but he does not know what man is.) [8, p. 126].

5. The implications of genuine dialogical thinking

The main motive of a dialogue between man and other people is a desire to understand oneself, what is good, and what represents the highest value in life. In Tischner’s thinking, there is an idea, originating in Socrates and elaborated by Plato, which claims that the restoration of the state cannot be based on strong legal organisation, but it has to appear in the conscience of every citizen. Only there can man find a standard of behaviour which is cleaned by the light of logos and which is undisputable as well as binding for everyone. However, in Tischner’s thinking there is also an idea that understanding of what is good cannot be based only on the dialogue of the soul, which is ultimately monologue-like. In his works, he repeatedly returned to the experience of Other as the source of human self-knowledge because there lie the foundations of the ethical values, truth, justice, and fidelity. “Neither you nor I can learn the truth about each other if we remain distanced from one another, closed inside the walls of our fears. We have to look at ourselves as if from the outside.” [25]. The identity of man is determined by the dramatic self-knowledge in which the

philosopher from Krakow saw the combination of the philosophical-religious search with participation in the public debate over the ethical dimension of the social life. In such a combination it is possible to dramatically unveil and confront various aspects of the human world [26, 27]. Tischner saw the dialogue with Other as a dialogue of good will where questions of Other are perceived as cries for help [8, p. 365-370].

Dialogue is accompanied with a perception of values which Tischner divided into hedonistic, vital, spiritual, and sacrum. He followed the ideas of Max Scheler and claimed that values are hierarchically ordered. According to Tischner, sacrum is the highest value and hedonistic values are at the bottom of the ladder of values. The choice of values is morally good when we focus on the higher values. He accepted the objective existence of values, their independence from human preference, and emphasized experiencing values as a way of their realisation in the drama of human life. He ascribed a special role to the truth as to the basic value which opens the gates to other values.

In his phenomenological essays, Tischner stressed that human existence is connected with work, suffering, conscience, and dialogue which, from his point of view, meant emerging from a hiding place. "One needs to reach out, cross the threshold, offer one's hand, find a common place for conversation." [25, p. 48]. He employed this metaphor also in his essays on work. It is of the highest importance that man manages to come to an encounter with another, to make contact or even to create common ground for dialogue. Tischner pointed out that the opening of a dialogue may be very hard as one needs to overcome his fears and dispel prejudices. It also seems necessary to find adequate language which would be common for both sides and contain expressions with defined interpersonally accepted signs. It must be pragmatic language without any allegories or hidden meanings. According to Tischner, not every dialogue between people is a reliable dialogue. In his description of reliable dialogue he employed the following metaphor of light: "Reliable dialogue brings about true revolutions in the life of people and societies. It is like letting light into the darkness of a cellar [...] Dialogue, through bringing light, unveils the truth. In other words, it restores the proper appearance to things and matters." [25] In order to reach the truth, people must be open one to each other. According to Tischner, the reliable truth is the result of common experiences of all the participants in the dialogue. In order to make such a discussion possible, it is necessary to come closer to one another, overcome one's fears, and look at oneself from the outside, through the eyes of another person. "The complete truth is fruit of our common experiences – yours about me and mine about you. Common views are the fruit of transformed points of view, thus dialogue [...]" [25]

J. Tischner creatively developed the ideas of his teachers, R. Ingarden as well as M. Buber. Reliable dialogue is a necessary means for achieving understanding which makes it possible to create a permanent society [28]. He claimed that the condition of dialogue is the ability to sympathize with the other. It is not only compassion but the ability to look from the point of view of one's

partner in dialogue. The basic point in dialogue is a recognition that each party participating in the dialogue is always, to some extent, right. It is necessary to accept the other's reasons and be aware of the fact that surely oneself is not entirely right either. As a result, when those in dialogue surpass themselves in these confessions, they can reach the same point of view. Dialogue is the building of reciprocity [25, p. 23; 29].

In his work *The Ethics and Solidarity*, the philosopher from Krakow opened an issue of dialogue characteristic in the relationship between suffering and work. He dealt with exploitation as suffering at the hands of another man – exploitation is a working man's suffering at the hands of his neighbour [25, p. 50]. He emphasized that: “nowadays, work has become a substance of interpersonal social communication. Work is a social activity.” [30] In accordance with the dialogic approach, he stated that work is a particular form of a person-to-person conversation, which serves to sustain and develop human life [25, p. 53]. It is also apparent that there is an analogy between work and language. In a conversation, people exchange sounds, words, and sentences which generates an understanding between people. Considering work, words are replaced by products, which gain meaning due to the work. The aim of work is to produce objects which have their meaning. A necessary condition for proper functioning of social structures is to understand the meaning of these products. Consequently, thanks to this understanding, we can read the meaning of objects around us. Tischner claimed that the very concept of understanding brings certain conversation and it is human work that creates and develops this understanding. According to him, the conversation of work has wide social as well as historical reach. Working people are links in a chain which connects people who do not know each other. “The dialogue of work goes further than an ordinary conversation. It embraces ever greater circles of people who often do not know each other's faces.” [25, p. 55] Work has not only dignity but also inner wisdom. This wisdom imposes responsible demands on people; thus man's work is on a responsible level. Consequently, an organic whole grows out of this work. Work is man's natural burden as well as a reflection of man's creativity. Work has a very unsubstitutable function but exploitation causes pain, and pain is needless according to Tischner.

Tischner's essays on dialogue, work, and solidarity were created during a culminating time period of social confrontation. In the work *The Polish Shape of Dialogue* of 1980, he attempted to have a dialogue with Marxism in its Polish version. He based his work on the idea that Marxism will remain in the minds of people, as well as in life of society, for a long time, however, not as a doctrine, but as a way of social life. Therefore, it is necessary for the opponents of Marxism to reflect on the consequences of this fact. (Contemporary authors from Slovakia point out that “a confused, insecure freedom can go hand in hand with the loss of established social securities [...] With little or no democratic experience and awareness of political responsibilities, Slovak people often became puzzled about how to use their new freedom, and how to survive in the new system.” [31] Slivka et al claim that theologians and church representative

must make “a case for the ‘public character of Christian theology’ in general only to move on to make a specific case for a contextual, post-totalitarian public theology after the Holocaust and Communist oppression in our part of the world. There can be no legitimate public theology unless there is a solid understanding of the historical and present challenges of the given society.” [32]

Tischner did not deal with Marxism for pragmatic reasons only, but he asked after Marxist arguments as well. In addition to contributions of his own reflection of dialogue, he asked what is good about Marxism as according to him, many excellent thinkers could not be fascinated by Marxism (such as L. Kołakowski, A. Michnik) only because of insufficient knowledge, blind eyes, ill-will, fear, or careerism [33].

6. Conclusion

Tischner’s way of philosophical thinking is defined by acceptance of man’s responsibility for himself as well as for the whole of mankind. However, it is possible only through dialogue which becomes a hope for the world of man. “Experiencing another person through the prism of values is inextricably connected with the experience of a hope. It is always the case that either I propose a value for the other person to realize and I have a hope that the other will take up my proposition, or the other proposes something similar to me, cherishing a similar hope” [24, p. 87]. Hope has a significant role: “Deprive man of hope and then try to make him persevere in Christian values: not to lie, not to betray, not to kill – you cannot” [25, p. 15]. Without dialogue, man could not be sure who he is, he could not find the whole truth about being, nor could he discover the scope of his responsibility for his being as well as for the being of others.

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