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FROM FORMAL ETHICS TO EXISTENTIAL ETHICS

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Abstract

Formalism in ethics may be considered the culmination of the Enlightenment. It can be interpreted as an attempt to find concrete criteria of human reason, by which humans – as 'rational animals' – can govern their choices and actions. Formal ethics distinguishes itself from the dogmatically interpreted ethics that prescribes concrete goods and determines what humans are supposed to strive for a while at the same time telling them how exactly they should act. Referring to the theological concept of God, Lotze turns his attention to consciousness wherein the process of attribution meaning to individual things takes place. Kierkegaard, like Lotze, sees the meaningfulness of one's choices and moral judgments because these stem from one's subjective faith in God. The culmination of the process of objectification of values and their being filled with meaning is the Scheler's effort to create a material ethics of values. From a theological perspective, however, both formal ethics as well as material ethics of values result in a mediated relationship to God and, ultimately, to an inauthentic experience of one's own existence.

Keywords: existential ethics, Scheler, Kierkegaard, material ethics, value

1. The reasons for formalism in Ethics

The ideals of the French Revolution opened up venues for new interpretations of human being and his/her relationship to the world. Of utmost importance was the idea of freedom which, from the time of the Revolution, assumed the status of a guiding motto on the way to liberation – for human individuals as well as for whole nations – and which became an impetus for further search for justice, rule of law, and one's own identity. The Enlightenment, followed by Liberalism, elaborated several concepts of freedom [1]. Many of these concepts, however, are based on the conceptual framework of negatively defining the meaning of the term 'freedom'. Within the lines of revolutionary excitement, freedom, defined in this negative way, is understood as the absence of limitations that might thwart or inhibit our actions. In an absolute (ideal) sense, negative freedom would mean the absence of any restrictions of humans in their actions and decisions. This kind of absolute freedom is a freedom that allows the human subject to do anything that he or she

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deems useful and good. The only criterion for decision making is the potential threat of freedom from the side of another human being, or an obstacle which stands in the way of our intended actions. Seen from the viewpoint of ethics, such position is radically relativistic. The inescapable implication would be that the criterion for making choices, in this case, is not the moral criterion of good which is the goal of human striving and deliberate action. The sole criterion here is the absence of restrictions.

Such depiction of human being resembles a river that flows in its banks and its direction is determined by its banks which regulate its flow. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, however, came to the realization that such delineation of freedom seduces one to false interpretation in the form of moral nihilism. A fast flowing river with rapids destroys everything in its way. It takes human lives, demolishes their possessions, while the rhythm of its flow remains unpredictable. This river of freedom rather instils fear than joy or hope in the human hearts. Rationalism and its ethics presupposed that human being is not wicked (in terms of his/her inner nature) and, therefore, is able to use his freedom rationally (wisely) on the basis of objective criteria that reason is able to determine. However, reality showed that in spite of his being as 'rational animal', human does not act rationally. She does not use her freedom for the benefit of others but rather selfishly, oftentimes at the expense of others. Formalism in ethics does not wish to achieve the situation of a boundless, chaotic stream of human freedom. Its goal is to set boundaries and rules by which human can responsibly make his choices. Formalism in ethics may thus be considered the culmination of the Enlightenment and we can interpret it as an attempt to find concrete criteria of human reason, by which humans – as 'rational (i.e. reasonable) animals' – can govern their choices and actions.

In our search for formalism in Ethics, we should also mind the fact that formalism is closely associated with Kant's philosophy. Some authors identify the foundation of formalism in Kant's division of reason into a 'theoretical' and 'practical' reason. The goal of theoretical reason is to produce knowledge that refers to experience; whereas the goal of practical reason is to determine the direction of our choices and actions in the sphere of Ethics. Metaphysics was discarded from the realm of theoretical reason and was offered as a potentially useful tool to practical reason in its mission to make the correct moral choices. The theoretical knowledge that is the domain of pure reason is unable to determine the norms of our behaviour and cannot justify the unconditional obligation of the moral imperative (duty). In order to do good law and moral duty stems solely from the practical reason. The practical reason is autonomous and determines itself. It sets duties to itself, formulates law, and enables the postulates of practical reason. This also means, among other things, that theoretical reason gains nothing from practical reason. The experience of the practical reason, as well as its own postulates, does not develop knowledge in the realm of theoretical reason. Faith, as a matter of the practical reason, enriches in no way our knowledge. The spheres of practical and theoretical reasons are thus radically separated. This conclusion is very significant for the

emergence of formalism in Ethics. Králik, however, rightly points out that it is impossible to perceive either oneself or the absolute God with pure reason [2].

Ethics in the form of Kant's formalism assumes a new role. This new role rests in finding new rules that would have a formal character, that is, it would lack any concrete contents. Goal accomplishment, in and of itself, cannot be the impulse for doing good. On the contrary, the impulse to do good must originate from the duty to do good. Formal ethics distinguishes itself from the dogmatically interpreted ethics that prescribes concrete goods and determines what humans are supposed to strive for a while at the same time telling them how exactly they should act. Formal ethics also constitutes a counter-position to the above mentioned rationalistic ethics because faith in the goodness of human nature (i.e., as if it were not corrupted), has proved to be false in the course of history. Kant thus tried to create such ethics that would be based on general rules without contents and these rules would then pertain to the actions of all human agents. Consequently, all humans would have to abide by these rules. Thinking in line with the Enlightenment, Kant further presupposes that we have not yet discovered such rules and, therefore, we must attempt to formulate them. In contrast to rationalism, Kant assumes that the rules of our conduct are not part of our nature. We have to formulate them by means of our reason. Just as the theoretical reason is able to know on the basis of a-priori forms, so also the practical reason is able to formulate rules of conduct.

In his formal ethics, Kant tries to establish a source of norms that would stay independent from external circumstances, from the conditions in which humans make their decisions, and, at the same time, a source that would be other than God. One possible way we can do this, according to Kant, is to resort to a command, an imperative which commands us what we ought to do. This command is not hypothetical, that is, it is not conditioned, but is categorical, that is, without being conditioned and without referring to consequences. The only purpose which, according to Kant, has value in and of itself, is human and his freedom. Other things of this world do not constitute a purpose, therefore, they cannot become objects of our striving. The formulation of the categorical imperative does not vary in any significant way from the biblical command of Christ: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7.12). Kant, too, speaks of a master pattern or principle of our behaviour which can then become the example to follow, or the pattern for action for all other human beings.

2. From formalism to human person

In the 19th century, we see a growing fragmentation of anthropological approaches that aim to understand what human being is. We might say that human as a holistic object of scrutiny disappears from the scope of philosophical interest. In Psychology, knowledge focuses on psychological processes and anomalies; in Philosophy, new social philosophy theories emerge that interpret human as a mere part of the production process; Anthropology sees man as one

stage in the evolution, etc. On the other hand, we see attempts trying to overcome formalism and presenting a new understanding of human in his specific, unique place in the world, followed by fresh approaches of philosophical anthropology and existential ethics, as we see specifically implemented by Kierkegaard [3].

The philosophy of values, which creates conditions for the origin of philosophical anthropology, was developed thanks to Lotze. Lotze offered a specific way of understanding the complex process of how human finds his bearings in the world. The kind of formalism that Kant produced is an austere offer for human who lacks tools that would help him make adequate life choices in concrete situations and who also lacks a goal and necessary tools by means of which he would govern his choices and regulate his intentional progress on the way to designated goal. Well versed in Mathematics as well as in Philosophy and Psychology, Lotze came to realize that human does not act on the basis of a general, categorical imperative, which would ever again emerge as present in his consciousness, thus enabling the human to always be aware of the maxim of his actions when making choices. Socrates' assumption according to which he who knows good, does good, is not valid. The Good as well as the Absolute Transcendence expresses itself differently in the moral calibration of each individual human being. Lotze is aware that what is unpleasant to one human, might be pleasant to another. The reason for this variety is not that the former is moral while the latter is immoral. The difference in perception rather stems from the dissimilarity of relatedness of each specific consciousness to the world. This peculiar variety of decisions of concrete individuals may sometimes appear as impossible to understand. Repar calls it a 'skandalon' [4].

Lotze talks about a discriminative sensibility (a kind of evaluative feeling) by which each consciousness, in its own unique manner, relates itself to a specific object on the horizon of being of the world. The specificity of the discriminative sensibility rests in the fact that it is intrinsic only to a human and that it is a tool by which the human relates himself to the world. Lotze's philosophical system is built up on the principle of Metaphysics and the evaluation is not a pure act of reason but is interconnected with transcendence that is identified with infinity and with the absolute being. In addition, Lotze assumes the existence of an ultimate destiny of the world to which the being of human relates itself. Attaining this destiny, or one's approximation to this destiny, embodies according to Lotze, the doing of higher good. The ultimate destiny of the world is also the bearer of the highest value. By doing the higher good, we then find ourselves on a journey to the highest value. Or, we might also say, that by virtue of doing the higher good we have a partial participation in the highest good. Our doing the higher good is accompanied by a feeling. The human senses that he does good; he feels a certain uplifting in his spirit. This feeling that stems from doing the higher good cannot exist outside of human spirit.

Lotze thus turns our attention to consciousness wherein the process of attribution meaning to individual things takes place. What we have at hand, however, is not a process of knowing but a process of understanding the meaning relatedness between object and subject. This means, that what we see before our eyes is an object which not only has certain characteristics but also a meaning. It is an object with a concrete value for the perceiving and evaluating subject. This relationship is later further developed by Husserl in phenomenology and in the concept of intentionality, which he takes over from Brentan. Our relationship to that which is valuable is, according to Lotze, already our participation in the highest value, which is the highest Good – Lotze uses capital 'G' when referring to highest 'Good'. From this, apparently follows that when using the term 'highest Good', Lotze refers to a theological concept of God. Ultimately, then, our consciousness is able to understand the things of this world in the context of this world's teleology, which we can also call Divine providential plan. That, which corresponds with the Divine plan and is thus heading to the ultimate destiny in the highest Good, is valuable. Our understanding of that which is valuable, however, does not occur on the level of knowledge and intellectual reflection, but on the basis of the discriminative (evaluative) sensibility that enables human to distinguish between good and bad, truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness. It does not happen by virtue of theoretical or practical reasons but because of the potency of discriminative sensibility that projects the objects of the world into the context of Divine teleological plan. For it to work, one does not have to be spiritual, nor does one have to confess any specific religious beliefs. Human essence is, according to Lotze, interconnected with God. Human beings can be proponents of any religion; they can be situated in various cultural or social conditions. Nevertheless, they will always have access to an inner voice that offers basic orientation in the world. Valčová points out in this regard, however, that the contemporary situation does not correspond to Lotze's faith in human. "In our present age, however, individuals seem to be ruled by chaotic desires and tormented by unyielding uncertainties". [5]

A more explicitly Christian alternative to ethical formalism comes from the Danish thinker S.A. Kierkegaard. Speaking of formalism, Kierkegaard refers to formalism in the context of religious institutions, that is, formalism of faith that is focused on the fulfilment of commands and rules pertaining to believers' behaviour. Just as Kant's formalism does not penetrate the inner world of human and his existential disposition, religious formalism does not penetrate into the soul of human that is oriented toward God. In religious formalism, human progress toward one's ultimate destiny is actualized through keeping commandments and rules that lead the human being down on a path that is alien to him. It is not a choice, an intentional decision of a human person but rather a formal instruction, given by an authority or an institution. Similar to Kant's moral imperative, to which the human being was subjected in his/her moral conduct, in religious formalism the human person is subjected to a heteronomous command that determines his path (actions).

The way out of this religious formalism, according to Kierkegaard, is embodied in the autonomous person of a human being who is in an immediate relationship with God, as Valčo correctly emphasizes: "The human self is a true self precisely because it realizes itself and is able to enter into an inner dialogue with itself. This would not be possible, according to Kierkegaard, if human being were a static essence, established without any constitutive relation to the Other." [6]

In Kant, moral choices were understood as sterile compliance with the commands of practical reason, without any trace of emotional elements. Lotze, on the other hand, considers sensibility (in the form of a discerning feeling) as the only source and ground of evaluation. In a similar fashion, Kierkegaard perceives moral judgment as a choice that is permeated by diverse emotional states. One such emotional state is anxiety. Responsibility for one's choice, the necessity to bear consequences, all of this leads the human person to the state of anxiety and ultimately to despair. For Kierkegaard, however, human life is not a choice without the possibility of purpose. Kierkegaard, like Lotze, sees the meaningfulness of one's choices and moral judgments because these stem from one's subjective faith in God.

3. Philosophical anthropology and material values

The culmination of the process of objectification of values and their being filled with meaning is the Scheler's effort to create a material ethics of values. In defining the points of departure of his ethical system, Scheler builds on what he calls a triple interpretation of human in the European thinking. The first type of anthropological interpretation is the Judeo-Christian tradition. Its foundation rests in the basic concept of human as one who is marked by original sin. The human being is imperfect (corrupted); she stands before God with her weaknesses and sins and asks for forgiveness. This approach can be labelled as a 'theological concept of human'. The second tradition that influenced the European understanding of human is the ancient Greco-Roman (Classical) tradition. This tradition emphasizes primarily the rationality of the human person. Human being is understood as a rational, reasonable being who is able, by virtue of his reason, to know oneself as well as other objects in the world. He is able to know his destiny and can formulate the meaning of his own existence. We can label this approach as a 'philosophical concept of human'. The third type of anthropology is the interpretation of human from the viewpoint of Natural sciences. In this type of interpretation, we find human as part of nature and its natural environment. Human is thus similar (in fact, closely related) to animals, distinguishing himself merely by a higher level of cognitive, rational abilities. The leading strand of thought in this Tradition is the Darwinist concept of evolutionary development. We will label this type of anthropological thinking as 'natural-scientific concept of human'. All of these three concepts fail, according to Scheler, because none of them has sufficient reasoning apparatus by means of which they could provide a complex account of human. An

adequate level of complexity would yield recognition by all parties involved. In other words, Science finds itself in a situation where it is unable to provide a complex account of who/what a human being is and, therefore, is unable to help humans in their search for destiny and meaning in life, nor the overall purpose of their existence.

Both Scheler and Lotze came to realize that sciences offer invaluable new information about various aspects of human anthropology. This extensive spread of knowledge, however, tends to overshadow the outlook that views human as a unique being in his individuality and ability to authentically experience one's own encounter with the world – living in the world full of meaning and moral norms. Scheler has given up on the formalistically oriented ethics that stands on irrefutable foundations of knowledge. He rather turns to emotionality and subjectivity, perceiving emotionality as indispensable part of the structure of being. In contrast to the three former approaches mentioned above that define human from various angles, Scheler places emotionality into the centre of attention, as well as the centre of human being. On the other hand, his starting point in emotionality differs from the starting points that one can find in existential ethics. Králik, for example, sees one of the principles of existential ethics in negative emotionality. "Man lives in a tragic situation, in a tragic inevitability of evil". [7] Contrary to that, Scheler projects human being in a positive vision. This being not only gets to know the truth; it is a being that is wholesome in essence, a being that suffers, feels, learns, and acts; a being that, by virtue of its actions and decision making, progresses to a positive state which we might compare to 'Eudaimonia'. The task of Philosophy is no longer to know truth and to formulate the truth that emerges from knowledge. Its task is to summarize the knowledge about human and, above all, to interpret the knowledge of human in a way which gives meaning and purpose to human existence.

Scheler expounds this line of thinking in his work *The Human Place in the Cosmos* [8]. At the foundation of his innovative approach to Anthropology is the discernment of two diverse paths that he wishes to unify. The first path is the path of Science that traces biological and evolutionary similarities between humans and animals; the second path sets out to interpret human through Metaphysics. These two approaches seem irreconcilable at first. Yet, Scheler readily points out the basic common element in both – the presence of psychic processes which are present in every living organism. These various levels of 'psychic life' at the same time represent different levels and stages of values. The lowest force that drives all life forms forward is something like a basic life-force that corresponds partially to Freud's libido. This force, or rather urge, is unaware. There are no ideas, images, or feelings in it. Nevertheless, it is intimately interconnected with the highest forms of spiritual activity because without this primary urge, without this principal force and energy, we would not be capable of the noblest and purest acts, such as the purest acts of intellectual reflection. In spite of his emphasis on subjectivity and its significance for the human person, there is a tendency in Scheler to systematize Cosmos, which may

be problematic with regard to the subject. As we argued elsewhere, "There is no system that can save us from the horizon of our own existence, even if we created a perfect rational structure in which all worked perfectly" [9].

The second stage of the hierarchy of life is instinctive life. Scheler understands this stage as an innate ability of living organisms to purposefully respond to given typical structures in the outside environment. Environment is here understood as a concrete space to which the living organism is bound. If it finds itself in an alien space (environment), it is helpless. By virtue of its evolutionary development, however, it is able to adjust and adapt its instincts to the changing environment, although this process takes a long time. Scheler distinguished two types of behaviour in this respect: habitual behaviour and intelligent behaviour. This distinction helped him reflect new scientific knowledge of his time that had pointed out the unique abilities of chimpanzees. According to Scheler, these animals have association memory, intelligence, and an ability to choose. They can progress in learning, use the method of trial and error [10].

What, then, is the difference between human and animal? The difference rests in the spirit. Human is a being endowed not only with consciousness but also with spirit. The foundational principle of human as spiritual being is the ability to resist one's environment. Just as inner urges and instincts enable humans to respond to certain stimuli, in certain determined ways, the spirit enables humans to respond differently, in ways that surpass instincts. Spiritual decision making is a typical human way of making choices. Spirit is detached from the natural environment of the human, as well as from the organic life itself. It is the spirit that makes human being a person in the true sense of the word, that is, the very being in and of itself. What we have on one hand is the transience and changeability of the world and life conditions which force the human to respond and to use urges and instincts. On the other hand, the human has at his disposal an unchanging foundation on the basis of which the choices of the human person are governed. This unchanging foundation consists of values. In the Baden Neo-Kantian School, these values were perceived as objects that have a specific way of existence; they are valid. In Scheler's conceptual framework of values, these are understood as value essences. He talks about the existence of entities of spiritual nature that are filled by a peculiar content. Humans are able to observe these after a kind of phenomenological reduction. As soon as we cleanse our behaviour from that which is accidental and nonessential, that is, all of that which prevents us from penetrating to the unchanging core of these entities, we will discover "value essences" [10, p. 39].

The hierarchy of values offered by Scheler contains values that are either basic or vital, i.e. values connected to the biological dimension of human existence. Humans make their choices on the basis of their striving to preserve their own existence, without any regard for other human beings. From an ethical point of view, Jurová suggests that this relationship can be described in the following way: "A man tends to judge superficially, that is, based on primary emotions (I like it/I do not like it) and then it comes to the intellectual

contemplation towards universal principles" [11]. Scheler identifies the point of transfer to human search for universal principles in one's transfer to spiritual values.

Only in the realm of spiritual values can human turn his attention from the problems of one's own existence and is able to evaluate the given situation in a prosocial manner, taking into account the other persons around him. Violence toward other human being, for example, produces resentment against such behaviour. On this level, one can thus speak of an empirical dimension of values. That one which experienced as unpleasant, he or she will not wish for other human being (providing this other human exhibits positive characteristics). Spiritual values, too, may enable us to sacrifice ourselves for others. Such sacrifice, such negation of one's own biological constitution, is directly present in the ancient, Greco-Roman tradition that we talked about above. It is a tradition of a rational living organism who practices virtues and knows justice, which he can derive from rational contemplation.

The highest place on the ladder belongs to values which Scheler calls "sacred values" [12]. It is a dimension of complete phenomenological reduction, where everything that is temporary and natural disappears or (at least) loses its meaning. By virtue of spiritual values, one looks at the world from the viewpoint of the transcendent. He sees the world from an elevated perspective of eternity and he understands what transpires in his environment from this perspective. On the basis of this spiritual, 'elevated perspective', the human comes to realize his own purpose, which is reflected in the order of love that is the principle of existence of the spiritual world. In Scheler, God is love but, at the same time, God is the one who personifies the normative function. This normativity, however, cannot be characterized in the form of commands and rules but rather as a normativity of love, which is the principle of the Universe. Within the intentions of the order of love, thus, it is insufficient to merely have knowledge of something; one has to experience (cognitively internalize) the contents of one's knowledge. This means, in our case, the experience of desire for God. We need to know God and, on the basis of this knowledge, desire Him, only then He becomes the norm for us. Without these two components (knowledge and experience of knowledge), the normative character gets lost. God is the norm on the basis of a spontaneous desire on the side of the human being. Antošová rightly emphasizes this very moment: "It means to love dyadically, transcendentally and to participate on transcendence by this love" [13].

The presence of divine norms in our value judgments expresses itself in a concrete level of order in our lives [14]. One who, based on his choices, experiences distress, does not make correct choices. Right choice emerges from the combination of one's own experience, individual constitution of the human person, and the way these individual conditions are incorporated into the order of love. Each human is an individual who makes authentic decisions. That, which general ethics calls 'conscience', exists in Scheler in the form of quality of experiencing one's own existence. This means that one who lives in compliance with the order of love, lives peacefully and one who ignores the

order of love, lives in disharmony and restlessness. The journey of the material ethics of values in Scheler comes thus to its culmination in eudemonic ethics, in which our rightful actions are rewarded with happiness. Existential ethics understands the relationships between these opposites differently. Valčová argues that "sin and faith are opposites, since a person is an individual before God, either he dwells in despair (sin) or he approaches God through faith to receive the forgiveness of sins" [5]. Scheler does not speak of sadness, despair and sin but only about external feelings of agreement or disagreement of our evaluative conscience with our own decisions.

4. Conclusions

The common element in the material ethics of values and the existential ethics is the authenticity of human person in his being. Pavlíková defines this with relation to Kierkegaard: "Kierkegaard defines the human soul as a relationship of the self that tries to find a balanced ratio in the relationships of its existence. It is a relationship to the finality, reality, to oneself, to the human choice and freedom." [15] The material ethics of values attempts to protect the human from wavering and offers a solution that consists of a definite, unchangeable system of values. While it emphasizes love as the foundational principle, this love, too, is subordinated to rationality and the order of knowledge. Human creates a structure of his own authentic values, while turning to others and appropriating new patterns of behaviour, schemes and values. Králik and Török, on the other hand, stress the inevitability of a subjective approach to understanding one's own destiny and one's own purpose of existence. "Man realizes how important and inevitable it is not to compare himself with others, because comparing to others makes man unhappy and disconnected." [16]

The principle difference between these two approaches rests in the fact that the material ethics of values, as well as the philosophy of values in the Baden Neo-Kantianism, directs us to a generally valid system of values that emerges from the concrete space (environment), in which one can evaluate external objects and one's own behavior. Although this space is wide, it is also limited. At the same time, however, this space exhibits traces of existential sterility. The immediate contact between human and God is lost when the authentic immediate relationship is being mediated by a system of values, which does not allow one to interpret God as a Person in relationship but rather interprets God as the Creator and Guardian of norms by means of which we measure values. The relationship between human and God is thus 'mediated' and it becomes impossible to bring about the essential, existential turn that Repar talks about [17], calling it an "existential revolution". From a theological discourse perspective this means that both, formal ethics as well as material ethics of values result in a mediated relationship to God and, ultimately, to an inauthentic experience of one's own existence. They promote formal obedience of norms and rules, which is typically the case in contemporary Christianity.

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