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THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL BASIS OF HUMAN DIGNITY

The idea of expressing an opinion on the difficult issue of relating to the anthropological basis of human dignity, arose in response to writings coming from two ideologically very different philosophical positions. The first of these is to be found in the author's academic neighborhood, namely school of Christian personalist philosophy associated with the Catholic University of Lublin. The second, on the other hand, originates from the sphere of libertarian humanist philosophy and expresses itself in a secular concept of human moral autonomy. Ideas coming from these two diametrically opposed standpoints provoke critical reflection; the latter will form the basis on which an alternative concept of human dignity will be outlined. With this aim in mind, analysis of this subject will consist of two parts: the first will take the form of a commentary-style critique, while the second will consist of proposals and clarifications.

1. Human Dignity According to the Concepts of Intuitive Personalism

As previously mentioned, the Lublin school of ethics, is where the intuitive personalistic theory of human dignity has been developed and expounded, its author being a distinguished Lublin philosopher, Rev. Tadeusz Styczeń. The point of origin of the theory composed by him, is the meta-ethical problem: is it possible, and by what means is it possible, to overcome the obstacles, placed by Hume, between that „which is” and that „which ought to be”. In other words, between „actual

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being” and „moral order”. Hume's holds that the passage from the former to the latter is impossible, and that morality is a sphere grounded in the forces of basic human instincts and desires. Rev. Styczeń disputes this thesis, maintaining that such a passage does exist, however, the question lies in what philosophical tools we need to use to build such passage. In answer to this dilemma, the author directs our attention to ethical experience, which he acknowledges to be the fundamental, as well as the authentic source of ethical knowledge. The role of this tool manifests itself, first of all, in enabling the elementary ethical fact to be established. Thanks to this, it is possible to gain an insight into the internal structure of morality, and above all, to identify what forms the central core of the structure, which provides order to both the mutual links between its specific parts, as well as the functions carried out by each part.

However, as different concepts of experience are to be found within the field of ethics, Styczeń presents his own understanding of ethical experience. According to him this term represents all possible, directly cognitive grasp of reality, which, in relation to morality, amounts to experiencing „absolute obligation (or non-obligation) of fulfilling acts as good (or bad) acts”.¹ In the process of analysis of this experience, the author precisely defines its conceptual content. Thus, he states, it is the affirmation of a human person for the sake of herself, that is, with respect to the dignity to which she is entitled („*persona humana est affirmanda propter seipsam*”).² In his recent works Styczeń further develops the concept of the person by introducing into its definition a new element in the form of truth and „auto-information” which transforms itself into „auto-imperative”: „truth as truth requires affirmation for its own sake”.³ This does not alter the concept of personhood, because it is always assumed that the human person is an object of direct cognition with respect to her dignity and because of this very dignity, she deserves unreserved affirmation, that is, respect and recognition. This means that human dignity, both its very existence, as well as its associated person-specific identity, is cognized in an act of an intuitive intellectual experience. Around this core concept winds a sheath of further interpretational clarifications which ought to be mentioned, though there is no need to elaborate them in the context of this article. To be discussed in some detail, however, is the, currently very popular, liberal concept of human dignity.

¹ T. Styczeń, *Problem możliwości etyki jako empirycznie uprawomocnionej i ogólnie ważnej teorii moralności. Studium metaetyczne*, Lublin 1972.

² T. Styczeń, *Etyka niezależna?*, Lublin 1980, 14.

³ Cf. T. Ślipko, *Tadeusz Styczeń SDS*, „Edukacja Filozoficzna”, 27(1999), 167-182.

2. Human Dignity as Defined in Liberal Ethical Theories

The liberal theory of human dignity will be outlined using a different method of presentation. In order to introduce the reader into the spiritual climate underlying liberal approach to human dignity, an example will be given of its manifestation in a real-life situation, as in the current discussion of euthanasia. This concerns the fate of a human being, condemned to immense, at times humanly unendurable, and hopeless sufferings, often experienced in degrading living conditions due to poverty, and deprived of essential care from the community. Advocates of euthanasia argue the following: in such a tragic combination of circumstances, when a human being is separated from everything that gives some colour to his life, all he is left with is his freedom. This freedom furnishes him with the power of deciding his own fate. The realization and simultaneous confirmation of this freedom is the decision to put an end to one's own life, be it in the form of a suicidal act, or by agreeing to the death-inducing intervention of another person, usually a doctor.

Thus, it is not the tragedy of extreme human degradation, which forms the key argument in favour of euthanasia, but actually the autonomic power of freedom, which is a person's right. The inventor of this approach, J. S. Mill, understands freedom to be: „the freedom of an individual to strive for his own good, according to his own means”,⁴ and in accordance with his own wishes. This is one of the indisposable (because it is inborn) tendencies of man, thus it needs to be understood „in the widest sense of the word”,⁵ as its only limitation is the freedom of another human being. Freedom can be likened to a lens, in which is focused that, which is most essential in a human being, as well as that which is most outstanding and most noble. One might say – it is the crystallization of the deepest essence of humanity. It manifests itself in every act of free choice, while the highest order of auto-creative, human aspiration is achieved at those times when, by way of heroic effort, a person decides to dramatically end their life, as in the case of agreeing to euthanasia. Overcoming in this way the greatest experience of human destiny, when he must take up the fight with hopeless suffering, freedom becomes the expression and confirmation of human dignity.

⁴ *O wolności*, trans. A. Kurlandzka, Warszawa 1959, 134.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 133.

3. Some Critical Observations

We have been presented with two different concepts of human dignity, held within the current Polish circles of ethical thought. As has already been stated in the introduction, it is possible to outline reasons, which compel one to take a critical stance towards them. Thus, it is necessary to explore a different way in order to find the answer to the question of human dignity.

What, then, arouses reservations towards the theory of personalist intuitionism? Initially, one must state very clearly that if we don't aim at questioning the actual concept of the human person, the specific dignity due to each person, or the duty to show each human being the respect, which is their right and which stems from this dignity. The idea, which is extremely difficult to agree with, within this theory, is the concept expressed as 'ethical experience'.

This paper is not the arena for expounding exhaustive derivations, thus one must restrict oneself to concise statements. The point is, that methodologically authorized sources of knowledge in each discipline of learning, including philosophical ethics, are experiences recorded within the moral consciousness, either of the whole of humanity, or, at least, of a sociologically identifiable group of society, and not uniquely individual records based on personal, subjective credibility. Thus, within this objective, verifiable field of intellectual experience, we are able to learn about the human being in a direct manner, though this experience encapsulates only the basic range of the essential characteristics. This means that the afore-stated experience encompasses a collection of characteristics, which belong, uniquely, to mankind. Thanks to this we are able to recognize the differences which separate mankind from other living species. However, these observed characteristics do not give a complete picture of the essential nature of a human being to the extent that they reveal the specific make-up of a person's dignity, and within it, more specifically, that aspect of dignity, which is involved in the absolute need to render respect to itself. It is for this reason that the answer to the question, what is human dignity and by what means can it be deciphered, must be looked for on a different path.

Despite this, our search does not take the route directing us to the understanding of human freedom to be found in liberal philosophical anthropology. Again, it is not the case that we want to negate the thesis that freedom is an attribute of human person. Criticism is directed towards the one-sided fascination for freedom, so obviously evident in proponents of this philosophy. For, as a consequence of this fascination, one loses sight of certain aspects of freedom, which suggest radically different philosophical approach to this freedom. This concerns, above

all, the description of freedom in its most elementary aspects. What we mean is the idea that freedom depends on the ability to make alternative choices, not determined by any other factors apart from will alone, namely so called „psychological freedom”. More attention will be paid to this matter at a later stage in these reflections, when it will be time to outline the present author's own understanding of human dignity. For now, let us confine ourselves to presenting the ideological sources, which to some degree condition the inadequacies of the liberal concept of freedom.

As can be seen from the history of philosophy, at its root lies individualistic human philosophy, grounded in philosophical materialism. In the material world engulfing the whole existing reality, it is only through revelations in the psychological life of the human being, that is it possible to uncover his differential characteristics, on which to base his dignity. These attributes, however, need also to be of a material nature. Liberalism finds these, at times, in the sphere of urges and inborn tendencies, while at other times in his auto-creative abilities, manifesting itself in his cultural activity. This concept, however, comes into conflict with the objective reality of both freedom itself, as well as with the ontological status of man as described by the materialists themselves. We will see this considering the consequences of this conflict later on, in the appropriate context.

This points complete the descriptive – critical part of our discussion. Meanwhile, we must proceed with an outline of the constructive part of our discussions, namely, to present the third, aforementioned concept of human dignity. This discussion will be developed, to some degree, along the lines laid out by the results of the descriptive – critical section. Firstly, in response to the proposal of intuitive personalism, we will clarify how the concept of human dignity can be formed. Secondly, as a result of confrontation with the liberal concept of human dignity, the role which can be assigned to freedom, in constitutionalizing the moral aspect of this very dignity, will be outlined.

4. In Search of Human Dignity

In the present paper, the question of human dignity is considered solely according to philosophical categories. Confining ourselves to this remit, we will not look for inspiration to the theological sources of the Revelation, or even to writings of philosophers whose thought was formed in the climate of Christendom, such as St Augustine or St Thomas Aquinas, but to Plato, who cannot be suspected to have been influenced by Christian theological ideas. Plato's philosophical reflections will be used to develop our understanding, because above all, this

thinker laid down the crucial foundations for the theory we are seeking, in one of his treatises.

He achieved this in *Phaidon*, whose main subject is a study of the eternal life of the human soul. One cannot, however, expect Plato to have arrived at even a very rough outline of the theory pertaining to human dignity, a theory which one could consider as an alternative concept to the two already discussed. It is sufficient to study the commentary supplied by Professor Legutko in his translation of *Phaidon*,⁶ to convince ourselves how specifically-defined a doctrine Plato had outlined, despite the prevailing climate of ancient culture. As a result of the latter, his doctrine was weighed down by a fog of numerous question marks. Despite this, it is impossible to deny that, at the centre of this great Athenian's discussions lies the thesis that the human soul exists. Undeniable also is the fact that Plato tries to prove the truth of this thesis in various ways, that he assigns with complete certainty the characteristic of „immortality” or „non-mortality”,⁷ to the human soul; that he postulates that only „with the soul alone” is man able to „observe things as they are in themselves”⁸; that man achieves this knowledge through concepts not determined by concrete beings that make up „nature”⁹. Plato sought the source of these concepts in the world of ideas existing beyond the boundaries of the phenomenal world. He was led along this path of understanding by realizing the supposed radical opposition between knowledge which can be attained by reason, and cognition which can be attained through senses. The latter, he thought, renders impossible an explanation of the genesis of rational knowledge.

This quasi – „summa” of Plato's anthropological thoughts, as outlined in this condensed version, justly earned him the reputation of the inventor of the doctrine of philosophical spiritualism. As regards of our subject matter, it gave European philosophical thought an everlasting injection of rich idealist impulses, which became the spark of subsequent philosophical investigations, spanning many centuries, and including those occurring in the context of Augustinian and Thomistic strands of Christian philosophy. The raw material of Platonic concepts, exposed particularly to the influences of the Aristotelian world of thought, underwent sometimes fundamental re-interpretations. One of

⁶ Plato, *Phaidon*, translation, introduction and commentary supplied by R. Legutko, Kraków 1995, 316 pp.

⁷ Ibidem, R. Legutko's commentary, 269.

⁸ Ibidem, 66e.

⁹ Ibidem, 99e.

these interpretations will enable us to outline the theoretical framework promoted in the study of the concept of human dignity, outlined below.

The methodological basis of this approach is expressed by the hypothesis that direct intellectual experience supplies us with the real knowledge of man, but this occurs differently to Plato's understanding of conceptual knowledge, or, equally, to the current, intuitional grasp of the dignity of the human person. This experience forms a second, based on sense perception, layer of cognition of the objectively given reality of man and the world; it furnishes our minds with universal concepts, so-called 'universalia'. It has already been pointed out, however, in the critique of personalistic intuitionism that the universal character of this recognition is limited to the direct grasp of species-specific characteristics of man, thanks to which we differentiate between the human species and other species of beings. However, this type of cognition does not extend to the deeper strata of existential reality, specific to man.

This is so because the objects that are at all accessible to direct intellectual experience, can be cognized only in their material, concrete substance, that is to say, in their phenomenal form of existence, as well as in the various expressions of the dynamics existing within them. This equally applies to man's cognition of himself. In order to access the secrets of human existence, which are invisible to direct experience, it is necessary to make use of a second human cognitive capability, namely, intellectual ratiocination, which enables him to examine his own cognitive acts, and himself. One of the achievements for which Plato is famous, is demonstrating this very pathway to the cognition of what a human being is within the innermost recesses of his reality, as well as for undertaking the first research in this area. Utilizing this method Plato was able to establish the core of humanity, which is expressed by the term „immortal soul". With time, the area of research started by Plato was developed by Christian thinkers into the theory of the non-material, or spiritual, soul as the joint raw-material of both the psychophysical structure of man and the basic principle of his functioning; this ended up being the theory of „the human person". In answer to the question „who is man?", this theory supports Boetius, stating that, firstly, he is „an individual substance of rational nature" („*rationalis naturae individua substantia*"), secondly, (fine-tuning this general definition) it declares that, thanks to his reasoning ability, man acts as a subject aware of himself; in this way, acting in his own name and on his own responsibility, he is capable of altering the world around him, and of changing himself in the process. In its shortest terms, this concept can be expressed in three words, namely, that man is an independent, a self-aware and a self-controlling being.

Despite its generalized character, the outlined definition contains the basic elements, which make man unique within the hierarchy of living things of the visible world, as an existentially separate being, vitalized by a non-physical spirit; the creator of a new world of material and spiritual culture. This provides an adequate basis to view man as a being, which deserves to be affirmed for its own sake, that is to say, for its own dignity. Embracing this position we achieve common ground with the Christian intuitive concept of human dignity, while falling into conflict with the secular interpretation of this dignity. The source of this conflict is the fact that this interpretation, though based on the foundation of a material understanding of man, places on a higher level his free will and his self-control, which not only assigns him creative and auto-creative potential, but even grants him the right to decide about his own life, or death. Being aware of the philosophical sources of this concept, it has, however, been stressed that this is an inadequate and philosophically misguided concept. At the time, a sufficient justification for this critical assessment was not given, in order to concentrate on a different train of thought. Now, however, comes the time to make good this omission.

5. The Advantages and Disadvantages of Freedom

Now our goal is to show the place freedom occupies in the formation of human dignity. With this aim in mind it is appropriate to remind ourselves of a few established facts, outlined on a number of occasions in my publications.¹⁰ We can, however, restrict ourselves to a recapitulation of the most important statements.

The term „freedom” has more than one meaning, thus we must start by revealing the meaning of so-called „psychological freedom”, which is undoubtedly of key importance in our context. Freedom seen from this angle manifests itself as the freedom to decide to act, or not to act; the choice of one good, from among several, equally – accessible ones; likewise, even as the ability to choose a less valuable good; in the extreme case it manifests itself as a horizon of all these possible choices, including the choice of a great evil, under the guise of good.

The latter-mentioned characteristic appears in accordance with the English saying „last, but not least”, being far-reaching in its significant consequences. Man is plagued by numerous imperfections: he succumbs to frequent, incorrect deciphering of the significance of values, which are

¹⁰ T. Ślipko, *Trojakię oblicze wolności*, w: A. de Tchorzewski (ed.), *Wolność jako wartość i problem edukacyjny*, Bydgoszcz 1999, 9-15.

intertwined within the complicated situations of life; the human will is susceptible to disordered motivations, which are conditioned, both by man's own psycho-physical structure and by the influence of external factors. The previously-indicated possibility of achieving a balance between good and evil under conditions of the above human imperfections, causes the sum-total of these factors to transform into a radical ambivalence – stemming from the innermost motive-powers of human nature – ambivalence to good and evil, growth and self-destruction, development and decadence. Justifiably, therefore, freedom is hailed as a great human attribute, thanks to which man is in control of himself and his surrounding world. On the other hand, however, one cannot forget that this same freedom is sometimes the causal force for human misfortunes and life catastrophes of a demonic magnitude.

In the light of this statement the optimistic utopia of individualistic liberalism loses its ground, as it is based on the conviction that freedom is always strong enough to overcome the dangers of mistakes and practical evil, so as to lead man to truth and good. The evidence of objective reality is different. Freedom in its elementary psychological form, left to itself without a directional compass, is condemned to the never-ending trials of wandering within an enclosed circle of truth and falseness, good and evil, ascending and falling. The inability to exit (by the strength of one's own elemental dialectic) this accursed cycle, which exists at the very heart of freedom, means that there is no situation in which freedom can be the regulator of man's own decisions. What is more, freedom cannot become the source of man's right to decide about critical human matters, such as suffering and death, which are steeped in great drama. As a further consequence, therefore, we can draw the simple conclusion that, because of its own disordered interior, freedom cannot claim the privileged title of being the creative force of human dignity.

Euthanasia, therefore, does not have sufficient moral justification on the grounds of freedom. Proponents of euthanasia are guided by a warped view of freedom. They also do not have a rationally-authorized vision of human dignity. They proclaim a doctrine, which leads to the destruction of man; to capitulation in the face of the fundamental problems of his existence. At this point we stand on the verge of the last stage of our reflections. The difficulty of looking at the problem of freedom from a different viewpoint now awaits us; namely from the point of view, which enabled us to find a way of discovering the essence of man.

6. The Moral Determinants of Human Dignity

Though psychological freedom, which has been discussed up until now, is not the fundamental raw material of human dignity, it has, however, an important role to play in the formative process of this dignity. This role relies on the fact that the ambivalence, which exists within the structure of freedom, determines the requirement for a system compatible with the nature of man, and existing on the same level as freedom, to regulate the functioning of this freedom. The point is that this system should organize the whole range of human cognitive actions with respect to realizing the greater good, indispensable to the achievement of full personal development and perfection by man, as an intelligent and free being. This system should simultaneously not overstrain psychological freedom – the most important characteristic unique to the human dynamic.

The objective moral order rooted within the rational nature of man, is just this type of fundamental regulatory system and this is why it precedes all other ways of regulating human behaviour, particularly positive law, as well as traditional, and the much later-established national law. This morality regulates conscious human behaviour in the following ways: (1) it places before man a certain, key ideal of personal human perfection, a type of summit and crown to his rational dynamic; (2) it shows the way of behaving during all actions undertaken by man, by laying before him the whole world of objective values and moral imperatives; in other words, it outlines the collection of elementary values and norms, which apply to man's freedom to enable it to function within the boundaries worthy of man; (3) the strength contained within the specific values of exemplary behaviour, their moral beauty and attraction, supply the deepest motivations (though not exclusively) to act in accordance with these values and norms; (4) when the human conscience is formed according to objective moral norms, it applies these principles to the specific actions carried out by man and assigns to them a new standard of moral good.

One can omit other, additional forms of regulation involved in the functioning of man's moral order. The above-mentioned, suffice to justify the final thesis: man, because of his psycho-physical nature, is set upon the summit of the hierarchy of beings of the visible world and, because of this, stands out by possessing the dignity, which is the right of an intelligent being and achieves full ennoblement of his dignity in the moral order, which is inseparably associated with his nature. This order not only enhances and enriches his essential greatness, but furthermore, furnishes him with spiritual strengths, which opens up before him ever greater perspectives of personal development, right up to the

transcendent boundaries of the human condition; for they provide a framework for the actions undertaken by man; they introduce the principles of harmony and beauty into them; very simply, they reveal the horizons of the completeness of the human being. Without doubt, the analysis of this extensive phenomenon of morality also uncovers within it the imperative of respect for human person due to his personal dignity. This imperative, however, does not function like an autonomous ontological structure, but on the basis, and with the force of a fundamental stratum of the ethical order in the form of a world of values¹¹.

In the framework of such an outlined moral order, man could, and should, by his own activity and effort, respectively, build his own, individually-formed, personal dignity, grounded on his moral character, as a vision of an already-ordered freedom, which is aware of its moral duties. Here, however, we reach a threshold beyond which stretches the extensive experimental research of pedagogy. One can hope that an awareness of what is being said on this subject within the field of philosophical ethics, will be of general help in efforts of other disciplines to understand human dignity and to promote shaping with accordance with it human actions on the individual and communal level.

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ANTROPOLOGICZNE PODSTAWY GODNOŚCI CZŁOWIEKA

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¹¹ T. Ślipko, *Zarys etyki ogólnej*, 4th ed., Kraków 2004, 266-274.