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The ethical and praxeological conceptions of an act and its evaluation*

Abstract

The conception of an act and its evaluation constitute the most interesting and important moral subject which consists of a complex set of theoretical and practical issues. The article includes St. Thomas' conception of the definition of the goodness of an act, Tatarkiewicz's theory of rightness of an act as a source of its evaluation as well as Kotarbinski's considerations which deal with the analysis of an act from an efficiency perspective. They have all contributed to the definition of an act in its several variants and provided the possibility of classification of evaluation of an act on the ethical and praxeological plane.

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1. Introduction

For business ethics, as for any normatively defined field, evaluation criteria are the most important. I wish to examine these criteria in order to answer the question regarding the importance of this type of considerations for business ethics. From the practical point of view, these issues constitute a starting point for the formulation of professional codes, and from the theoretical perspective, they allow for a broader reflection on the moral dimension of responsibility of particular employees and companies as well as on the phenomenon of trust and justice. They include such basic elements of morality as:

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- (1) analysis of human activity and its sources dependent on the subject's efficiency as well as external circumstances,
- (2) the norm of action—what criteria must be met by a right, righteous and efficient act as well as by the performer of such an act,
- (3) internal and external conditions that positively or negatively affect an act, its effects and the attitude of its performer.

The most important question resulting from the confrontation of ethics with praxeology concerns the relationship—which occurs or not—between a right, efficient and righteous action. All these types of acts and their corresponding evaluations are connected by a common way of understanding ethics as a science of human self-fulfilment. It deals with the most widely understood human activity seen as a means of man's self-realisation and the preservation of man's presence in the world. Its various dimensions are characterised in detail in the works of, among others: Saint Thomas Aquinas, Kant, Tatarkiewicz, and Kotarbiński.

2. Ethics as a science of human self-fulfilment

Since the description, understanding and interpretation of such a complex issue as the basis of moral evaluations cannot be reduced to a single model of justification, I will refer to both classical and contemporary approaches in my inquiries. For this reason, such terms as action, act and deed are treated synonymously. I have been encouraged to outline a common, normative plane for praxeology and ethics by reading the work of Ernst Tugendhat entitled *Lectures on Ethics* (2004) and the great treatise of Robert Spaemann entitled *Happiness and Benevolence* (1997). These monographs consider two threads characteristic of the experience of contemporary ethics. The first of these threads concerns the possibility of justifying moral norms, i.e. providing an objective and rational basis for moral judgments. The other thread results from the need to make a radical revision of the source concepts of morality, such as: good, bad, morally righteous, efficient or useful. It is an attempt to lead them out of the framework of religious or metaphysical concepts into a broader, inter-subjective field of experience. I will treat the statements and suggestions contained there as the premises for my own considerations. To avoid unnecessary summaries, I will limit myself to providing a few statements that give the character and direction to my inquiries. To some extent, they also provide justification for them.

Historically, there have been two ways of justifying moral judgments: authoritative (external to the individual and the community) and autonomous (in which it is assumed that the source of ethical judgments is either the individual or the community itself). Nowadays, as Tugendhat points out, only explanations referring to autonomy are taken as their basis. Kantianism and opportunism are an expression of this tendency.

Neither of the two positions is backed by sufficient moral arguments compatible with experience. The weakness of utilitarianism includes the fact that it places doing good and not doing evil on one scale as well as the fact that it cannot do justice to interpersonal obligations; Kant derived the categorical imperative from practical reason is presented as an evident overreach of Kantianism.

The question about the maxims, in the case of which one cannot want them to work as universal laws, requires to place ourselves in the position of an individual and to ask which maxims referring to the others cannot be accepted by her. (Tugendhat, 2004, p. L)

Autonomously justified morality can only be thought of being provided if an individual asks what mutual requirements he or she can justify. And autonomy cannot be understood—as in Kant’s philosophy—as the autonomy of an individual, but only as “[...] a reciprocal autonomy, i.e. each person attaches equal significance to his own will and of the others” (Tugendhat, 2004, p. LI).

A moral contract based on mutual benefits determines the scope of mutual requirements of members of a given community arising in relation to the idea of a good man. An outrage and a sense of guilt, for one reason or another, are always felt in relation to the concept of a good man. This moral contract includes not only agreement on the good for each partner but also on what everyone thinks is good, what everyone wants to approve of. In this sense, the good has both an autonomous dimension, because everyone is objectively entitled to it, and an instrumental one, because it constitutes the content of mutual obligations of members of a given community. This results in another aspect of autonomy, i.e. equality based on the common approval of the good and subordinate to the idea of symmetry. According to this point of view, all people, if they are interested in cooperating with others, have an interest in ensuring that everyone involved agrees to observe a certain system of norms, and thus approves of certain goods.

Moral norms are based on the Golden Rule which recommends that you act towards others as you would like them to treat you. In other words, the Golden Rule is contained in Kant’s imperative—“act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end but always at the same time as an end.” The Golden Rule with its message “do not instrumentalise anyone” covers all specific norms. Three sets of rules derive directly from it:

- (1) the rule not to harm others,
- (2) the rule to help others,
- (3) and the rule of cooperation, i.e. do not lie and keep the terms of a contract.

On this path, only fragmentarily presented here, one can assume that Kant’s imperative and the Golden Rule point to the source, personal experience of the good. Only a person (Aristotle would add that a morally upstanding person, and therefore a courageous one), due to his or her agency such as will and reason, can act in accordance with the presentation of rules, i.e. normative rules of conduct.

The justification of moral judgments requires a proper distinction between reasons and motives of human action.

Reasons are the reasons for the validity of utterances: motives are the reasons of a different kind. They are the reasons for a given action, for a given way of acting [...] or for the acceptance of a given moral system. (Tugendhat, 2004, p. 25)

From this last statement, it follows that ethical reasons for conduct are not the same as its motives since they concern its various dimensions. Another assumption, which is seen as fundamental for ethics, is connected with the central place that the Golden Rule, and therefore the categorical imperative of Kant, has in it. The Golden Rule is re-interpreted due to the manner of its justification and conditions of validity. Regardless of these differences, from the point of view of ethics, man cannot be treated instrumentally as a means of action, and at the same time is obliged to respect others.

Some ethicists fear that this rule does not apply in the area of praxeology.

So, does a conduct ideal from the point of view of the science of action—praxeology—need to be negatively evaluated from the point of view of ethics? According to Kotarbiński, necessity and life practice force a person to choose the most efficient means to achieve the desired goal. (Drabarek, 2004, p. 48)

In other words, can the effects of an action, or more precisely its efficiency, be separated from the performer of the act and the personal character of free and rational human actions? It is also possible to ask a question from a completely different position: does praxeology bring any new ideas or creative solutions to the field of ethics or enrich its reflection on the sources and determinants of human self-fulfillment?

3. Righteous, right and efficient act

I have chosen such authors as: Saint Thomas Aquinas, Tatarkiewicz, and Kotarbiński to show that moral norms can be studied as a basis for evaluating actions and their determinants from various perspectives. There are three types of justification in the proposed positions: metaphysical (Saint Thomas Aquinas), analytical (Tatarkiewicz) and praxeological (Kotarbiński).

Saint Thomas assumes that the objective norm of morality is determined by the rational human nature. The natural law is written into it, and practical reason, i.e. conscience, recognises its content. What is evaluated in a human act is its object, i.e. “[...] what the human act is objectively directed at due to its nature, that is, the result of an act at which accomplishment it aims by the power of its own internal purpose” (Szostek, 1980, p. 23). Another component of an act is the purpose of the subject, also called the purpose of the person acting, the purpose of

the performer of the act or the intent, i.e. why the acting person wants the act committed. The third element is a set of circumstances: who, what, how, where, when, by what means, etc. Thomas assumes that an action takes on its species-defined morality from a moral object. An act intentionally evil cannot become good due to circumstances, nor can any, even the noblest object, change the negative quality of an act.

Therefore, the object of an act, namely the content of the intended and realised good, is evaluated. A judgement of conscience determines what to do and what to avoid in a given situation. It is not a simple message, as it requires that the subject meets the appropriate conditions, above all, that the performer of a given act has the ability to perform self-evaluation. An important role in this process is also played by objective difficulties which not everyone can overcome and not in all situations. The source of norms is universal law characterised by a universal and unchanged nature. Moral prohibitions or requirements do not result from the reflection of conscience, but from its imperative. A righteous act combines the features of a right and good act. Therefore, it remains in harmony with the rational nature and corresponds to the position and dignity of the person. In this approach, the rational nature of man is the so-called objective norm of morality, and conscience, due to its subject-related dimension, is defined as a subjective norm. To act rationally means to affirm the dignity of every human being through the right choice of values. The idea of the golden mean has a double meaning in this context since it affects the objective value of both people and goods to the realisation of which everyone is obliged by virtue of natural law.

It is worth confronting this position with the views of Władysław Tatarkiewicz on the moral foundations of right action.

If I want to act morally and understand by it that I want to do as much good as possible, this means that I want to commit the right act. If ethics is to provide rules of moral conduct, this means that it has to provide such rules that whoever acts in accordance with these rules commits a right act. (Tatarkiewicz, 1971, p. 140)

According to Tatarkiewicz, the morality of an act is in its rightness which is measured by "doing as much good as possible". Let us determine with the author of *On the Absoluteness of Good* [*O bezwzględności dobra*] important features of human actions. First of all, an act does not represent a certain value only in itself but also because of its effects. In the latter case, an act is a means to achieve a certain state of affairs that represents some sort of positive or negative value. While acting, we are usually interested in its effects, as they change reality around us, introducing good or evil into it. We have various possibilities of action, but only those acts are right whose effects create the most good. "If I want to do as much good as possible, this means I want to commit a right act". Three conclusions that are important for understanding Tatarkiewicz's position are derived from this assumption. Firstly, right acts are identical with moral action, and even with morality. Secondly, the author advocates the absoluteness and objectivity of values, at the same time granting rules of right conduct, i.e. norms, the feature of

relativism and objectivity. Thirdly, Tatarkiewicz points to a clear difference that exists in the basis for evaluating a morally good act and a right act. Not every good deed is right, which becomes fully understandable taking into account the specificity of these criteria.

Why do such differences exist? The author of the treatise *On the Absoluteness of Good* [*O bezwzględności dobra*] explains that the rightness of an act does not depend on the intentions of the performer but on the objective measure of the good which is verified by a simple procedure, namely by adding and subtracting the values of positive and negative effects of a given act. What has been achieved through a given action is the objective good or evil. These differences depend on different scopes and determinants of what is good and what is right in an act. Let us explain in more detail what these determinants are. If an object with specific properties is good, then all objects having these properties are also good. On the other hand, the rightness of an act is determined by the specific circumstances in which it occurs. Other actions with similar characteristics may or may not be judged as right. Thus, the absoluteness of good does not coincide with the condition associated with rightness. It is the results, the effects of the action that determine whether it is right or not. Consequently, a good act is not always a right act, as the rightness of an act consists of sets of characteristics and circumstances such as the acting person, time, place, and the presence and influence of other people and objects. Some of these are permanent and objective, while others are accidental and situational. All of these together determine the conditions under which a given act occurred and what role the subject played in this act. Specific situations create a background—a kind of a challenge for an individual's action, and only from this perspective can it be evaluated. An act is, therefore, objectively and individually right as it is right in certain situations and due to certain individual properties. The rules to which right actions are subordinate are always individually and conditionally binding. Each time they must be considered based on a given situation, which excludes the possibility of using universally and objectively valid rules in the field of ethics. These could be contradictory to the reality of specific situations and, at the same time, contrary to the human condition.

If ethics is expected to provide rules—says Tatarkiewicz—then these are not supposed to be individual rules but rather universal and unconditional rules that can indicate a right act to everyone who wishes to act rightly. However, considering how we live and act, albeit not unique, are nevertheless variable and diverse, and the possibility of the existence of universal and unconditional rules must be questioned. (Tatarkiewicz, 1971, p. 143)

Even if inductively we adopt a certain set of rules of right action, it does not mean that they should be used in an unchanged form in all cases, incidents and situations. The relativity of these rules requires from subjects not only the use of universally accepted rules but also the creation of rules in individual cases. The performer's activity cannot be limited to the application of rules recognised in social practices but also requires a reflection and work regarding his or her action. Acts are of a creative nature as their main function is change, and thus a positive or

negative intervention into the existing system. The specific acts are influenced by the individual character of man and his decisions along with the practical dispositions acquired in the course of life. Knowledge and practice stimulate each other and ultimately determine the extent to which the subject can be creative in his or her actions. These elements make up an act and, as a result, lead to the identification of several of its properties assessed in terms of value, rightness, morality, and merit.

The value of an action is based on its rightness, and therefore refers directly to its effects and is subject to specific moral obligations. In turn, the moral quality of the action is determined by the merit of its performer. The will and intent of a given act are evaluated in action through introspection on the part of its performer. Tatariewicz adds that:

Equally entitled is a judgment about a man based on the amount of good he intends to do and a judgment about the man based on the effort he makes to achieve the said good. A man who leads a holy life, even if he leads it without effort, is worthy of admiration, so is the man who strives for perfection even if, for some unfortunate circumstances, the result of his effort is imperfect. (1971, p. 148).

Undoubtedly, this accurate observation informs us that evaluations of acts are much more individually and situationally varied than our ability to reduce them to specific rules.

It seems, therefore, that Tatariewicz assesses human action from two perspectives: from the perspective of the intentions and choices made by the subject and from the perspective of qualitative changes caused by a given act. They include the sphere of facts in the form of effects of a given action as well as the scope of the merit of the subject. The evaluation of the rightness of a particular action requires empirical knowledge about the individual subject and the conditions under which the act was committed. At the same time, one cannot refer to the universal features of the human nature or the judgments of practical reason, i.e. conscience, as Saint Thomas did; or Kant, who adopted universal, a priori principles as the basis of morality, underestimating its empirical dependence on specific circumstances. Not only the action based on the same maxim, i.e. moral rule, can have various effects but also the merits of a particular subject cannot be generalised. At the same time, without these assumptions, it would not be possible to adopt a fixed, definite measure of good results. Therefore, if we did not assume along with the classics that man is capable of reflecting on his behaviour, development and self-fulfilment, then the rightness of an act would have a completely ambivalent character. There is no radical change or re-evaluation in this field. It is the narrative layer that has fundamentally changed – from the metaphysical description we have moved to the level of experience. A right act is considered on the basis of the quality of changes that it introduces into the existing reality, and not from the ontic positions of the foundations of the human nature and its dynamics. The analysis carried out by Tatariewicz includes other properties of acts and points to other rules that guide them. The context decides, therefore, that the

subject's specific creativity, understood as an attitude, disposition, or merit prevails in this description. It should be noted that Aristotle, pointing to the right or an appropriate measure of prudent action in relation to the specific circumstances, took into account the reflection and inventiveness of the performer.

Using the distinction introduced by Tugendhat between reasons and motives, it can be said that for Tatkiewicz motives are the most important in ethics and that they set the standards of right conduct. This attitude toward morality brings closer together the views of Tatkiewicz and Kotarbiński. These philosophers were aware of the fact that an act is dually creative as the changes it causes in the actors and the modifications it introduces into the world in the form of specific effects. Among other things, they can be subjected to axiological-metaphysical, analytical or praxeological studies.

Kotarbiński developed the aforementioned studies in which he proposed a separate qualification of "efficient action" based on its efficiency. For the author of *Praxiology. An Introduction to the Science of Efficient Action (Traktat o dobrej robocie)*, praxeology provides appropriate methodological tools to identify different ways of acting and systematise them. Kotarbiński understands by praxeology

the science of methods of doing anything, the science that considers action from the point of view of efficiency, and detached from working conditions specific only for a given specialty, as well as from any kind of emotional assessment. This science can be called methodology—the author adds—since it treats about methods, and it can be called general methodology since it concerns methods of all actions. The so-called methodology of sciences, i.e. the study of methods of scientific research, is the field of applications, thus a narrower field, since scientific research is only one form of action in general. (Kotarbiński, 1938, pp. 612–613)

Praxeology, due to its assumptions and research methods, deals exclusively with the issue of efficiency of action, omitting all ethical and aesthetic evaluations that are related to emotional or moral preferences. The author, therefore, does not question their validity, but they are not in the field of his interest, as they are not a subject of knowledge but feelings. The praxiologist has the following tasks: analysis of concepts concerning all purposeful action and criticism of given methods of action, taking into account their efficiency, effectiveness, and purposefulness. The criticism is based on the typology of an act and the setting of standards, i.e. certain codified advice which contains indications relating to the achievement of greater efficiency. Ultimately, praxeology aims at clarification, accumulation, and systematisation of experience of *homo faber* related to the efficient action (Kotarbiński, 1972, p. 501).

As the efficiency of man's action is at the heart of Kotarbiński's interests, i.e., the very way in which he understands action is modified. According to the author of *Praxiology. An Introduction to the Science of Efficient Action*, action encompass deeds, acts, and active behaviour, such as speaking or thinking. An act is determined by external and internal conditions that constitute the possibilities of action. Externally, this possibility is determined by a lack of obstacles apart from

the intent of the performer of a given act. Internally, such possibilities occur in connection with the dispositions of the performer for carrying out a specific act, i.e. will, strength, knowledge, and efficiency. Kotarbiński refers to the tradition of Aristotle, yet endows these concepts with a specific meaning adequate to the norm of efficient action. First of all, they should be read along with the courage which the performers of the deed are ascribed. Its measure is the creative attitude of the performer to his or her own action which is assessed on the basis of the amount of energy and resolve involved in a given act. The creative act is characterised by a kind of originality of the work and its products, which results from the ingenuity of the intentions of the performer, along with the goals and plans that he or she has followed. The energy and efficiency of an act in connection with its economy in total make up its practicality, while its efficiency and economy determine the technical value of a given action. Kotarbiński also reflects on what properties of human action enable the subject to achieve the intended work. Consistency in the pursuit of a given goal, i.e. determination in action, regardless of the emerging obstacles, comes to the fore. Apart from determination, Kotarbiński emphasises the importance of a well-thought-out strategy of action, influencing its efficiency and connected with its “suitability”. This term encompasses individual skills and talents of the subject which can vary—from incompetence to a kind of mastery. Kotarbiński also appreciates the importance of economy which indicates particular skills associated with the use of resources and manifests itself in the form of efficiency and savings.

Actions carried out in teams of people resemble a fight (a certain form of competition) between rationally acting opponents. Some rules of efficient action also come down to it. I will forgo the description of these principles in order to reflect on the efficiency of action seen mainly from the economic point of view. Two of its features are worth mentioning; the economy of action, which requires a special attitude on the part of the subject to the means which he or she intends to use. On the other hand, such an economical approach requires the opening of the subject to thought experiments; hence ingenuity becomes important as well as the performer’s creative attitude based on the practice of acting and making the right choices. Kotarbiński, after Aristotle, says that man can learn efficient action only through acting.

Is it possible to use evil means or break the ethical rules of behaviour for optimal efficiency? Does the resolve of a subject consist of pursuing his or her goals using all means available?

The end never justifies evil means—explains Kotarbiński—even the necessary ones, if only the resignation from this goal would not be something worse. There are endless possible choices, hence let us not set goals which would necessitate the loss of what is more valuable than the goals themselves. And if we really need to pursue a given goal which entails the necessary sacrifices deemed worth making, let us show due resolve. (Kotarbiński, 1999, p. 445)

Let us try to divide this statement into three threads that will make it easier to understand his position. Firstly, the author says that the end never justifies evil means if its abandonment does not result in even worse consequences. The example of war comes to mind—the combat requires the use of evil means, but it would be even worse if we abandoned any defensive actions. Then Kotarbiński recommends that we do not choose such goals for the achievement of which we would lose what is more valuable than the set goals. There is also no shortage of examples confirming the rightness of this statement. Then, the philosopher says that if we have to pursue the goal that requires sacrifices, then we should maintain consistency, and therefore due resolve. He also emphasises that these must be special goals worth making sacrifices. Let us refer again to the example of war, in this case, we can accept the above arguments without leaning towards quietism and fatalism criticised by Kotarbiński. These arguments are not easy for ethics, as they require the reconciliation of ethical norms with these special cases. Let us repeat after Tatarbiewicz that not every right act is absolutely good and that motives behind the act determine it. Let us look at these issues from the position of Saint Thomas and Kant, as both philosophers agree with Kotarbiński that the end never justifies evil means. The remaining statements, allowing evil means under very clearly defined conditions, are perceived as critical issues in ethics, i.e. such issues that will always raise doubts and anxiety from the practical point of view. In these cases, moral decisions are at an individual's discretion and must be considered in relation to a specific situation. That is where the creative role of conscience can be seen, as its judgements are based on the subjective ability to evaluate one's own actions and oneself as their performer. Neither fear of relativism in ethics should dictate final decisions, nor should the aversion to fundamentalism justify the postulated principles.

4. Conclusions

Saint Thomas, Tatarbiewicz and Kotarbiński successively addressed issues related to the foundations of human moral activity. Their considerations have provided explanations concerning the internal and external effects of an action as well as what the goodness, rightness, and efficiency of an act are and how they should be achieved. Their reflections concern the main reasons and motives of action in relation to its various components and determinants. Consequently, these reflections determine the need to include separate evaluations of action in relation to its various functions and methods of implementation. The goodness, rightness, effectiveness, and efficiency of the subject's action corresponds to the category of deeds assessed as morally righteous and right, as well as in a broader sense, to the category of efficient actions. The goodness of action—as a source of its evaluation—has been analysed based on the choice of individual, social, economic, political

and cultural *praxis*. In this field, not only the theoretical foundations of morality are taken into account but also the empirical foundations of social approval of what are considered morally good and right.

These considerations show that praxeology complements ethicists' studies in terms of the possibility of man's complete self-fulfilment which is determined by his versatile activity. The efficiency of action and the related skills of the subject mean for an individual and the community no more and no less but the good life and well-being. According to Aristotle, this is what is needed to be happy and, referring to the Golden Rule and Kant's imperative; we can say that efficiency of action enables various forms of work and cooperation with others.

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