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TATARKIEWICZ ON THE ABSOLUTENESS OF GOOD INTRODUCTION

It is a great pleasure and honor to present to the Reader the first translation of Władysław Tatarkiewicz's work "On the Absoluteness of Good," published originally in 1919 as *O bezwzględności dobra*.

Władysław Tatarkiewicz was born in 1886, in Warsaw. His grandfather, Jakub Tatarkiewicz (1798-1854), was one of the best Polish neoclassical sculptors of his time. His father, Ksawery Tatarkiewicz (1848-1903), was a lawyer.

After graduating from a philological gymnasium in Warsaw, Władysław entered the University of Warsaw, which was Russian-speaking at that time. In 1905, in the wake of manifestations organized by students demanding Polish as the language of instruction, the university was closed. Tatarkiewicz decided to continue his studies at German universities. He studied law, theory of art, zoology, and philosophy, in Berlin, Paris, and Marburg, where he got his Ph.D. in 1910.

Only after that, he went to Lvov, where he met Kazimierz Twardowski and attended some of the seminars. Since Tatarkiewicz was not formally a student of Twardowski or any of Twardowski's students, he cannot be considered a typical member of the Lvov-Warsaw School. However, Twardowski and his way of teaching strongly influenced Tatarkiewicz. Later, he used to say that despite having spent only a few weeks in Lvov, he realized what it meant to work in philosophy. Twardowski's philosophical style became for Tatarkiewicz a model of clarity. He even revealed that while writing, he thought of Twardowski as an ideal but critical reader. In his diaries, Tatarkiewicz confessed that if there is any school to which he belongs, it is the school of Twardowski. All of that serves as a good reason for including Tatarkiewicz in the Lvov-Warsaw School, at least broadly understood.



Twardowski's School in 1910. Sitting from the left: Alfons Baron, Daniela Tennerówna-Gromska, Tadeusz Kotarbiński, Kazimierz Twardowski, Zofia Paślawska-Drexlerowa, Władysław Tatarkiewicz, and Anna Jakubowska. Standing from the left: Mieczysław Treter, Stefan Dańcewicz, Henryk Świerczewski, Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, Rudolf Nykołajczuk-Nałęcki, Józef Sandel, and Seweryn Stark.

During World War I, Tatarkiewicz briefly lived in Częstochowa, where he taught algebra and geometry in the local gymnasium. When the Polish university was opened by German occupiers in 1915, Tatarkiewicz started his lectures there on the history of philosophy. In 1919, he obtained his habilitation in Lvov. "On the Absoluteness of Good" is his habilitation thesis.

After Poland regained independence and new Polish universities were reopened (Wilno) or opened (Poznań), Tatarkiewicz lectured briefly in both of them. Then he came back to Warsaw and continued his work as a professor of history of philosophy until retirement in 1960.

However, there were two unwanted and sad interruptions in the continuity of his work.

During World War II, all Polish universities were closed by Nazi and Soviet occupants. In Warsaw, Tatarkiewicz was active in a secret university. However, many of Tatarkiewicz's students and assistants took part in the Polish anti-German Warsaw Uprising in 1944, and most of them were killed. Tatarkiewicz's apartment, with a rich library and collection of art, was destroyed.

The second interruption in Tatarkiewicz's work took place in the early 1950s when he was removed from the University for a few years for political reasons. A group of young communist ideologists, which included Leszek

Kołakowski, accused him of being an enemy of the system installed by the Soviets.

Tatarkiewicz came back to the University of Warsaw after the political terror was softened. Active to the last years of his life, in 1960 he founded the journal *Estetyka* [Aesthetics]. In 1974, as an 88-year-old man, he still lectured in Lausanne. He died in 1980, in Warsaw, at the age of 94.

Tatarkiewicz is known mostly as a historian of philosophy. Moreover, he was one of the best historians of philosophy in the history of philosophy or even, as Józef M. Bocheński once said, simply the best. For sure, Tatarkiewicz's three-volume *History of Philosophy* is a unique oeuvre, combining broad perspective and erudition with incredible precision and clarity of presentation. The same is true of Tatarkiewicz's volumes on the history of aesthetics, where he combines an analytic approach with detailed knowledge of art and the evolution of its theory. As an excellent historian, Tatarkiewicz was naturally interested in the methodology of history. His methodological proposals included an "interventionist" conception of the historian's work and an elaboration of some procedures necessary in humanities, such as disjunctive definitions or a strict distinction between analyses of notions (culminating in definitions) and theories.

In his "Notes for Autobiography," he wrote:

I have dealt, as a historian, with what great thinkers thought about being and the universe, but that is different than speaking for yourself. If I spoke about the world on my own behalf, it was only about some of its properties and values: moral and aesthetic, trying to simplify and unravel them. (Tatarkiewicz 1979: 182)

In fact, Tatarkiewicz proposed some master analyses of concepts and theories of aesthetics and ethics. The first group includes, first of all, analytic-historical studies of art, beauty, form, creativity, imitation, and aesthetic experience gathered in his *History of Six Ideas*. The second, ethical group includes studies on the absoluteness of good (1919) and on happiness (1944). Let us just note that these works were prepared during the most tragic periods in the history of the 20th century: the two world wars.

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What was Tatarkiewicz's argument for the absoluteness of good (and evil)?

Good and evil are simple and unanalyzable properties belonging to objects and actions. Sentences about good and evil cannot be justified on the basis of descriptive sentences. They are accepted "without proof," as "intuitive axioms," such as "Prudence is good" or "Impiety is bad." Tatarkiewicz treats intuition as a way of (intellectually?) recognizing values understood as abstract but

simple properties. These properties are absolutely and evidently good, bad, or neutral. The illusion that values are relative comes from various confusions. First of all, objects that are evaluated are mostly complex and contain both good and bad properties. Moreover, good has to be distinguished from rightness (*ślusznosc*), which is relative.

In his treatise, Tatarkiewicz's simple theory is presented within an extensive conceptual scheme and compared with all or at least most types of relativism and subjectivism proposed in history. Thanks to that, the work "On Absoluteness of Good" is instructive not only for those who share Tatarkiewicz's absolutistic intuitions but also for relativists.

These views situate Tatarkiewicz's metaethical approach among moral intuitionists, the view which was accepted by many members of the Lvov-Warsaw School, including Twardowski, Czeżowski, Ajdukiewicz, and to some degree also Kotarbiński. However, there are some differences between the intuitionism of Tatarkiewicz and that of the members of the Lvov-Warsaw School listed above. In their approach, the objects of moral evaluations are not properties but actions, and moral intuition has an emotional rather than intellectual character; it is also compared to sensory perception.

However, for both Tatarkiewicz and other members of the Lvov-Warsaw School, intuitionism serves the same goals: to defend ethical absolutism and lay the foundations for independent ethics.¹

Although Tatarkiewicz's work on the absoluteness of good is considered in Poland a classic ethical work, it has not been discussed as much as it deserves to be. Surprisingly, only one review of the book was written in the interwar period — namely, by Maria Ossowska (it was *nota bene* her first published work). There is a rather small number of mentions of Tatarkiewicz in Twardowski, Kotarbiński, and Ossowska. Some comments on Tatarkiewicz's work were published over fifty years after it was published (see Ślipko 1977, Godlewski 2011, Wiśniewski 2013).

We hope that the present translation will change the attitude toward Tatarkiewicz's classic study and initiate its wider reception in the philosophical world.

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The text whose translation we present below was written under circumstances described by Tatarkiewicz in the first edition as follows:

The dissertation was written in connection with lectures on ethics delivered at the University of Warsaw in the summer semester of 1917 and in the winter semester of 1917/1918.

¹ On intuitionism in the Lvov-Warsaw School, see Brożek 2015.

Written in the summer of 1918, it was then presented and discussed at the meetings of the Warsaw Philosophical Institute on October 10 and 19, 1918, and was accepted by the Institute at its meeting on November 12.

The title of the dissertation achieves brevity at the expense of accuracy. The exact title would have to be: *O bezwzględności i obiektywności dobra i zła* [On the Absoluteness and Objectivity of Good and Evil]. (Tatarkiewicz 1919: VIII)

Our translation has been based on the second edition, published half a century after the first printing and inserted in the first volume of Tatarkiewicz's *Collected Writings*, entitled "*Droga do filozofii*" i inne rozprawy filozoficzne ["The Road to Philosophy" and Other Philosophical Dissertations] (1971). The volume was edited by the author himself. In the "Preface," Tatarkiewicz wrote:

In what form are the older dissertations published in this volume? Partly original, partly changed. The changes, however, are only in the language form, not in the content itself. They are in earlier dissertations. . . . In earlier [dissertations] the way of writing seems alien to the writer. . . . At first, the author wrote just as he spoke, and then a little differently, because he came to the conclusion that one form is good for living speech, and another for writing, publishing, preserving thoughts. (Tatarkiewicz 1971: 6-7)

The dissertation *On the Absoluteness of Good* is one of these earlier works. The stylistic changes in it are relatively extensive. In accordance with the declaration of Tatarkiewicz himself, we decided that thanks to these changes the text better expresses the author's views. However, the bibliographic footnotes have been taken from the first edition as the later edition is much more selective in this regard. The original footnotes — standardized and sometimes supplemented — are marked with Tatarkiewicz's initials: [W.T.]. The remaining notes have been added by the editorial staff of *The Philosophy of Science* and marked: [Eds.].

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