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ON THE ABSOLUTENESS OF GOOD (1919)

INTRODUCTION

In his dialogue *Inquisitio veritatis per lumen naturale*, Descartes introduced three interlocutors.¹ Polyander is a sophisticated and experienced man, Eudoxus is a simpleton with instinctive good judgment, and Epistemon is a scholar. They discuss almost every topic, not only the issue of truth. They also dispute the idea at the heart of the present dissertation.

This idea is quite simple and not at all new. It is familiar to a scholar and any sophisticated and experienced person, but it is just as familiar to a simple man, who might have pondered on what is good and what is bad. This idea is familiar to everyone, but it is not accepted by everyone. One can assume that Polyander will oppose the idea of the absoluteness of good, and Eudoxus will defend it; and as usual, Epistemon will weigh his arguments and delay his decision. The aim of this dissertation is not so much to influence those who have already formed their views in life practice and are reluctant to relinquish them but to convince a hesitating Epistemon that this time Eudoxus is right.

To achieve this goal, the claim Eudoxus believes in, more or less naively, ought to be equipped with arguments, and it should be demonstrated that Polyander's reasoning and arguments are faulty; their claims should be formulated and contrasted more precisely than they usually are; and many terms, explanations, distinctions, and reservations must be introduced. Thus, a dissertation emerges that will satisfy neither Polyander nor Eudoxus, as it is too dry and pedantic for either. But perhaps it will satisfy Epistemon. At least it would if it could be more precise in its argumentation.

¹ R. Descartes, *The Search of Truth by Means of the Natural Light*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985, pp. 400–420. [Eds.]

I. ETHICAL RELATIVISM AND ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM

RELATIVISM

1. Before discussing the theory called ethical relativism, we should provide some clarifications.

Objects are linked to each other through various relationships; each relationship linking an object with another object corresponds to a property of that object. For instance, if object P is distant from object P_1 , then object P has the property of being distant from P_1 , and also object P_1 has the property of being distant from P .

Although each relationship linking an object with another object corresponds to a property of that object, the reverse is not true — namely, not every property of an object corresponds to a relationship of that object to another object. This state of affairs allows for a certain division of properties of objects. Namely, some of these properties are relative and some are absolute.

Every property of an object that *corresponds* to this object's *relationship* to another object or other objects is *relative*. Relative properties are properties such as: near and far, top and bottom, earlier, simultaneous, short, big, better, or best. If object P has a relative property c , there is an object P_1 , or multiple objects, in relation to which P has this property.

A property of an object that is not relative — namely, corresponds to *no* relationship of this object to another object or other objects — is an *absolute* property. Such properties are, for example, squareness or regularity. If a table is square, its squareness does not correspond to any relationship this table is in relative to other objects; there is no such object P_1 in relation to which the table would be square.

2. *Relativism*, or a relativist theory concerning a class of objects, is a theory that considers the property constituting the basis of the class to be relative. In this sense, a theory that considers *every* property of objects to be relative is universal relativism. A theory regarding truth and falsity as relative properties is logical relativism. A theory that considers good and evil, or in other words, positive and negative *values* of people and things, to be *relative* properties, is *ethical* or *axiological relativism*.

3. Ethical relativism will be the subject of the present discussion. However, this discussion must be preceded by an introductory clarification concerning good and evil. Primarily: how to understand the words “good” and “evil” as they are notoriously ambiguous words, especially “good” is used in various ways, in a narrower and broader sense, not only in everyday language but also in science.

Namely, “good” is often interpreted as exclusively moral good. Or conversely, exclusively material, utilitarian, economic good. In the first case, it is more or less synonymous with respectability (*zaczność*), and in the other, with usefulness. In the present discussion, “good” is not limited to moral good or to utilitarian good or to the sum of moral and utilitarian good; it also encompasses other goods, such as aesthetic, which are neither moral nor utilitarian. Good in this broad interpretation means the same as “value,” or more precisely, the same as a positive value; they are synonyms. In other words, good is what is valuable in some way. Evil is what has negative value. “Good” or “value” in this broad interpretation are the most general terms in the field of evaluations, just as “being” or “object” are in the field of claims.

Employing such a general concept is not devoid of difficulties. The methodological principle makes us apply only concepts that are clearly established with definitions, whereas we cannot define good and evil, at least in the usual way. This is not negligence but rather an unavoidable state of affairs: it does not derive from our choice of concepts and terms but from the nature of things that we apply those terms to. Good (in the broad interpretation) is a simple property, which cannot be taken apart. It is impossible to define it *per genus et differentiam* as it constitutes the highest genus of a whole domain of evaluations. This can hardly be surprising: following Aristotle, we cannot “go to infinity” in defining or proving. With simple properties, the end of defining is at the highest genera: “good” cannot be defined, just as “being” cannot. Common statements about good, that it is what “is desirable,” “satisfying,” “worthy of appreciation,” “better than evil,” are not good definitions and at most guide us in the direction of the meaning of the word. However, we know how to understand good and evil even without a perfect definition.

Someone might say: since we cannot define good, let us not speak of it in science, let us leave it to journalists and novelists. However, such a decision is unacceptable: it would eliminate from science all the branches no one would like to eliminate, such as ethics or aesthetics. After all, one cannot speak of moral good without speaking of good; one cannot speak of aesthetic values without speaking of values.

4. *Ethical relativism* is a theory that negates rather than claims. It does not negate that science can and should deal with good and evil, but it denies them being absolute properties of things. They are their relative properties, nothing more than a relationship between some things and other things. We can state about object *P* that it is good or evil, but it will mean only that it is so in a specific relationship with another object *P*₁. What is this relationship? According to relativism, it can be a two-way relationship: either a relationship

we tend to signify with the word *for* [Polish *dla*] or a relationship signified by the word *to* [Polish *do*]. *Two forms* of ethical relativism correspond to these.

In the first form, object P_1 , with respect to which object P has a property of being good or evil, is a human being or a *feeling entity* for whom object P is good or evil. In the second form, object P_1 is a *state of affairs* such that P is an effective *tool* or instrument *to* achieve it. In the first form, ethical relativism claims that if P is good, it is good *for someone*; in the other form, it claims that if it is good, it is good *to something* [Polish *do czegoś*].

Winning in a card game is good *for* the winner and bad *for* the loser. According to relativism in its first version, if any object has any value, it is always value *for* someone, with respect to someone. As ancient relativists claimed, following the norms of justice is good for some — that is, the vulnerable — and bad for others — that is, the powerful. Conversely, freedom to do as one pleases is good for the powerful and bad for the vulnerable.

Some examples of the second form of relativism: warm-blooded horses are good *to* move fast across land and bad *to* carry heavy loads, as opposed to cold-blooded horses. According to this form of relativism, it is similar in all other cases where we speak of good and evil. For instance, supporting vulnerable individuals is good to achieve equality among individuals, but it is bad to promote the development of powerful and naturally gifted individuals, whereas supporting powerful individuals is good and bad to achieve the opposite states of affairs.

The two forms of ethical relativism differ greatly, yet they are still both ethical relativism. They are not mutually exclusive. Ethical relativism sometimes expresses the conviction that good and evil are doubly relative and that whatever is good or evil is always good or evil *for someone and to something*. Still, it is enough that someone accepts one case of the relativity of good and evil for them to be a relativist.

5. In a simple form, the claim of ethical relativism is as follows: good and evil are relative properties. However, there are also other formulas, both for relativism in its general form and for its specific forms. Let us present these formulas for the first kind here: *mutatis mutandis*, it is easy to transform them into formulas of the second kind as well as a general formulation of ethical relativism.

First, a formula about good or evil objects rather than about the properties of good and evil: every good *object* is good in relation to (for) someone, and every bad object is bad in relation to (for) someone.

Thus, if we assume that an object that is not “good for someone” should not be called “good,” *there are no good objects* (or *bad ones*) but instead, there are only objects that are good for someone (and bad for someone).

Since in most cases an object that is good for someone is bad for someone else, and also, it may be good for a person at one time and bad for the same person at another time, this thesis of relativism can be formulated as follows: at least some good objects are not always good and not for everyone, but they are bad for some individuals and at certain moments. This formulation is sometimes expanded and replaced by another, more spectacular version, which is less precise and not equivalent to the previous one: there are no objects that are always good or bad, but every object that is good is also bad, and every object that is bad is also good. In short, *every good object is also bad* and every bad object is also good.

Even shorter and less precisely: *good and evil are the same thing*. In this formulation, ethical relativism occurs for the first time in the history of European thought in Heraclitus.² This formula was used for a very long time, and the paradoxes resulting from it have been toyed with. A work of an unknown sophist from the fifth century, known under the title of *Dialexeis*,³ states:

On the matter of what is good and what is bad contrasting arguments are put forward in Greece by educated people: some say that what is good and what is bad are two different things, others that they are the same thing, and that the same thing is good for some but bad for others, or at one time good and at another time bad for the same person. For myself, I side with the latter group.⁴

These formulations lead to certain conclusions, which the author of *Dialexeis* already drew himself:

Another view is that what is good is one thing and what is bad is another thing: as the name differs, so likewise does the reality. I myself also distinguish the two in the above-mentioned manner. For I think it not even clear what sort of thing would be good and what sort of thing bad if each of the two were the same thing and not different things; the situation would be an astonishing one indeed. And I think that the man who says the above-mentioned things would not even be able to make a reply if someone were to put the following question: . . . "Tell me, did you ever before now do to your relatives anything that was good? In such a case you were doing them something bad. Or tell me, did you ever before now do harm to your enemies? In such a case you did them a great deal that was very beneficial. And please answer me this as well: Are

² Heraclitus, fragment 58. [W.T.] Tatarkiewicz's reference is to the standard Diels-Kranz edition, where the first sentence reads "καὶ ἀγαθὸν καὶ κακόν [näml. ἓν ἐστίν]," i.e., "good and evil [are one and the same thing]." M. T. Robinson removes this introductory statement, regarding it as Hyppolitus' interpretation rather than Heraclitus' authentic words. See Heraclitus, *Fragments*, ed. and trans. T. M. Robinson, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1987, p. 41: "Doctors, who cut and burn complain that they do not receive an appropriate fee for doing these things," with a commentary on p. 121. [Eds.]

³ H. Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Berlin: Weidman 1906. [W.T.]

⁴ *Dialexeis*, ch. 1.1-2, in *Contrasting Arguments: An Edition of the Dissoi Logoi*, ed. and trans. T. M. Robinson, Salem: Ayer 1984, p. 99. [Eds.]

you not in the position of pitying beggars because they are in a very bad way and also (contrariwise) congratulating them for being well off, if the same thing is good and bad? And there is nothing to stop the King of Persia from being in the same condition as beggars. For what is for him a great deal of good is also a great deal of evil, if the same thing is good and evil.”⁵

6. Ethical relativism of the first version claims that there are no good objects that would not be good for someone (which is included in the very concept of good), every object is good for some person P_1 , but this person is understood in various ways in relativism. Thus, there are variants of relativism.

The first variant: Object P is good if it is so for *any* person P_1 , without limits, for any feeling individual.

The second variant: Object P is good if it is good for a *determinate* person P_1 , with specific qualifications.

The following statement can be encountered: an object is good if it is good for God. Also: it is good if it is so for a smart and noble person, or for an *Übermensch*. Or conversely: it is good when it is good for an average, ordinary, typical, “statistical” person. Respectively, evil is evil for God, or an *Übermensch*, or an average person. These are all examples of relativism, but they occur in different variants.

Similar variants also occur in the relativism of the *second variant*, claiming that good means good *to something* [Polish *do czegoś*]. In the *first variant*: good means good to *anything*, to any purpose. In the *second variant*: it means good to a *specific* purpose, for example, to increase the amount of energy in the universe or, according to others, to produce brave people, or to improve culture. The situation is analogous with evil.

In the second variant, there is only one object P_1 for which object P is good or bad. Thus, if it is good, it cannot be bad, and if it is bad for that P_1 , it cannot be good: since in relation to which object it could be such? Thus, formulations of the kind: “every good object is also bad” do not correspond with this variant of relativism.

7. After contrasting the main versions and formulations of the theory of relativism, we should next make a clear distinction between the theory of relativism and what it is sometimes wrongly confused with.⁶ First, one should distinguish the theory of relativism from the fact of the inconsistency of ethi-

⁵ *Dialexeis*, ch. 1.11-15, op. cit., pp. 103 and 105. [Eds.]

⁶ K. Twardowski, “O tak zwanych prawdach względnych” [On So-Called Relative Truths], in *Księga Pamiątkowa Uniwersytetu Lwowskiego ku uczczeniu pięćsetletniej rocznicy fundacji Jagiellońskiej Uniwersytetu Krakowskiego*, Lwów: Uniwersytet Lwowski 1900, pp. 1-25. [W.T.] English edition: “On So-Called Relative Truths,” in K. Twardowski, *On Actions, Products and Other Topics in Philosophy*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 1999, pp. 147-169. [Eds.]

cal judgments uttered by different individuals. This fact, not only sufficiently established by science but also evident in everyday observation, is not identical to our theory, as fact is never identical with theory, especially here, where theory and fact concern different things: theory concerns good and evil, and fact concerns people's judgments about good and evil. At most, stating a fact may entail accepting a theory as a necessary consequence of the fact, which we shall discuss later on (II, 2-6).

8. We should also distinguish the thesis that good and evil are relative from the thesis that the *truth of sentences about good and evil* is relative, that it depends on who utters a sentence, where, and in what situation.

According to the second thesis, a sentence about good or evil is true for someone — say, Peter — and it is false for someone else — say, Paul; Peter tells the truth claiming that something is good, and Paul makes a mistake claiming the same. Although this theory often assumes imprecise formulations, identical with the formulations of ethical relativism, it is not ethical relativism. Ethical relativism does not claim that truth is a relative property; according to it, both Peter and Paul, and anybody else, are telling the truth when stating that, for instance, something is good for Peter; but Peter and Paul, and anybody else, make a mistake stating that, for instance, the same is good for Paul.

The relativism that is distinguished from ethical relativism here is logical relativism; it is partial logical relativism if it states that the truth of sentences is relative only in the case of ethical sentences.

This partial logical relativism is sometimes refuted in the same way as logical relativism in general. Critics find numerous misunderstandings in its arguments. One such misunderstanding is failing to distinguish between relatively true sentences and sentences that allow exceptions: "Speaking against one's convictions is a wrong action" — this sentence is sometimes considered to be relatively true by logical relativists; it is supposedly true for some situations and some people, but it is false for other situations and people. However, if it is not true just in one case that speaking against one's convictions is a wrong action, the general sentence that "speaking against one's convictions is wrong" is not true. When it comes to exceptions, the general sentence is not "relatively true" but absolutely false.

9. Next, we should distinguish ethical relativism from a theory that can be deemed one of its forms. This theory claims that an object is only ever *good* or *bad in comparison* with another object. "In comparison" is supposed to perform the same function as "for" and "to" in other forms of relativism.

This comparative theory of good and evil comes in two versions, as object P_1 can be interpreted in two ways in it.

A. An object is good *in comparison with something good*. If P_1 is good, then P is also good when it is *similar* to P_1 . P_1 is here a *model* of good. This model P_1 could be a rule of good conduct; conduct P is good if it is similar to the conduct prescribed by rule P_1 .

This theory is not relativism as according to it, model P_1 itself is good *without comparison* with anything else, whereas other objects are equally good as the model as they are similar to it. Comparison with the model is not a relative property of their goodness but a means used to recognize the fact that they are good.

B. An object is good in comparison with something *neutral* or *bad*. If P_1 is neutral (zero on the scale of good and evil) or bad, then also P is good when it is better than P_1 . P_1 is the *measure* of good here. For example, according to this theory, pleasure is not good “in itself” but only in comparison with a neutral state or unpleasantness; similarly, unpleasantness is bad in comparison with a neutral state or with pleasure.

This is the form of the theory ethical “comparatists” often have in mind. In this form, it is not relativism either. If a good object means “better than” and a bad object means “worse than,” then there are no good or bad objects, there are only better and worse ones. Therefore, there is no property of good and no property of evil. However, ethical relativism does not claim that there is no property of good and there is no property of evil, but it claims that the property of good and the property of evil are relative properties (see I, 28 and II, 21).

The comparative theory of good and evil does not seem right. In order to know that suffering is bad, it is sufficient to experience it, it is not necessary to compare it with pleasure. Whoever refers to well-known psychological facts of the interdependence of pleasure and unpleasantness, or pleasure and suffering, to support this theory, they are clearly wrong, as these facts only show that pleasure without unpleasantness does not occur or occurs with less force, but they do not state that pleasure without comparison with unpleasantness is not something good, or that unpleasantness without comparison with pleasure is not something bad.

10. We should also distinguish ethical relativism from certain theories that it can be confused with due to the formulation: “Every good object is also bad, and every bad object is also good.” This formulation corresponds not only to ethical relativism but also to another theory that is not ethical relativism. The gist of this theory is as follows: *every object* which has *good* properties also has *bad* properties; every thought and desire, every action and every result of an action, every thing and every system of relationships, if it has good properties, it also has bad properties. Thus, there are no objects that

would be *exclusively* good or, as some say, perfect. This theory either presents it as a fact that cannot be explained further or looks for necessary connections between good and bad properties.

This theory has little to do with relativism. If objects have mixed good and bad properties, it obviously does not mean that good and evil are relative (see III, 12 ff.).

The above formulation causes confusion between ethical relativism and yet another theory. This theory sounds similar: *Every good object is bad*. In short: *Good is bad*. The main character of a certain modern novel says, "There is nothing worse than good. You wouldn't believe exactly how evil the good is that I did."⁷ Paradoxically, this statement, which is probably hard to find in textbooks on ethics but easy to encounter with people wondering about their moral life, does not adopt very strictly the terms used by it; if it had, it would be self-contradictory. Whoever says that "every good object is bad," or that "every good is evil," means either something that has the *appearances* of good (and is called "good") or something that is *considered* good, or (in deeper theories) what *wants* to be good, what *intends* to be good, what contains striving after being good; the latter concerns good and bad moral experiences and actions.

Naturally, such views can be associated with ethical relativism, but they are not identical to it or even similar to it. It is only the similarity of formulations that makes it confusing.

The formula "Every good object is also bad" is definitely not the correct formulation of relativism, and not only due to the reason cited above (I, 6). After all, ethical relativism claims that good and evil are relative, thus, it does not rule out the idea that there are things that are good *for everyone* and *to everything*, as well as bad for everyone and to everything. If an object is good for everyone and to everything, it is not bad for anyone or to anything, and therefore, it is not bad. Nineteenth-century liberals assumed that such a good is educating the working masses; it is good for the working classes themselves, as thanks to it they demand better working and living conditions and obtain them sooner or later, but it is also good for enterprises, as it provides better workers, and for consumers, as better and cheaper commodities are the effect of educating workers and workers doing a better job. Therefore, educating the working classes is good for everyone and is not bad for anyone. Thus, for relativism, there may be good objects that are not bad.

11. Common instances of failing to distinguish between ethical relativism and ethical skepticism make us remark that these are two different theories.

⁷ Z. Nałkowska, *Narcyza*, Kraków 1911.

The relationship between skepticism and relativism is exactly the same as the relationship between skepticism and a theory opposite to relativism; claiming that good is relative has the same value for skepticism as claiming that good is absolute, as the former claim is as uncertain as the latter.

Yet, even a historian of ethical skepticism, Kreibitz, included as skeptics such ethicists who claim that there is no absolute good, and he regarded them as sceptics.⁸ It seems that there are even such ethicists who have not realized and admitted even to themselves which of these two theories they profess. A fragment of Diogenes Laërtius on the ethical skepticism of the patriarch of Greek skeptics, Pyrrho, begins with: φύσει δὲ μὴ εἶναι ἀγαθὸν καὶ κακόν,⁹ and ends in: ἄγνωστον οὖν τὸ φύσει ἀγαθόν.¹⁰ Besides, this misunderstanding should be attributed to Pyrrho's ancient commentator rather than Pyrrho himself.

Relativism is sometimes confused with yet another theory, the most appropriate name for which is subjectivism, which we shall discuss in more detail presently.

SUBJECTIVISM

12. In order to discuss *ethical subjectivism*, we should introduce yet another distinction of properties — that is, subjective and objective.

A property is subjective when the possession of this property by a given object *depends on* a subject. A property is objective if it is not subjective — that is, when the possession of this property by a given object *does not depend on* any subject. It used to be common to state that an object that has a property regardless of the subject has it “by itself,” “by nature,” or that it belongs to its “nature.” This would allow for a definition without a negative phrase: every property an object has by nature is objective.

The human mind is inclined *not* to perceive properties objects have as subjective; when a thing has a given property, it has it independently from the subject. Practical, down-to-earth people usually persist in this standpoint, whereas theoreticians, especially philosophers, psychologists, or cognition theorists can easily find subjective properties among the properties of things.

⁸ J. C. Kreibitz, *Geschichte und Kritik des ethischen Skeptizismus*, Wien: Hölder 1896. [W.T.]

⁹ Diogenes Laërtius, IX, 101. [W.T.] See Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* IX, 101, trans. R. D. Hicks, London: Heinemann 1925, vol. 2, p. 513: “There is nothing good or bad by nature.” In the standard editions of the *Vitae philosophorum* IX, 101, by H. S. Long (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1964) and M. Marcovich (Stuttgart–Leipzig, Teubner 1999), this passage reads: φύσει τε μὴ εἶναι ἀγαθὸν ἢ κακόν. [Eds.]

¹⁰ “Therefore the good by nature is unknowable” (trans. Hicks, p. 513). [Eds.]

We are looking at the blue vast jolly sky and we think about its properties: it is probably blue and vast independently of me or any other subject, and it would be so even if there were no conscious beings around, whereas the sky is jolly only in virtue of the subject who perceives bright blue as jolly. If there were no such subject, the sky would not have this property. The property of being jolly is a subjective property. However, the vastness of the sky may actually be a similar issue: the sky is vast only when there is a conscious subject who assumes a unit of measurement that is smaller than the sky in their assessment of the size of the sky. If conscious subjects assumed as a unit of measurement a unit that is bigger than the sky that we can see above us, the sky would be small. If there were no conscious subjects, the sky would be neither small nor big. Big as well as small are subjective properties. So is being blue. The sky is blue only when there is a subject with a specially constructed organ of sight. If there were no subjects with eyes, or even, with specific eyes, there would be no blue color of the sky.

This sort of discussion leads to deeming certain properties subjective: the sky is only a bit of space, all properties of which are subjective, except for spatiality. Yet, some subjectivists claim as well that spatiality is a subjective property.

13. I understand a subjectivist theory — or in short: subjectivism — concerning a class of objects, to be a theory that considers the property constituting the basis of the class to be subjective. In this sense, a theory that considers every property to be subjective is universal subjectivism. In the same sense, logical subjectivism is a theory that deems the properties of truth and falsity subjective. Ethical subjectivism is a theory that deems the properties of good and evil subjective.

Therefore, ethical subjectivism claims that if an object has the property of being good or the property of being bad, it has the property depending on a subject. Without this or a similar subject, the object would be neither good nor bad. Pleasure would not have a positive value or unpleasantness would not have a negative value if there were no sentient subject.

14. In light of the above explanations, the difference between relativism and ethical subjectivism is clear:

- [R. — Good and evil are relative properties.
- [S. — Good and evil are subjective properties.
- [R. — Good is good for someone.
- [S. — Good is dependent on someone.

The connection between these two theories is psychological, and it is a very strong connection. Both theories result from a similar way of thinking and are almost always held jointly. Still, there is no logical connection between these theories. A relative property can be objective and a subjective property can be absolute. If relativism is true, then subjectivism may be true or may be false; if subjectivism is true, then relativism may be true or may be false.

15. However, ethical relativism and ethical subjectivism share a common consequence.

If good is a relative property — that is, for instance, it is good for someone — a good object may cease to be good while still remaining the same object: it was good for *P* but it is not good for *P*₁. Similarly, if good is a subjective property, and thus it is dependent on someone, then a good object, while not having changed in any way, may cease to be a good object. Therefore, both the relativity and the subjectivity of good entail its mutability.

If, however, one would like to include both ethical relativism and ethical subjectivism in one theory, one would have to assume as the basis for this theory the property of the mutability of good rather than its relativity or subjectivity. Such a theory, which claims that good is a mutable property, could be called ethical mutabilism. Indeed, relativists and subjectivists of the past constructed their theories starting from the property of the mutability of good. Also, previous enemies of ethical relativism and subjectivism primarily attempted to demonstrate the fact that good and evil are immutable rather than absolute and objective; they treated it as *de immutabili boni et mali, justi et injusti natura*.¹¹

Having discussed the relationship between ethical subjectivism and ethical relativism and the theory that could include them both, let us return to further analysis of subjectivism.

16. The thesis of ethical subjectivism is as follows: good and evil are subjective properties. The following formulations are equivalent: good and evil are properties the possession of which by a given object depends on a subject, or: every good object is good depending on someone. Moreover, we have a negative version: there is no difference by nature between a good and bad object (*nullum naturale boni et mali, justi et injusti discrimen est*). No object is by nature good and no object is by nature bad.

There is yet another kind of formulation: since no object has the property of good or evil if there is no participation of a subject, then, simply and not eva-

¹¹ “[They treated it as] having an immutable nature of good and evil, of just and unjust.” [Eds.]

sively speaking, no object inherently has the property of good and evil, but only subjects give those properties to objects: *Nous appelons valeur en les choses*, as Montaigne states, *Essais*, I, 40, *non ce qu'elles apportent, mais ce que nous y apportons*.¹² No object is good or bad unless the subject makes it good or bad.

How are we supposed to understand the claim that an object, which is neither good nor bad, is “made” good or bad by a subject? That is to say, how do we understand the dependence of good and evil in a given object on the subject, or how do we understand the subjectivity of good and evil? There are various views on that among the proponents of subjectivism. A certain number of subjectivists, especially in antiquity, presented only the negative formula: no thing is good or bad by nature. Others provide various ways to understand the dependence of good and evil on the subject. Various types of subjectivism can be distinguished according to this method.

17. The following contrast of subjectivist views seems the most fundamental:

A. Good and evil depend on a subject that can be different from the subject issuing the judgment on good and evil.

B. Good and evil depend on the subject issuing a judgment on good and evil.

The dependence of the first type occurs through a free *act* — either a contract or an order — of such importance that from then on it is valid forever or for some time. This form of subjectivism is often described with the term “conventionalism.” However, this term suggests that good and evil derive from a two-sided act (a convention, a contract), whereas for some instances in this group, it would be more correct to use a name that stresses the origin in a one-sided act, an order — for instance, the name “decretalism.”

The dependence of the second type is not derived from an act of an individual but from the individual’s psychological or physical *organization*. This most modern form of subjectivism often retains the name “subjectivism” for itself, in opposition to conventionalism.

18. Conventionalism is an earlier, ancient version of subjectivism. Greeks juxtaposed what is “by nature” (φύσει) with what is “by contract,” by establishment (θέσει), and by law (νόμῳ). This juxtaposition was applied especially to the issues of values, to what is good and what is evil, because in these matters, first of all, the “law” “establishes” something. However, this juxtaposition was also used in other domains where “law” and “establishment” may have

¹² See *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* I, 14, trans. D. M. Frame, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1965, p. 43: “We call value in them not what they bring, but what we bring to them”; M. de Montaigne, *Essais* I, ch. 40, translated into modern French by G. Michaud, Paris: Firmin-Didot 1907, p. 465: “et appellons valeur en elles, non ce qu'elles apportent, mais ce que nous y apportons.” [Eds.]

only metaphorical meaning. For instance, they said about sensual qualities that they are not “by nature” but by establishing, “by law.”

Apparently, they could not understand or express the fact that something is subjective in a different way. These terms were even used in the sphere of values, without determining who, when, and with whom made a contract, or who, when, and for whom issued such a law. According to Diogenes Laërtius, Archelaus, Socrates’s teacher, is such an indeterminate conventionalist who claimed that καὶ τὸ δίκαιον εἶναι καὶ τὸ αἰσχρὸν οὐ φύσει ἀλλὰ νόμῳ,¹³ as well as Aristippus of Cyrene, who claimed that μηδέν τε εἶναι φύσει δίκαιον ἢ καλὸν ἢ αἰσχρὸν, ἀλλὰ νόμῳ καὶ ἔθει.¹⁴ Since *ethos* is at the root of these evaluations, they do not probably begin with a specified, conscious act, but rather, they come into being in a slow and unconscious way, just like a custom.

19. However, ancient subjectivists left us several attempts at determining who and when made such a contract by virtue of which certain properties acquired a positive value while others acquired a negative value. These attempts associate a contract with the predominance of power in society, but they go in opposite directions: either the powerful imposed their will on the weak and made what was convenient for them be accepted as good, or the weak, who were the majority, restrained the powerful and achieved the opposite result: only whatever is appropriate for the weak is good. Both concepts deal with a contract imposed by force rather than an agreement made because it suits the interests of all sides making the arrangement. Both concepts were presented by Plato, who opposed them: the first was uttered by Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, and the other by Callicles in *Gorgias*.¹⁵

20. In modern times, there has often been talk of “the social contract” (French *contrat social*), explaining that social relations are the result of a contract. However, this is different from what ancient subjectivists discussed. The *contract* referred to by Rousseau and other modern thinkers is a social rather than ethical agreement.¹⁶ It explains why there is a social and legal system and why it is exactly the way it is — that is, why certain things are legal and acceptable and others are illegal and unacceptable. However, it does

¹³ Diogenes Laërtius, II, 16. [W.T.] See *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* II, 16, London: Heinemann 1925, vol. 1, p. 147: “What is just and what is base depends not upon nature but upon convention.” [Eds.]

¹⁴ Diogenes Laërtius, II, 93. [W.T.] See *Lives* II, 93, vol. 1, p. 221: “Nothing is just or honourable or base by nature, but only by convention and custom.” [Eds.]

¹⁵ Plato, *Republic*, Book I, ch. 12 and 14, 338a-341a; *Gorgias*, ch. 38-41, 482c-486d. [W.T.]

¹⁶ On “social contract,” see A. Peretiatkiewicz, *Filozofia prawa Jana Jakóba Rousseau’a* [Rousseau’s Philosophy of Law], Kraków: Gebethner i Wolff 1913, ch. 3. [W.T.]

not explain, nor does it aim to explain, why certain things are good and others are bad. Modern theoreticians of the “contract” have their own view on good and evil, independent of their view on the origin of the social and legal system. For some of them, values are more primary than the social contract, as they belong to things by nature, before any contract; one can produce a certain social system through a contract, but one cannot make a good thing cease to be so or make a bad thing become good. These social conventionalists are not ethical subjectivists. This is the case with Rousseau. For others, conversely, ethical values come after a contract, as they are established through an order issued by the authority, which in itself was formed through a contract. This standpoint is presented by Hobbes.

The modern theory also includes a sort of evolution in the concept of contract: the contract loses the quality of a historical fact and assumes the quality of a timeless and non-factual legitimization of an actual state of affairs. The “contract” becomes the reason rather than the cause of this state of affairs.

Perhaps only one modern ethicist is a conventionalist in the meaning popular in antiquity. This is Friedrich Nietzsche, whose “slave revolt” clearly resembles theories Plato opposed. This is a masterly reminder of ancient philosophy in the nineteenth century.

21. If ethical conventionalism exists in a separate form, specific to modern times, it can be called “decretalism.” A good thing is what was ordered by those who have the power to order: the state, the ruler, or the law. “There are no authentic doctrines of just and unjust, good and evil, except the laws established in each commonwealth, and that questions as to whether an action will be just or unjust, good or evil, should be addressed only to those mandated by the commonwealth to interpret its laws,” states Hobbes.¹⁷ “No law can be unjust.”¹⁸ “To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice.”¹⁹

¹⁷ T. Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. R. Tuck, M. Silverthorne, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 9–10. Tatarkiewicz quotes the Latin version (for a modern edition, see T. Hobbes, *De cive: The Latin Version*, ed. H. Warrender, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1983, p. 79). [Eds.]

¹⁸ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part II, ch. 30, 20, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996, 230. [Eds.]

¹⁹ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part I, ch. 13, 13, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996, 85. Tatarkiewicz quotes Hobbes via J. L. Mosheim’s Latin translation of R. Cudworth’s *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, printed in *Systema intellectuale hujus universi*, vol. 2, Leiden: S. & J. Juchtmans 1773, p. 631. [Eds.]

22. The Middle Ages also had their form of ethical subjectivism. It is theological subjectivism. The things that God wants or that God commands are good and bad. *Nihil esse absolute et ipsa interiori natura sua bonum aut malum, justum aut injustum, nulla legis cujusdam aut mandati divini ratione habita: Dei meram voluntatem et arbitrium . . . ejusque leges, quae vel vetant vel jubent, primam et unicam omnis justitiae et unjustitiae normam esse ac regulam.*²⁰ Even the love of God is inherently neutral and is good only because God commands it. Commanding something that is actually forbidden as a sin would not contradict the divine law (*jus divinum naturale*). *Aliter tamen potuit Deus ordinare,*²¹ as Ockham often wrote. God might command perjury, blasphemy, etc. God does not command what is good by nature as there is no such good.

The motive to adopt such a standpoint was usually religious. There seem to be two ways to express God's power. These ways are even opposite: either to exalt the creation in order to praise the Creator as well, or to humble the creation in order to emphasize the infinite gap between the creation and the Creator. Theological subjectivism was associated with the latter standpoint. No created thing has a natural value, natural superiority. This state of affairs seemed to correspond better with God's dignity, as his omnipotence is not limited by any law and any natural advantage of certain things and objects, and his will is unreservedly free.

Mutakallimūn,²² orthodox Muslims who denied the existence of any forces and causal relationships in the world and understood the world as a set of unconnected atoms, did so to demonstrate that only God with his power and incessant vigil holds these atoms together, connected in space and time; they also denied things the properties of good and evil so that God did not have to take into account their good or evil and was able to endow them with such properties freely.

²⁰ See R. Cudworth, *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, Book I, ch. 1, 5, ed. S. Hutton, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 14: "[Modern theologians do not only seriously, but zealously, contend in like manner] that there is nothing absolutely, intrinsically, and naturally good and evil, just and unjust, antecedently to any positive command or prohibition of God; but that the arbitrary will and pleasure of God, . . . by its commands and prohibitions, is the first and only rule and measure thereof." Throughout the paper, Tatarkiewicz refers to the Latin translation by J. L. Mosheim in R. Cudworth, *Systema intellectuale hujus universi*, vol. 2, Leiden: S. & J. Juchtmans 1773, pp. 627-746. The present quote is found on p. 631. [Eds.]

²¹ "Yet God could have ordained otherwise." [Eds.]

²² Mutakallimūn are Muslim practitioners of speculative theology, *kalam*. One of the schools of *kalam*, the Asharites (opposed to Mutazilites) subscribed to the divine-command theory of justice (labeled "theological subjectivism" here). [Eds.]

This doctrine was not dominant in the Church, but it always had its proponents, starting with the Church Fathers. All concepts of this type, where creation is humbled in order to exalt God, begin with Tertullian. In fact, there is a sentence in his works: *Non quia bonum est, auscultare debemus, sed quia Deus praecepit.*²³ This view, further reinforced by Duns Scotus and Ockham, was still prevalent in the seventeenth century, which retained some remnants from the Middle Ages, and it was even the very concept that the enemies of subjectivism of those times fought the most zealously. A writer who was undoubtedly Polish, Joannes Szydlovius, Jan Szydłowski, the author of the work *Vindiciae quaestionum aliquot difficultium*,²⁴ published in Franeker in 1643, was sometimes quoted as the most significant representative of theological subjectivism.

Descartes, a man of the new era, found this issue valid and also very difficult. In his *Meditations*, he decided that the essence of every thing is eternal and unchangeable; however, when Gassendi warned him in the *Objections* that accepting such a notion of essence will result in something eternal and unchangeable besides God existence, and therefore, it cannot be subordinate to God, Descartes resorted to evasion in his *Replies*:

But just as the poets suppose that the Fates were originally established by Jupiter, but that after they were established he bound himself to abide by them, so I do not think that the essences of things, and the mathematical truths we can know concerning them, are independent of God. Nevertheless, I do think that they are unchangeable and eternal because God willed and decreed that they should be so.²⁵

When applied to good and evil, this means: certain objects are good by nature and certain objects are bad by nature, but they are by nature so because God commanded it. However, this evasion is met by radical objectivists with the response: this is none other than admitting that the properties of good and evil are subjective, or even dependent on God's command.

23. In contemporary philosophy, ethical conventionalism and decretalism are rare. However, subjectivism in a narrower sense is prevalent. Without anyone's acts of will, without agreements or commands, a thing that is by its nature neither good nor bad becomes good or bad due to the very nature of the subject.

²³ "We should listen not because it is good but because God commanded so." See Tertullianus, *De poenitentia*, c. 4, *Patrologia Latina*, 1, 1234A. [Eds.]

²⁴ "Solutions to a number of difficult issues." [Eds.]

²⁵ R. Descartes, *Objections and Replies, Author's Replies to the Fifth Set of Objections*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985, 261 (AT VII 380). Tatarkiewicz quotes Descartes via Mosheim's Latin translation of Cudworth's *Treatise*, in *Systema intellectuale hujus universi*, op. cit., p. 639. [Eds.]

Dependence on the subject may be understood in various ways here:²⁶ as dependence a) on the feelings of the subject, b) on the needs of the subject's will, c) on the subject's judgment.

Respectively, the thesis of subjectivism will be as follows.

- (a) Whatever satisfies the subject's feelings is good.
- (b) Whatever satisfies the subject's will (desire, appetite) is good. Because we want what satisfies our needs, therefore: what satisfies our needs is good. This is sometimes expressed more concisely: whatever we desire is good; and: whatever we need is good. It is not only that what we need and desire is good, but also it is good because we need and desire it.
- (c) Whatever we deem good is good.

The judgment on these things can be perceived as a secondary phenomenon, depending on our feelings and needs. Then formulations (a) and (b) are spot on. However, we may also interpret judgment as a primary phenomenon: the propensity to certain judgments is a primary fact, which cannot and does not have to be explained in terms of feelings or desires. This view corresponds to formulation (c).

24. A subject that good and evil depend on can also be interpreted in various ways. Besides the most natural interpretation — that is, that a subject is a conscious individual — there is also the view that a subject is a set of conscious individuals or the majority of conscious individuals belonging to a certain set.²⁷ Respectively, subjectivism can be individualist, universalist, or “majorist.”

A. What satisfies our needs (feelings, methods of judgment) is good. This interpretation does not require further explanation.

B. What satisfies the needs (feelings, methods of judgment) of society is good. According to this interpretation, the judgment of good and evil is not an individual judgment, or: an individual judgment of good is submitted to society's judgment.

Subjectivists resort to this interpretation, having realized that it is impossible to find a parallel between the needs or feelings of any individual and the judgments on the value of things. Particular individuals have no power to impose their nature on things and thus “make” them good or bad. However, society is supposed to have such power. The bigger the set of individuals satis-

²⁶ On the types of ethical subjectivism, see G. E. Moore, *Ethics*, III and IV (“The Objectivity of Moral Judgement”), London: Williams and Norgate 1912. [W.T.]

²⁷ On non-individualist subjectivism, see E. Durkheim, “Jugements de valeur et jugements de réalité,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 19(4), 1911, pp. 437-453. [W.T.]

fied with the object, and — that is, the bigger this “society” is — the “stronger” the property of values that reside in the object is.

The set of all humans and even all conscious individuals is a borderline case. Besides, ethical subjectivists rarely leave the sphere of people in their discussions — either thinking that only humans issue judgments on values and thus create these values or that we cannot know anything about the judgments of other individuals. Subjectivism is usually anthropological if it is not individualist.

C. Common and anthropological subjectivism are based on the conviction that there is a common nature of all conscious beings, or at least all people, such that there are needs and desires or feelings or judgments that are common to all individuals. Facts do not seem to confirm this universality. Ultimately, this universality is not necessary to explain the subjective nature of good and evil. It is enough that within humanity, or even within a given social group, the *majority* makes a given judgment; it is sufficient that something suits the majority. And this is what is “good.”

This standpoint, not usually distinguished from universalism, could be called “majorism.”

25. These are the main forms of ethical subjectivism. We should also make the distinction between subjectivism and theories that merely resemble ethical subjectivism. The first theory claims that “making judgments on good and evil is subjectively conditioned,” or to be more precise, “the condition for making judgments on good and evil is the occurrence of certain mental states of the person judging — for instance, certain emotions towards the judged object.”

This theory is not ethical subjectivism as, according to it, making judgments on good and evil is subjective — that is, dependent on the subject rather than on the object having these properties. Yet only a theory according to which having the properties of good and evil depends on the subject is ethical subjectivism, according to the definition (I, 13). One should naturally agree that making judgments on good and evil and learning about good and evil is conditioned by the occurrence of certain mental states; and one may accept it without assuming the standpoint of ethical subjectivism.

26. Ethical subjectivism should be distinguished from yet another commonly expressed view, which states that not every object can be good or bad; namely, no physical object is good or bad, and it is *only mental* objects that are good or bad — for instance, personalities, experiences, or striving.

This view is more commonly uttered with a certain concession to different views. Not only mental objects are good and bad, but also certain other objects that have emerged due to the mental objects. People, their personalities

and experiences, as well as their actions and products, are good and bad. This means that either mental objects or such objects for which mental objects were the condition for their occurrence are good and bad. If a given mental fact did not occur, no good or bad object may exist. This fact can be of any type and may occur in the mind of an individual other than the one making a judgment on good and evil. However, such a mental fact is a condition of something being good or bad; good and evil depend on it.

This view might seem not to differ from ethical subjectivism; since good and evil depend on a mental fact, they depend on a subject; the dependence of good and evil on a subject is just a thesis of ethical subjectivism.

However, these are two different views. Equating them does not take into consideration the additional requirement of a definition of a subjective property (I, 12) and ethical subjectivism. This requirement, which explains the meaning of the word “dependent,” states: it depends on a subject whether an object has a property if the object would not have this property without the subject. Yet the discussed view does not determine this issue. It states that the existence of a good or bad object depends on the subject, but it does not state that it depends on the subject and the fact that the object is good or bad.

One may consistently claim that good and bad objects are of a mental and humanist character without claiming that good and evil are subjective properties — that is, without supporting ethical subjectivism.

27. Next, we should make a distinction between ethical subjectivism and a theory that could be called the theory of subjective ethical criteria.²⁸

Let us juxtapose two claims: “What people consider to be good is good” and “What is good is considered to be good by people.” These two claims sound similar but are very different. The first one is a subjectivist claim whereas the second one is not. According to the first, “good” and “what people consider to be good” are two expressions with the same meaning and thus, they signify the same object. According to the second one, each expression has a different meaning and there is only a factual coincidence between what the first expression signifies and what the second expression signifies. There are certain good objects and people consider these very objects to be good.

This claim presents a subjective criterion for good, but it does not state that good is subjective, and therefore, it is not ethical subjectivism.

²⁸ On the subjectivity of good and the subjectivity of the criteria of good, see G. E. Moore, *Ethics*, III. [W.T.]

28. Another view often equated with ethical subjectivism is ethical *nominalism*.²⁹ This theory has only a negative thesis in common with subjectivism — that is, that no objects are good or bad “by themselves,” “by nature,” or “objectively.” However, later on, the theory claims that no one ever makes these objects good or bad and that generally there are no good or bad objects in the world; this is where it differs from subjectivism. According to ethical nominalism, “good” and “evil” are words with a similar function to exclamations such as “oh” and “ah,” which signify nothing but only express a state of the speaker — for instance, fear or delight; “good” and “evil” also signify nothing (as there are no good or bad objects in the world) but they express something — that is, desire or will. For instance, if certain objects suit our needs or desires and ensure the success of our actions, we call them “good.” However, we act inaccurately, as we refer to an object with a word that does not signify this object but only expresses our reaction to this object.

Therefore, the difference between subjectivism and nominalism is the following: according to the former, objects “make” things good and bad, and according to the latter, they only name them good and bad.

Nominalism is not subjectivism, but it is non-objectivism [Polish *a-objektywizm*], just as subjectivism is; it could be called subjectivism only if subjectivism was defined negatively as a claim that good and evil fail to be properties that are objectively inherent to objects.

II. ON THE CRITICISM OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM AND SUBJECTIVISM

CRITICISM OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM

1. All sentences can be divided into two groups: sentences that *state or ascertain* [Polish *stwierdzają*] a state of affairs that is given directly in some way and sentences that say something about a state of affairs that is not given directly and that may be available to us only through *reasoning*. Also all sentences and groups of sentences called “theories” can be divided into these two classes.

With this division, ethical relativism and ethical subjectivism will be put into different groups even though they are so similar. Relativism is in the first group: whether good and evil are relative properties can be ascertained directly, by analyzing these properties. Subjectivism is in the second group: it is

²⁹ On ethical nominalism, see M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die Materiale Wertethik*, Part II, ch. 4, *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* 2, 1916. [W.T.]

impossible to ascertain directly whether good or evil, or generally, any property, is subjective — that is, whether having this property depends on a subject.

The tasks before these two theories are also different. The task of ethical relativism is to correctly *state* [Polish *stwierdzić*] its thesis. Relativists neither need nor can prove it, just as we neither need nor can prove that something that is far away is always so in relation to something and that something square is so in relation to something. The task of subjectivism is to *prove* its thesis.

A similar difference occurs between the opposite theories asserting that good and evil are absolute properties and that they are objective properties. A theory asserting that they are objective properties must prove its assertion (just as one that asserts that they are subjective properties). By contrast, the theory that asserts that good and evil are absolute properties is supposed to *state or ascertain* a given state of affairs (just as does one that asserts that they are relative properties). It is not supposed to prove or disprove but only to state a given state of affairs and convince others that the statement is correct, and the statement of the opposite theory is incorrect.

However, this state of affairs is not commonly accepted. The proponents of relativism generally believe that they can prove their theory on the basis of a fact of a specific kind. This fact is the inconsistency of ethical judgments. We should therefore take a standpoint on this fact.

2. From Greek sophists and skeptics to contemporary relativists and subjectivists, there have always been authors who compared and contrasted ethical convictions and judgments to prove their incompatibility. An extensive account of such contrasts has survived from antiquity in the skeptical *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* by Sextus Empiricus. We read there (Book III, chapter 24)³⁰ that Greeks consider life to be a good, whereas Thracians sit around a newly born baby and cry over it. Uncovering one's arms is good and acceptable in Sparta but it is not in Ionia. Not providing higher education to boys is considered good in Sparta but not in Ionia. Tattoos are considered pretty for girls in Thrace but elsewhere, it is a punishment for criminals. Scalping an enemy and tying their skull to one's saddle is popular in Scythia whereas a Greek would not enter the same house together with a person who would do such a thing. Certain tribes kill infirm elderly people, eat their dead, marry their sisters, make specific kinds of sacrifices, eat specific dishes, wear specific clothes, and they do it in the belief that these actions are good, whereas the same actions in other tribes are considered bad and reprehensible.

³⁰ See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, edited by J. Annas, J. Barnes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, pp. 193-205 (Annas and Barnes intentionally omit the heading of chapter 24). [Eds.]

3. Also contemporarily, just like in Greece, there are researchers of inconsistencies and discrepancies in people's views, especially in their views on good and evil.³¹ Greeks only knew their convictions and customs as well as those of their neighbors and the myths and legends of various tribes, from which they rightly inferred traces of ethical beliefs from earlier times. Contemporary researchers have at their disposal vast ethnographical and historical material. However, their discourse is strikingly similar to the ancient discourse.

Here are some characteristic examples from among numerous facts quoted by contemporary researchers: The custom of killing elderly people still survives in Hottentots, in Melanesia, and in the Fiji islands. Tibetans peel the skin off corpses to attract vultures and make pancakes out of ground bones mixed with brain, which they then give animals to eat. Other tribes eat their dead themselves. For ancient Persians, killing a dog, especially a pregnant one, was one of the most severe crimes. Tahitians believe eating in other people's company is highly inappropriate. For Kamchadals, it is a sin to save a drowning person, even yourself; someone saved from drowning is not let inside the house and is considered dead. An aboriginal Australian whose wife has died will only achieve inner peace when he kills a woman from another tribe. Eskimos do not have in their language any words denoting a lie, treachery, or war; they share everything among themselves and it is unheard of that one of them goes hungry when others are well off. Some tribes believe that smoking tobacco is so bad that it can only be compared with murder. Many tribes allow for killing a barbarian, aborting a fetus, burning a wife at a stake together with her husband's corpse, some allow the father of a family to kill his children and a master to kill a slave, or allow or even require to sacrifice people to gods.

One must only compare ethnographic data with the appropriate contemporary facts of European life: it is clear there is no agreement between people regarding those issues.

4. There is no agreement. But where does exactly this lack of agreement lie?³² Is it a lack of agreement between judgments on what is good and what is bad? In a significant number of these cases, the issue is differences in habits rather than differences in judgments on good and evil. People who stick to habits do not necessarily think that a given action is good or another action is bad.

As for the other facts mentioned above, there are in fact different ethical convictions, but these are convictions of tribes with distinct cultures and living

³¹ Such divergencies in ethical judgments have been vividly presented in A. Świętochowski, *Źródła moralności* [The Sources of Morality], Warszawa: Gebethner & Wolff 1912, pp. 24-30. The facts discussed in this paragraph are drawn from Świętochowski's book. [W.T.]

³² Paragraph 4 draws on M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik*, Part II, op. cit. [W.T.]

in different conditions. Thus, a judgment in the same form may carry a different meaning for different peoples, and a judgment with the same meaning may have a different form. A dog has a different significance for shepherds than for us, and killing a dog carries a different weight. For warriors or nomadic peoples, saving the lives of infirm elderly people is difficult if not impossible and would constitute a burden and pose a danger to the whole tribe.

The peoples whose judgments are sometimes compared are often at different mental levels; their understanding of issues is not identical. What can be taken as a difference in valuing things is often a difference in their understanding. This explains, for instance, various tribes deviating from the rule of valuing human life and a ban on murder. In some tribes, it is allowed to kill a barbarian and abort a fetus, as neither are humans. One should burn a wife at the stake together with her husband's corpse because a woman does not have selfhood [Polish *osobowość*]. The father of the family can kill his son, just as (according to Mommsen's comparison³³) he is allowed to "cut off his own body part," and one can kill a slave just as one can "destroy one's property."

In many cases, the differences between ethical convictions come from the fact that a tribe harbors superstitions and makes an intellectual rather than moral error. When an aboriginal Australian tries to kill a woman from another tribe after his wife dies, he does so because he believes that any death is the result of someone's ill will, which must be shattered. When a Kamchadal does not save a drowning person, it is because he sees the will of God, the higher spirits, or nature in someone being engulfed in water and he does not want to oppose it. When certain tribes believe smoking tobacco to be a great evil, it is because they are convinced it is a poison.

In order to *compare* peoples of other groups in terms of their moral values, it is first necessary to *reduce* such peoples of groups to the *same* conditions in terms of their intellectual culture, their techniques of action, the levels of expression of their value-estimations and their extramoral estimations, their degrees and types of interest, their ability to suffer, etc.³⁴

When someone presents peoples' judgments on what is good and bad without having gone through the standardization, they act no different from

³³ See M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik*, p. 184: "Es ist weiterhin derselbe Grund vorhanden, wenn im alten Rom der pater familias einerseits seine Kinder, der freie römische Bürger seine Sklaven töten konnte – die ersteren »so, wie er sich selbst ein Glied abschneiden darf«, die leeren »wie eine Sache« (Mommsen)." [Eds.]

³⁴ M. Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, trans. M. S. Frings, R. L. Funk, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1976, p. 298. Tatarkiewicz's original reference: M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik*, Part II, ch. 5, pp. 166-167. [Eds.]

someone who contrasts the results various calculators achieved without taking into consideration the fact that one used the decimal system and the other used the duodecimal system.

However, when the standardization occurs, it turns out that the respective judgments on good and evil passed by the ancients and by us, by the inhabitants of Fiji and by Eskimos or Europeans are not that different. Some peoples bury their dead, others eat them, but both do it to honor the dead; honoring the dead is obligatory for both, and it is only the form that differs. Killing infirm elderly people is not accepted nowadays, but there are some nowadays who do not value very highly life weighed down with hopeless suffering, and euthanasia has its advocates. Peoples do not vary greatly in terms of the assessment of modesty, but for some modesty means covering one's face, for others it is covering one's shoulders, for some it means refraining from eating in company. The facts concerning Eskimos presented above do not warrant the conclusion that their ethical convictions differ from ours, on the contrary: their convictions seem similar, only their nature is better, and their actions are more synchronized with their convictions. Making human sacrifices does not prove that life is of no value to the people who do it; they value it as highly as those who, in different times, sacrifice their own life for their homeland or the progress of science.

It is hard to find a tribe that does not consider life, happiness, sparing people pain, respect for elders, or loyalty towards the closest relations to be good and immodesty or ingratitude to be bad. Out of these divergencies between people mentioned by historians and ethnologists, which they present as divergencies between convictions on what is good and bad, a large part consists of various extra-ethical issues, especially habits, which are by their nature different depending on the place, time, and conditions.

5. However, one cannot claim the opposite, that there is universal consent among people when it comes to convictions concerning good and evil. Is there any agreement at all in any domain? It is not hard to find the cause of the lack of universal consent in these convictions.

A. Humanity discovers goods gradually, in conjunction with its own development and the development of events. We understand that primitive man, not highly developed and absorbed with physical work, was not able to devote attention to subtle, complicated values. There was certainly a time when not all goods were known, experienced, or evaluated; this might still be the case now.

B. The limited human mind cannot usually encompass all goods simultaneously; when it is concerned with some goods, it becomes deaf to others. *Nihil humani a me alienum puto* was more often a slogan than reality.

C. Deviations in the mentality of individuals and groups occur in a similar way as in other areas of life. A common phenomenon is the atrophy of the sense of a certain good (usually associated with hypertrophy of the sense of another good) or deprivation of the sense of good. Freedom is a good, as well as law and order. The sense of freedom and the sense of order correspond to those goods. It would seem they are simple goods and it is easy to get a sense of them. However, it is clear that whole nations, and cultural ones at that, demonstrate atrophy of the sense of freedom, not only the sense of freedom of other nations but also their own, whereas other nations demonstrate atrophy of the sense of order and hypertrophy of the sense of freedom.

6. Although the inconsistency of ethical judgments is not such as it is usually presented, it still exists. The question is: what results from this inconsistency? Is it necessary to assume a relativist standpoint, as relativists believe? Does the inconsistency of ethical judgments constitute an argument in favor of their theory? After all, the inconsistency of ethical judgments can be explained from the point of view of non-relativist ethical theories. It can be explained from the point of view of relativism, but also nominalism, skepticism, or even the standpoint that accepts good as absolute.

Relativism says: something that is good is good for someone. What is good for one person may not be good for another. Hence the inconsistency of ethical judgments on what is good.

Nominalism says: there are no good objects in the world. "Good" is a word that expresses only a certain state of an individual evoked by certain objects – for instance, the state of satisfaction. Objects evoking this state can metaphorically be called good. They are different for different individuals. Hence the inconsistency of judgments on what is good.

Skepticism says: it is impossible to know good. Whatever people claim about good, these are only opinions. When it is impossible to know what a thing is like, it is possible to have various opinions of this thing. Hence the inconsistency of judgments on what is good.

Finally, the last theory says: good is an absolute property. It is also a cognizable property, but it is not cognized by everyone and always. It is easy to make a mistake when cognizing it. Where there are mistakes, there are also inconsistencies between views. When two people present two inconsistent views on the same object, at least one of them is mistaken. People's fallibility is the reason for the inconsistency of judgments on what is good.

Therefore, we can interpret the inconsistency of views on good in a relativist way but also in other ways.

This is an issue of the inconsistency of views that is usually associated with ethical relativism and put forward as an argument for it. This inconsistency is a fact to some extent, but as it can be explained in ways other than relativistic, it is not an argument for ethical relativism.

Other arguments in favor of relativism are rarely presented. This lies in the nature of the theory itself, which is of the kind that is supposed to ascertain a certain state of affairs rather than justify it.

This nature of the theory also restricts the task for those who wish to refute it. Perhaps refuting it is all about leading to a mistake in stating a given state of affairs.

7. I believe ethical relativism to be wrong and I wish to present another theory of good in the present work, inconsistent with ethical relativism.

To argue that relativism is wrong, I can only present language material that allows for stating the state of affairs in question more easily, and then point out the conceptual confusion relativism is guilty of, thanks to which it gives the impression of being correct.

There is no doubt we use the word “good” [Polish *dobry*] and “a good” [Polish *dobro*] in various meanings. Julian Ochorowicz states:

A horse is good when it pulls or carries weight well; a drawing is good when it resembles reality; a padlock is good when it locks well; a hat is good when it is comfortable, pretty, or durable; a profit is good when it corresponds to the capital; a book is good when it teaches or entertains; a pedigree is good when its corresponds to vanity; a method is good when it saves time and effort; a wet nurse is good when she feeds the baby well; a government is good when it defends rather than stifles citizens; death is good when it comes suddenly (for some) or with enough warning (for others).³⁵

Dictionaries systematically capture this ambiguity: Jan Karłowicz’s *Dictionary of the Polish Language* distinguishes 15 meanings of the word “good” [Polish *dobry*].³⁶

There is no doubt that in some of these meanings, or even in most, good is a relative property — that is, everywhere where “good” means as much as “profitable,” “pleasant,” “suitable,” and where it can be replaced with these words without changing the meaning much. We say, “good for someone,” but then “good” means as much as “profitable”; we say “good to something [Polish

³⁵ J. Ochorowicz, “Metoda w etyce” [Method in Ethics], *Przegląd Filozoficzny* 9(1), 1906, pp. 1-62, at 39. [W.T.]

³⁶ J. Karłowicz, A. A. Kryński, W. Niedźwiedzki, *Słownik języka polskiego*, vol. 1 (A-G), Warszawa: Subscriber’s Edition 1900, pp. 475-476. [Eds.]

do czegoś]” but then “good” means as much as “suitable.” There are many people who use the word “good” and are aware of only those meanings of the word, many connect only specific intuitions with the word; naturally, those must support ethical relativism.

An opponent of relativism does not have to and cannot deny the idea that the word “good” is sometimes used in such meanings, or deny that the property which it signifies in these meanings is a relative property. It is sufficient to demonstrate that the word is used in another meaning as well, where it signifies an absolute property.

For instance, we say, “it is good [Polish *dobrze się stało*] that justice prevailed,” and we do not mean that it was good “for someone” or “to something.” We also speak of “moral good”; we say that nobleness is something good and meanness is something bad; are they something good and bad “for someone” and “to something”? Those using the nouns “good” and “evil” and the adjectives “good” and “bad” in this meaning and context use them without complementing them with “for someone” and “to something.”

In particular, this meaning can be found in some specific phrases. Even if someone only accepts relative good, personal good — consisting, for instance, in the idea that someone’s desires are to be fulfilled — this someone will probably admit that it is better when the desires of two people are fulfilled than when only the desires of one person are fulfilled; it is good for the first one that his desires are fulfilled, it is good for the second one that his desires are fulfilled, but for whom — Russell rightly asks — is it better that both desires should be fulfilled?³⁷

Anyway, there can only be a doubt as to the adjectives “good” and “bad,” sometimes used with the qualifications “for someone” to “to something” and sometimes without them, whereas the nouns “good” and “evil” do not possess this duality: they are usually used without qualification, signify constant properties that are not relative, and the language instinct protests against saying “good [Polish noun *dobro*] for someone,” and especially “good [*dobro*] to something.”

When we speak of good and bad things in such expressions, “good” and “evil” signify properties that are not relative. “Good” in this meaning is not synonymous with “pleasant,” “profitable,” or “suitable.”

This is the meaning that is exclusively considered in the present paper, and this is the meaning usually considered in ethical discussions. When we consider “pleasure,” “profitability,” and “suitability,” it is more correct to use these words rather than the ambiguous word “good.”

³⁷ B. Russell, *Elements of Ethics*, in *Philosophical Essays*, II, London 1910. [W.T.] Tatarkiewicz may be referring to p. 18 or pp. 20-21, but no passage on pp. 16-25 (ch. II “The Meaning of Good and Bad”) seems to deal with the exact same question. [Eds.]

8. What remains is to explain the origin of the pretense of legitimacy that relativism undoubtedly can boast of. False theories usually draw the pretense of legitimacy from confusing concepts and claims. There are several such confusions in relativists' opinions.³⁸

A. Confusing good with certain good properties — for instance, pleasure or utility. Pleasure is always relative, it is always someone's pleasure, pleasure "for someone." Similarly with utility or benefit: it is always someone's benefit, usefulness "for someone"; everything that is useful is always used "to something." However, neither pleasure nor utility is identical with goodness. A given state may be good because it is pleasurable, a thing may be good because it is useful, but it may also be good for other reasons. An object's goodness must often be contrasted with its pleasantness or usefulness, and then we can say that, for instance, something is pleasant or useful for a given individual or individuals, but it is not good. Damaging a great work of art is bad although it brings profit to a restorer. Sickness and suffering are bad although doctors and pharmacists profit from it. The death of a strong, healthy man is bad although it is profitable for the grave digger and funeral home owner and may bring some pleasure to the successors as well as the dead person's enemies or rivals. Conversely, a noble, generous deed is a good deed although it and its results may be decidedly harmful to the person performing it and to others. Aristotle rightly claims that differences in views on good result from the fact that good often brings harm to many, and evil brings profit.³⁹

This discussion seems to contain a contradiction: utility is relative; good is absolute; therefore, if utility is good, then relative utility is absolutely good. This contradiction is illusory, though, as there is no claim that utility is simultaneously relative and absolute.

B. Confusing "a good object that is to something" [Polish *jest do czegoś*, i.e., serves a purpose] with "an object that is good to something" [Polish *jest dobry do czegoś*]. Good and bad objects, just like other objects, can be used for something; we can say that they are "to something": "A good object *P* is useful to something." However, we cannot equate this statement with a similar sounding but different statement "Object *P* is good to something." Out of these statements, only the second expresses ethical relativism.

C. Confusing a person taking part in an event with the person "who the event is good for." No one can deny that there are people who take part in a good or bad event — its "actors," so to speak. However, one cannot draw the conclusion that events are good or bad only for certain people — namely, for

³⁸ G. E. Moore, *Ethics, passim*, and *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903, *passim*. [W.T.]

³⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, ch. 3. [W.T.]

those who take part in the event — from the fact that there are people taking part in events that are good or bad. *Hamlet* is beautiful not only for the actors taking part in the performance. The fact that not everyone wants to and can play in *Hamlet* does not result in it not being beautiful for everyone.

D. Confusing the fact of having the property of being good with the fact of recognizing this property. Recognizing may be difficult. It is usually hard to determine whether a thing, which has numerous and complex properties, is good or bad. When a fight starts, and it must end with destroying one of the fighting sides, it is difficult to say whether it is better that the lion was eaten by the snake or that the snake was eaten by the lion.

This recognition is all the more difficult here as we usually do not consider these issues in an unbiased way. As the issue is difficult and prone to bias, various people's judgments look different. The dissimilarity of judgments on a given thing is commonly confused with this thing's relativity.

E. Confusing absolute good with absolutely correct actions and absolutely binding rules. This will be discussed in the last chapter.

9. We have discussed universal relativism, according to which good and evil are good and evil for any person or for any state of affairs. It is the same with other forms of relativism — for instance, one claiming that good is the same as good for [Polish *dla*] an *Übermensch*. Or: if something is good, it means it is good for [Polish *do*] raising the cultural level.

Someone stating that “good” amounts to “good for raising the cultural level” probably considers raising the cultural level to be good. However, raising the cultural level is not good for raising the cultural level! Raising the cultural level is good although it does not lead to another good: it is good although it is not “good to something.”

CRITICISM OF ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM

10. Subjectivism is a different type of theory than relativism.⁴⁰ Therefore, a theoretician's standpoint on subjectivism is different than in the case of relativism. Subjectivism is a theory that cannot state, but it must prove. Yet, it is such a simple and general theory that arguments are hard to come by, but arguments to refute it are also hard to find.

Arguments in favor of ethical subjectivism are as follows:

⁴⁰ Arguments against ethical subjectivism have been collected by L. Nelson, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, III, 2: “Widerlegung der subjektivistischen Wertlehre,” Leipzig: Veit 1917, p. 582 and ff. [W.T.]

- A. inconsistency of ethical judgments,
- B. relativity of good and evil,
- C. emotional character of evaluation,
- D. dependence of changes in the value of objects on the changes occurring in the evaluating subjects.

11. However, these arguments may not be considered sufficient to justify ethical subjectivism.

A. The inconsistency of judgments on values is a fact. Still, this fact does not necessarily lead to the theory of subjectivism, just as it does not lead to the theory of relativism. The idea that *A* claims that *X* is good, and *B* claims that the same *X* is bad, does not result in good's existence being dependent on *A* and evil's existence being dependent on *B* — that is, it does not result in good and evil being subjective.

12. B. Another argument presented in favor of the theory of ethical subjectivism is the theory of relativism (in a “personal” form: “Good is good for someone”). Values are subjective if they are relative with regard to people.

However, ethical relativism (1) is not a true statement (as was mentioned above) and (2) is not an argument in favor of ethical subjectivism, as the claim of ethical subjectivism does not follow from it. Even if relativism were true, subjectivism would not have to be true. A relative property does not have to be a subjective property. Distance — for instance, the distance between a city and the sea — is a relative property, as the city's property is its location *relative* to the sea, but it is not a subjective property, as it is not a property the city has only in relation to a subject. A similar relationship occurs between the relativity and subjectivity of any other property. Thus, if good and evil were subjective, at any rate, it would not be because they are relative.

13. C. The third argument is based on a psychological contrast — that is, a contrast between “cognitive” and “emotional” states.⁴¹ In cognitive states, perceiving or thinking, we reproduce certain properties of an object, which is why these states are “of an objective nature.” In emotional states, we do not reproduce anything; an emotion is a matter all sources of which lie in the subject, and it is “of a subjective nature.” Thoughts and senses are always directed at a given object, whereas an emotion does not have its object but, at most, it is connected with a thought or perception having its object.

⁴¹ For an analysis of mental states in which evaluation and realization of values takes place, see studies from the phenomenological school — among others, D. von Hildebrand, “Die Idee der sittlichen Handlung,” *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* 3, 1916, pp. 126-252. [W.T.]

Hence the syllogism: everything which is a matter of emotion is subjective; values are a matter of emotion; thus, values are subjective.

The syllogism is formally correct, but the premises are not certain. As for the minor premise: the psychological division between cognitive states and emotional states is not one of those that allow for the unambiguous introduction of a given object into one of the classes of the division. It is probably easy to assert about certain states that they are emotional states and to assert about others that they are not. However, these are states for which this judgment is in doubt. Such states are those in which we perceive values and evaluate the value of things. When I realize, for instance, that nobleness is a positive value, or that a given action I witnessed is morally good, is this realization a matter of emotion or is it not only that — or maybe even not at all — a matter of emotion?

As for the major premise: how do we know that everything that is a matter of emotion is subjective? This relationship between emotion and subjectivity is not necessary and neither is it factual. It could probably be claimed that something that is an issue of emotion is not necessarily objective and is often not objective. However, this is different from claiming that it is never objective.

14. D. The last argument refers to the fact that objects that have a given value change it while not changing another property. Objects that had value when one was a child have lost it now, although they have not changed in any way. The change in an object's value is not conditioned by a change in the object; therefore, one can assume that it is conditioned by the subject.

However, one can question the fact that there have been changes in values without changes in any other property of that object. Indeed, there are objects that we can only use in our childhood; when we do not use something, we are inclined to presume it does not have any value, but such a presumption may be wrong. If a given object is useful or pleasurable for certain people in their childhood, it has value because of that and does not lose it even though the persons in question are no longer children. Yet these persons may forget about its value and may even mistakenly deny it its value. An object has a specific value although this value is not equally clear for everyone at all times, and not everyone takes advantage of it to the same extent.

15. Deriving a theory from more general theories constitutes a separate type of argumentation. Apart from its own, previously discussed arguments, ethical relativism is also familiar with the argumentation of that type. There are four more general theories it can be derived from: universal subjectivism, universal relativism, sensualism, and universal mutabilism.

If *universal subjectivism* were proven, it would be proof of ethical subjectivism. Yet it cannot be deemed proven; for there are the same doubts about its justification as about the justification of ethical subjectivism.

Universal relativism also cannot be deemed proven. Even if it were, it would not be proof of subjectivism, especially ethical subjectivism.

Universal sensualism claims that there are no experiences other than sensory ones. Since these experiences are subjective, all mental experiences are subjective. In particular, all states in which some values are experienced are states of sensory pleasure or unpleasantness, according to this theory. Sensory pleasure and unpleasantness are subjective states, therefore any value is subjective. After all, the sensualist justification of ethical subjectivism is erroneous in that it identifies positive and negative value with pleasure and unpleasantness.

Mutabilism (under various names) claims that reality undergoes constant change: one can say that objects become something and only improperly that they are something: white or black, good or bad. They are by nature neither of this kind nor of any other. Therefore, if we say that they are white or black, good or bad, we reveal an illusion of a subject rather than a property of an object. This view was proposed in ancient Greece by Heraclitus and Protagoras and presented in detail by Plato in the *Theaetetus*.

However, even if mutabilism were true, the truth of subjectivism does not follow from it. The reasoning is based on *quaternio terminorum*: both according to mutabilism and according to subjectivism, things are “by nature” neither good nor bad: however, this expression means *permanently* in mutabilism and *objectively* in subjectivism.

16. The arguments in favor of ethical subjectivism are insufficient. Still, they attract minds despite being insufficient. What also works to subjectivism’s advantage are theses *similar* to it, whose arguments are sometimes ascribed to it. These are theses such as: good is of a humanist and mental nature (I, 26); distinctive criteria of goods are subjective; perceiving good is subjectively conditioned.

Apparent arguments and apparent subjectivist theories create a favorable atmosphere of appreciation and friendliness around subjectivism; nowadays, a person cannot be impartial towards subjectivism. Subjectivism in general, and ethical subjectivism in particular, goes well with the contemporary mindset. It has the opinion of being critical. The objectivist standpoint immediately bears a sort of stigma of dogmatism. And yet there is no permanent connection between subjectivism and criticality. There were periods in the history of human thought when, conversely, the subjectivist standpoint was seen as a lack of criticality.

There is no doubt that whether people will realize the value of things depends on human nature, people's education, and the development of their feelings and needs. This subjective dependency occurs in every area of life. However, we also wish to break free from this dependency in all areas. We attempt to learn the objective value of things in life and research: this is how people act in practice when they profess subjectivism in theory.

17. However, even if the arguments quoted in favor of ethical subjectivism are false, this falsity does not entail the falsity of its thesis. Thus, its opponents must not only refute the arguments but also refute the thesis itself. These opponents have long been dealing with this task, at least since Plato.

(a) They attempted to demonstrate that ethical subjectivism makes the mistake of infinite regress. However, this only threatens its intellectualist variant: "What someone *considers* to be *good* is good."

18. (b) Ralph Cudworth, a seventeenth-century English Platonist, reasoned as follows.⁴² According to subjectivism, the subject endows the object with the properties of good and evil, and by doing so, changes its properties. Yet it is impossible to perform a change of properties of an object without using actual force: if the object is physical, you need physical force. It is impossible to achieve it (using scholastic language) *sine nulla physica et naturali mutatione per quendam essentialium conversionem*;⁴³ it is impossible to do it through a sheer act of mind or will, through something that only happens in an individual's psyche. This reasoning had its proponents at some point, and this is why it should be mentioned. However, it should not be considered correct.

19. (c) Another kind of reasoning: if a subject could endow an object with specific properties, change its properties, "any knowledge would be impossible," as then contradictory claims would simultaneously be possible.

This reasoning also used to be directed against the theological form of subjectivism. For the thinkers of bygone centuries, it was even a source of anxiety. As they said, if it were possible for God to change the properties of an object,

⁴² R. Cudworth, *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, Book I, ch. 2 and 3, London: James and John Knapton 1731. [W.T.]

⁴³ "Without any physical or natural change, by a certain shift of essences." See R. Cudworth, *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, Book I, ch. 3, 4, ed. S. Hutton, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 25: "That the nature of a square should not be necessarily what it is, but be arbitrarily convertible into the nature of a circle, and so the essence of a circle into the essence of a sphere, or that the self same body, which is perfectly cubical without any physical alteration made in it, should by this metaphysical way of transformation of essences, by mere will and command be made spherical or cylindrical: this doth most plainly imply a contradiction." [Eds.]

it would not be possible to know or ascertain anything about any object. If God could change the nature of things, there would be nothing true by nature. This is also Cudworth's reasoning.

20. The following argument seems more apt compared to the historical ones. Let us divide it into three parts for the sake of clarity.

A. If an object's property is subjective, it was bestowed by the subject. This action could be of two kinds: either through an external act — such as a command [Polish *nakaz*] or a contract — or through the subject's internal act, such as a desire or a liking towards the object. When I prescribe [Polish *nakazuję*] something, I cause something to be prescribed; when I desire a thing, I make it desirable. In both cases, I endow an object with "subjective" properties.

If good was a subjective property of objects, it would have to be bestowed on them the same way as the property "prescribed" (ethical subjectivism of the first type), or the same way as the property "desired" (ethical subjectivism of the second type): it would have to be bestowed through an external act, such as a command, or an internal act, such as a desire. It would "be reduced" to prescribing or desiring.

B. When we say that a thing is good and its good is "reduced to" the fact that it is prescribed (or desired), it may mean three things:

- (a) there is no good, there is only prescribing (or desiring);
- (b) good is the same as prescribing (or desiring);
- (c) good is the result of prescribing (or desiring).

In each of these meanings, good is subjective: in the first one, it is because prescribing (desiring), which we take for being good, is subjective; in the second — because good is the same as subjective prescribing (desiring); and in the third — because it is the result of subjective prescribing (desiring).

C. Let us discuss the issue in each of these three cases.

(a) If there is no property of being good (there is only the prescribed or desired property), it cannot be true that it is subjective.

(b) It is not true that good is the same as prescribing (desiring). The relationship between these properties may be close, but it is not the relationship of identity, even if the class of good objects were the same class as the class of prescribed objects.

(c) There remains only the last option: things are good *because* they are prescribed (desired). This thesis has long been contentious, where a completely opposite thesis was contrasted with it; it was noticed that there is a relationship of entailment between the two properties, but which property is the reason and which one is the consequence was disputed. Theologians

asked: does God command something because it is good or is something good because God commanded it? Lawyers asked analogously: does the law prescribe something because it is good or is something good because the law prescribes it? Those defending the first alternative tended to objectivize the command, and those defending the second one tended to subjectivize good.

The idea that good is not a result of a command can be demonstrated with examples much better than with general reasoning. In some examples, not only is it impossible to find a command that is the source of good but also searching for such a command strikes us as absurd. What kind of command would make joy good, and what kind of prohibition would make suffering bad? How are we to accept that power may not be good, and weakness may not be bad, that they would only depend on whether certain commands and prohibitions are issued or revoked?

Let us summarize the argument. Ethical subjectivism claims that good is a subjective property. In order for good to be a subjective property, it should be possible to reduce it to the property of prescribing or the property of desiring, or another property of these two types (1). Good can be reduced to another property in three ways corresponding to the three meanings of the expression “reduce a property to another property” (2). However, ethical subjectivism does not turn out to be true with any of these meanings. This was presented for the property of prescribing (3), but *mutatis mutandis* it can be demonstrated for desiring and other properties.

21. Apart from the general argument against all subjectivism, there are also objections against its special forms. For instance, we could cite the objections against theological and conventionalist varieties of ethical subjectivism.

There is a certain very natural line of reasoning against the theological variety presented by Plato in *Eutyphro*, which Leibniz also uses:⁴⁴ God, as a perfect being, is not only omnipotent but also good. If he is good, he wants good, he commands good, he does good. God wants what is good, rather than: what God wants is good.⁴⁵

22. The conventionalist variety of ethical subjectivism claims that good and evil are a question of a contract between people. This contract can be understood either as a historical fact or if not a fact, then a postulate that legitimizes differences in values.

⁴⁴ Plato, *Eutyphro*, 10a and ff.; G. W. Leibniz, *Discours de métaphysique*, § II. [W.T.]

⁴⁵ G. W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays*, trans. D. Garber, R. Ariew, Indianapolis–Cambridge: Hackett 1991, p. 2. [W.T.]

A. If the contract is understood as a fact, it is a fact that no one ever stated and that probably never occurred. Socrates, according to Xenophon, focused on it:

“But Hippias,” said he, “do you know any unwritten laws?”

“Those,” said he, “observed alike in every country?”

“Would you be able then to pronounce,” said he, “that men have enacted them?”

“And how could that be?” said the other; “they could never at least all come together, nor are they of the same language.”⁴⁶

This is not a fact but a fiction of a fact.

B. If the contract is understood not as a historical fact, it is useless for formulating the subjectivist standpoint. A contract understood not as a fact can be useful in the theory of state, society, or law. The state, social, or legal system is legitimized in that it corresponds to an ideal contract between people. A contract is “ideal” if everybody agrees with it; if it is the most convenient possible and the most desired by everybody; if it is the best and has a positive value. This value of a fictional contract legitimates a given state, social, or legal system, but how can we legitimize a value itself with a contract?

III. THE THEORY OF ABSOLUTE AND OBJECTIVE GOODS

1. A standpoint opposite to relativism and ethical subjectivism can be formulated most simply as follows:

Good and evil are absolute and objective properties.

If an object is good, it is so absolutely and objectively; its good is not only a reflection of its relationship with other objects, and it is not dependent on any object. A good object is good, not for someone and to something, and it is good not because of someone who makes it good. Similarly, if an object is bad, it is bad absolutely and objectively. For example, if nobleness is “good,” it means that it is absolutely and objectively good, not to something or for someone and not because of someone, and if suffering is “bad,” it is bad, not to something or for someone and not because of someone, but absolutely and objectively bad.

In Polish these formulations are negative (*irrelative* [Polish *bezwzględne*] and *independent* [Polish *niezależne*] good and evil). Besides them, positive formulations are possible: what is good and what is bad is “by nature” good

⁴⁶ *The Memorabilia of Xenophon*, Book IV, Cambridge: Metcalfe & Palmer 1856, p. 112. (Tatarkiewicz refers to a Polish translation by E. Konopczyński, *Wspomnienia o Sokratesie*, Warszawa: Aleksander Gins 1896.) [Eds.]

and bad; it is good and bad “in itself” and “of itself,” as the Greek expression states: καθ' ἑαυτόν, ἐφ' ἑαυτόν, clearly naming the thing but also being burdened by historical ballast. When using these expressions, we can state, for instance, that it is in the nature of nobleness that it is good, that it has positive value; or that suffering “in itself” is bad. It was said in the Middle Ages that objects are good *per se*; hence the term *perseitas boni*, meaning the same as the currently used formula “the absoluteness and objectivity of good.”

2. The standpoint formulated above encompasses two different theories: “Good and evil are absolute properties” and “Good and evil are objective properties.”

These theories do not only contain different claims but also have justifications of different kinds (II, 1). The theory of the absoluteness of good and evil is one of those that state or ascertain a given state of affairs; it is not proof that is needed here but rather an understanding of the nature of certain properties signified with the words “good” and “evil.”

The theory of the objectivity of good and evil has a different status. It is impossible to ascertain directly that a given property is dependent on the subject. This theory requires proof. It can be proven in the following way: in principle, there are three possibilities: either there is no good or evil (nominalism) or good and evil are subjective properties (subjectivism), or they are objective properties (objectivism) (II, 23). As nominalism has no defenders, there are only two remaining options: good and evil are either subjective or objective. If subjectivism is a false theory, then objectivism is true. There is no need for another proof of the validity of objectivism other than the proof of the falsity of subjectivism. When the falsity of subjectivism is proven, it is also proven that good and evil do not depend on the subject, and thus, that objectivism is true.

The theory of the absoluteness of good and the theory of the objectivity of good are based on different foundations, but they make up a consistent whole and share a superstructure: the knowledge of goods — that is, values.

3. These theories, less widespread than their opposites, do not have established names, unlike the others. One who is not worried about words loaded with undesirable associations will probably call them ethical “absolutism” and “objectivism.” In any case, to avoid natural misunderstandings, one has to add a caveat about “objectivism”: this is not transcendent objectivism, which moves the discussion into a sphere where discussion is not possible. One will also have to declare that one is not concerned with good in the sense usually suggested by the words “the Absolute,” “absoluteness,” or “absolutism,” or their Polish counterparts “bezwzględnik” or “bezwzględność.”

Good as an absolute property has nothing to do with “the Absolute” understood in the way systems such as Plotinus’ and Schelling’s do — namely, as the source or essence of being.

It also has nothing to do with “absolute” understood as something which is not associated with actual existence: it is not similar to “the idea of Good,” which Plato interprets as an absolute good in the sense that it is “above any being.” Objects that have the absolute (in our sense) property of good are not *ἐπέκεινα τοῦ ὄντος* (beyond being), as Plato states,⁴⁷ but they are connected through various relationships with other objects.

“Absolute good” does not mean “the greatest good,” or not even “a great good.” A lesser good is as absolute as a great good. When we speak of absolute good, we only know that good is good “in itself” rather than good for someone; a great good is in itself a great good, and a lesser good is in itself a lesser good. Permanent happiness is an absolute good just as a fleeting pleasure is, except that the former is a great good, and the latter is a lesser good.

In such a simple and not at all “metaphysical” sense, good and evil are absolute and objective properties. Admittedly, there are minds for whom, understood thus, having absolute and objective properties seems mysterious and metaphysical; however, having objective properties is no more mysterious than having subjective and relative properties.

4. When the Absolute is interpreted as the source of being apart from relationships and comparisons as the greatest good, there is only one Absolute.

In our interpretation, absolute good is also only one if we interpret it as a *property*. If good were a relative property, there would also be only one.

On the other hand, many objects have and can have this unique property. If the word “good” signifies everything that has this property, there are many goods. Goods in this meaning include: nobleness, faithfulness, and pride; a beautiful, harmonious, or full life are goods; power, joy, and health are goods. There are many goods in this world since there are many things that have the property of good.

5. What objects have the property of good and which have the property of evil is the main problem in ethics. A vast majority of its claims determine these issues: “*a* is good,” “*b* is bad,” or: “*a* has a positive value” and “*b* has a negative value.”

Sentences in these formulations are correct only under the assumption that good is an absolute and objective property. For relativism, other sen-

⁴⁷ This formulation is found in Plotinus. Plato famously used a similar expression in Book 6 of the *Republic* (509b): *ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας*, “beyond substance.” [Eds.]

tences fulfill the relevant function — that is, sentences such as “*a* is good for someone,” “*b* is bad for someone,” “*c* is good to something,” “*d* is bad to something”; and in subjectivism, the sentences: “*a* is good depending on subject *S*,” “*b* is bad depending on subject *S*₁.” If someone supporting these positions claims about certain objects that they are outright “good” or “bad,” they are not expressing themselves precisely.

What is the justification of sentences about good and evil? Relativism will justify its sentences by showing, for instance, that objects that are good “to” some purpose serve as means to achieving this purpose; subjectivism will justify its sentences by proving that objects get the property of being good — for example, they correspond to the laws issued. Absolutism and objectivism cannot justify their claims in this way.

6. A sentence about good and evil can only be proven with another sentence or other sentences about good and evil. Any attempt at deriving sentences about values from sentences that are not sentences about values is futile. It is not possible to construct such a syllogism whose premises would not include the terms “value,” “good,” or “evil,” but they would occur in its conclusion.

It is also impossible to derive sentences about values inductively from sentences about facts, as ethicists have attempted, by appealing to biological, psychological, sociological, and other facts.⁴⁸ It is impossible, after all, to achieve induction about values on the basis of such individual sentences none of which is a sentence about values. Sentences about facts are sentences stating that someone considers something to be a value or feels that something is a value; but something in fact being a value does not result from the fact that someone considers something a value or feels that something is a value. Even universal agreement in considering something a value, if it existed, would not constitute proof that something is a value.

Therefore, it is impossible to derive sentences about values deductively or inductively from sentences that are not sentences about values. Neither is it possible to derive the idea that objects are valuable (good, bad) from the definition of values (good, evil). This is because these are simple terms that have no definition. Information on what is good is also insufficient to realize which objects are good, just as knowing the color red is not sufficient to determine which objects are red.

One can only justify the sentence that *x* is good by reducing it to another sentence where “good” must also occur. It is impossible to make justifications

⁴⁸ On the impossibility of deriving sentences about good from a definition of good and on the impossibility of deriving them by induction, see G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, I, 6 (and subsequent chapters). [W.T.]

like that indefinitely, so one must stop with a sentence about good and accept it without proof. Ethical objectivism must also do so. Still, it is not in a unique position.

7. Good and evil are usually predicated of both concrete objects and properties: we say that a selfless act is good, and that selflessness is good; we say that pain is bad, and we speak of painfulness in the same way.

Sentences about good and evil that we adopt as “primary” sentences — that is, sentences without proof, are not sentences about specific things but sentences about simple properties.

Some *simple* properties are “by nature” good (positively valuable), some others are bad (negatively valuable): these are *primary* truths. Sentences making such claims are primary sentences for which there is no proof. If they are accepted, it is without proof. A comparison of simple, good and bad properties is an important task in ethics or the theory of values (whatever these inquiries are called). The number of these properties is not infinite: they are exclusively simple properties. Not every simple property is good or bad. There are simple properties that are neither good nor bad, but rather “neutral.” They even constitute the majority.

8. There is a second important group of sentences concerning good and evil. One good is not equal to another, and the case is the same with evil; there is great and small good and evil, greater and smaller as well. If two properties have a positive value, it does not mean that they have the same value since one can have a higher value and the other — a lower value. We always claim that certain objects are good, but also that they are better than others; not only that some objects are bad but also that they are worse than others.

The question arises of how we can justify sentences from the second group. Is it possible to derive them from the sentences in the first group? It is only possible to derive them from the sentences in the first group in the following case: if “*a* is good” and “*b* is bad,” it follows that “*a* is better than *b*” and “*b* is worse than *a*.” On the other hand, if “*a* is good” and “*c* is good,” it follows neither that “*a* is better than *c*” nor that “*c* is better than *a*.” If we claim that *a* is better, we have to have another reason for it.

The situation is the same as in the first group of ethical sentences. Just as certain primary sentences of the type “*a* is good,” “*b* is bad” had to be adopted there, also here certain sentences of the type “*a* is better than *c*,” which justify other sentences but are not justified themselves, must be adopted. This second group of the “primary” ethical sentences concerns only some simple sentences. Other sentences regarding what is better than what and what is worse than what are based on these primary sentences.

9. Sentences about the value of simple properties are accepted without proof, not as assumptions of axiomatic theories, which can be of any kind as long as they are not self-contradictory. We accept them as “intuitive” axioms. Our intuitions speak in favor of the idea that these sentences are obvious:⁴⁹ they are true and they do not require justification. Pleasure is a good thing, and unpleasantness is a bad thing, which we obviously know. It is impossible to accept as true such claims as “pleasure does not have positive value” or “it has negative value.” If sometimes that seems to be true, we soon realize it only seems so; it becomes obvious to us that pleasure does not cease to be good by itself, even if it was achieved by villainous actions, nor does villainy cease to be evil just because pleasure was achieved through it.

Such simple, obvious sentences are the basis for other ethical sentences. These sentences are the first premises of ethical reasoning and the measure of the veracity of the results of this reasoning.

This function they perform is very pronounced in Socrates’ reasoning, in both Xenophon’s and Plato’s reports. Socrates began every proof by establishing an agreement regarding such premises. “You will agree, however, that prudence is good.” “But will you admit to me that impiety is bad?” When it followed from a given claim that, for instance, prudence is bad or impiety is good, he held it as proof that this claim was erroneous.

10. It cannot be denied that sentences that are considered obvious here have not always been considered so and not everywhere.⁵⁰ After all, not all universally acknowledged truths are considered obvious and not all obvious truths are universally acknowledged. Universal acknowledgment is not a necessary condition for obviousness. It is similar in logic or mathematics, where certain claims are “obvious” although only some people know them, and it is also similar in ethics. It is irrelevant for the obviousness in matters of goods whether all periods and all groups of people recognize this obviousness; certain claims can only show up at a certain moment and among certain groups of people. It is enough for them to show up to take on the quality of obviousness. In the past, new values have been discovered, and new ones are likely to be discovered in the future. Obvious truths have little to do with commonly accepted truths.

⁴⁹ On obviousness in the matters of good, see F. Brentano, *Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis*, Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot 1889 [*The Origin of the Knowledge of Right and Wrong*, trans. C. Hague, Westminster: Archibald Constable 1902]. See also G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, V, 86. [W.T.]

⁵⁰ On the relationship between obvious sentences and universally accepted sentences, see C. Stumpf, “Vom ethischen Skeptizismus,” in *Philosophische Reden und Vorträge*, Leipzig: Barth 1910; and M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus*, op. cit. [W.T.]

11. The theory of absolute good has no reason to deny that certain positive or negative properties are only available to certain subjects. They are available in the sense that only certain objects can possess them and only certain subjects can evaluate them; for instance, only some people have the property of nobleness, but there are no noble galaxies or noble truths. Experiencing pleasure is a property of only conscious individuals who have a certain psychophysical structure. Similarly, any other positive or negative property is available to some and unavailable to others. This state of affairs can be called the relativity of these properties. This “relativity” does not have to be denied, but it is an entirely different relativity from the one discussed above. Confusing two different things bearing the same name is the cause of misunderstandings: a relativity that does not exist is derived from a relativity that does.

Only this relativity is meant by those who claim that there are degrees to relativity, who speak of lesser or greater relativity of good (Scheler).⁵¹ They mean that certain goods are available to a smaller class of subjects and some to a larger class of subjects.

12. Several claims determine the relationship between valuable objects and valuable properties. However, this relationship is not as simple as in the case of the rule *nota notae nota rei*.⁵²

The first claim: An object that has *only good properties* is good and an object that has *only bad properties* is bad. In other words: an object that has only properties of a positive value also has a positive value, and an object that has only properties of a negative value also has a negative value. Examples are easy to construct; that said, they are easier to construct than to find, as in real, infinitely complex systems, it is exceptionally rare that one object comprises only positive properties or only negative properties (see I, 10).

13. Second claim: An object with a *predominance of good properties* is good, and an object with a predominance of bad properties is bad. In other words, an object with a predominance of valuable properties is positively valued, whereas an object with a predominance of negatively valued properties is negatively valued.

This is not only about the quantitative majority of positive or negative properties but also, and primarily, about what side the higher values are on (III, 8); one property of a great positive value may counterbalance many negative properties and vice versa.

⁵¹ M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik*, Part I, in *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* 1(2), 1913, pp. 405-565, at 499 and ff. [W.T.]

⁵² “A trait of a trait is a trait of the thing itself.” [Eds.]

The vast majority of evaluating judgments we utter throughout our lives concern specific objects rather than properties; out of those, the vast majority concern objects that have predominantly positive properties or negative properties rather than objects that have only positive properties or only negative properties. We evaluate these objects positively or negatively according to the prevalence of positive or negative properties.

Most people demonstrate great courage and conviction in their judgments, even in very complex cases, although ascertaining the predominance of positive or negative properties can be difficult. Intuition about the superiority of some goods over others may fail us in certain cases. The rule that “an object with a predominance of positively valued properties is positively valued” can be applied only when the value of properties can be compared in terms of their level.

At other times the value of the properties cannot be compared and we cannot speak of the “predominance” of some values over others. Then it is impossible to state about one object that it is positively or negatively valued; we can only state that it “has positively valued (good) properties and negatively valued (bad) properties.” We often speak commonly of such objects that they are “good in some respects and bad in some other respects”; however, this expression should not suggest an idea of the relativity of good and evil, which it has nothing to do with (I, 10).

14. Third claim: An object that has a positive property may be not positive in itself; an object that has a negative property may be not negative in itself. This follows from the above. A life full of worry, and therefore, having a negative value, may have positive value if it otherwise has positive values — for instance, is rich in joyful times. A crude, unpleasant person may still be a positively valued person. Conversely, a life full of joy may have a negative value, and an agreeable person may be a negative person.

15. Immutability is a feature of abstract properties rather than particular objects. A positively valued property is so everywhere and always; it cannot become negatively valued or neutral. On the other hand, a specific object that has a positive value may lose this value — namely, when it loses its positive properties, or even without losing them if it gains negative properties. Hard-working and polite persons, who do not have negative properties, are positively valued persons; however, if these persons become deceitful and dishonest, they will become negatively valued. Yet being polite and hard-working did not cease to be positive properties, and being deceitful and dishonest were negative properties even when those persons did not yet have them.

One cannot infer the immutable value of objects from the immutable value of properties, or conversely, one cannot conclude the changeable value

of properties from the changeable value of objects. “Insidiousness remains evil even when someone who has this property gets rid of it entirely, and friendly love remains good even when your best friend betrays you.”⁵³

16. The relationships of values get complicated in the case of classes of objects rather than just particular objects. A class of objects that have a positively valued property is not yet a class of positively valued objects; neither is a class of objects that have a negative property a class of negative objects. This follows from the previous claim that an object that has a positive property or properties may not be a positive object, and an object that has a negative property or properties may not be a negative object. For example, a set of hard-working people is not a set of positively valued people; not all hard-working people are valuable, although being hard-working is always valuable. This claim also has a practical significance because of the widespread practice of classifying people as good or bad, positive or negative, on the basis of a specific property or specific properties.

Of course, a class of objects with a predominance of positive properties is a class of positive objects, and a class of objects with a predominance of negative properties is a class of negative objects.

17. The theory of absolute goods also has forms other than those presented above.⁵⁴ Some of them go further in their claims, some less so. The currently prevalent ones reach less far; they admit that some goods are absolute and objective, whereas some are relative and subjective. This is right in a way and convincing when we distinguish means and purposes. The means of conduct have value *if they serve* to achieve objectives, so their value is relative; whereas purposes either have value in themselves or they do not have it at all. Some things have value because they replace other valuable things, they symbolize them or *bring them to mind*. Examples of such things include national emblems, banners, souvenirs, national representations; just as academic titles are valued as emblems of knowledge and medals as symbols of merit. All of them have secondary, derivative value and they only have it under certain conditions *if* they replace or symbolize something that has its independent value. In this sense, Germans distinguish *Eigenwerte* and *Fremdwerte* among

⁵³ The second part of this quotation seems to be taken from M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik*, Part I, 1913, p. 418: “Der Wert der Freundschaft wird nicht angefochten dadurch, daß sich mein Freund als falsch erweist und mich verrät”; M. Scheler, *Formalism*, trans. M. S. Frings, R. L. Funk, p. 19: “The value of friendship is not affected if my friend turns out to be a false friend and betrays me.” [Eds.]

⁵⁴ F. Krueger, *Der Begriff des absolut Wertvollen als Grundbegriff der Moralphilosophie*, München: Kgl. Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität 1898. [W.T.]

values, translated as: objects with their own value and those with derivative, borrowed value. Derivative value is relative, and inherent value is absolute.

This is definitely true, but we should remember two things. Firstly, derivative value is relative but not subjective. Secondly, among *specific* objects, some have relative value (namely, those that are means or symbols of values), others have absolute value, whereas the *properties* due to which objects have value have absolute and objective value, or they have none.

The *means* for achieving a certain value can also have its *inherent* value. For instance, readily serving a good cause is not only a means to materialize a good cause, but it also has value by itself — namely, moral value (see II, 8, B).

18. The theory of absolute good sometimes has, and in particular, had in the past, further-reaching forms than those presented in this work.

Ethical absolutism has not always been such a simple theory: it often provided a theory with a superstructure explaining that absolute good resides in other worlds, in God. This concept of absolute good originates in Neoplatonic and Augustinian thought and perhaps earlier, in certain formulations of Hellenistic speculation combining the threads from Plato and Eastern theology. This concept should be presented to distinguish it from the theory defended here. It is present in its late but full form in probably the most monumental work devoted specifically to the defense of absolute good — the *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, a work by a late Platonist from Cambridge, greatly valued once but now all but forgotten, Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688). It is best known in its Latin translation and is wholly medieval (or even pre-Thomistic) in its content and style.

Having refuted the theory of relativity and the mutability of good, Cudworth reasons further: What is mutable is not subject to reason. What is mutable cannot be the principle of the immutable.

Whence it plainly follows that the immediate objects of intellection and knowledge cannot be these individual material things as such which our senses are passively affected from, but must of necessity be something else.⁵⁵

Wherefore if there be . . . any immutable truths, then there must of necessity be some other kind of beings or entities, besides these individual material things, . . . [beings] which are the proper objects of certain, constant, and immutable knowledge.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ R. Cudworth, *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, Book IV, ch. 4, 1, ed. S. Hutton, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 122. Here and further Tatarkiewicz quotes Cudworth's *Treatise* from its Latin translation in *Systema intellectuale hujus universi* (see above, footnote 20). [Eds.]

⁵⁶ R. Cudworth, *Treatise*, IV, ch. 4, 3, Cambridge 1996, pp. 123-124. [Eds.]

This “some other kind of beings” has been known for a long time, since Plato. But where is it? — Cudworth asks. It is not in particular things. Aristotle understood this: a particular thing is not immutable. Therefore, if immutable things exist, they exist separately from particular things. However, they do not exist outside of the mind; this is what Plato understood. If they were outside of the mind, they could only be experienced through the senses.

Experiencing immutable things is possible only through “some inward ideas that are domestic to the mind, and actively exerted from it. . . . Wherefore these intelligible ideas or essences of thing, those forms by which we understand all things, exist nowhere but in the mind itself.”⁵⁷

[These essences are] not dead things, like so many statues, images, or pictures hung up somewhere by themselves alone in a world. Neither are truths mere sentences and propositions written down with ink upon a book, but they are living things and nothing but modifications of mind or intellect.⁵⁸

The mind does not come up with them or produce them freely, they are immutable natures that the mind captures but has no control over.

They exist in the mind, but their existence does not depend on the fact that the mind thinks about them — for instance, the rational forms and necessary truths of the geometers were not invented by Archimedes and Euclid but were before them, and they would not cease to be if there were no more geometers and the memory of those issues was lost among people. Even if the whole physical world was lost, these forms and truths would be undisturbed. As they are independent of the physical world, they already existed when the physical world had not been created yet. It is impossible to think of a time when they did not exist or when they were false as they had not been created yet. How would they be created and from what? Such entities have no history.

Therefore, these natures exist eternally, and they exist in the mind. Therefore, there must be “an infinite, eternal mind, necessarily existing,” which “includes and encompasses” all these natures and truths.⁵⁹ This mind is God.

This applies to all immutable objects, and therefore also to good. If good is immutable, it cannot belong to the mutable and transient world. It can only exist in an infinite mind — that is, in God.

This absolutism constructing a metaphysical hypothesis is fundamentally different from the one presented and defended in the present work, which only aims to describe the good available to people.

⁵⁷ R. Cudworth, *Treatise*, IV, ch. 4, 4, Cambridge 1996, p. 125. [Eds.]

⁵⁸ R. Cudworth, *Treatise*, IV, ch. 4, 7, Cambridge 1996, p. 128. [Eds.]

⁵⁹ R. Cudworth, *Treatise*, IV, ch. 4, 7, Cambridge 1996, p. 128. [Eds.]

IV. THEORY OF RELATIVE RULES

1. Our discussion has so far avoided issues commonly considered the most significant concerning good and evil — that is, the issue of good and bad *conduct*. What conduct is good and what conduct is bad? What should it be if it aims to be good? What is the rule one should follow so that it is as it should be?

We are concerned with the question: if conduct is good, is it relatively and subjectively good, for someone and because of someone, or is it absolutely and objectively good? Another question: will the regulations that can be applied here be valid relatively and subjectively or absolutely and objectively?

2. A person's conduct may have various positive or negative values — for instance, it may have positive or negative aesthetic value; it may be skillful or harmonious or sloppy and inharmonious. Apart from the fact that it has a given value in itself, it is a *means* to achieve something that, again, may have a positive or negative value. When I do something, I am not only the cause of the action itself that has a positive or negative value, but also the cause of the fact that a change occurs in the world through this action, and a new state of affairs is created that also has a positive or negative value. When we perform an action, we rarely care about the action itself but rather about the state of affairs it is supposed to produce. This state of affairs could be that I achieve some sort of pleasure, or that someone else will suffer distress; the state of affairs I strive to achieve could be that the white piece of paper before me is covered in letters expressing my thoughts or that the manuscript is destroyed by fire. It does not even matter if I *wish* to make a change in the world, what matters is that I actually make it. Every action changes the configuration of good and evil in the world, and not only by virtue of the good and evil that is in the action but also by its result.

If we want to do good, it does not necessarily mean that we want to perform an action that has a positive value by itself; we may want to carry out a deed that creates a state of affairs having a positive value.

3. Let us assume that in a given situation I can act in the way a_1 but also a_2 and a_3 . Action a_1 has value m_1 (positive, negative, or neutral) by itself, and it creates states of affairs that have their own values (positive, negative, or neutral): n_1, p_1, r_1, s_1 , etc. Action a_2 has value m_2 by itself, and it generates states of affairs that have values n_2, p_2, r_2, s_2 , etc. Similarly, every action I can perform in a given situation creates a certain amount of good or a certain amount of evil, or a certain amount of good and evil.

Let us assume now that there is one action that generates the *greatest amount of good* (or the least amount of evil) *out of all* possible actions in a given situation. This action will be called the *right* [Polish *szluszny*]. If I want to act morally and I interpret this as doing the greatest amount of good, it means that I want to perform the right action. If ethics is supposed to provide the rules of moral conduct, they should be such rules that one who acts according to them performs the right action.⁶⁰

4. I find myself in a given situation and, by luck or having considered all options, out of all possible actions in this situation, I perform the one that provides the greatest amount of good — that is, the right action. Is this action objectively right by nature, or is it only right depending on my nature or any other nature?

The answer to this question is as follows. The right action is objectively right just as good achieved through this action is objectively good, and just as goods that could have been achieved through other possible actions are objectively less good. The right action can be determined by adding and subtracting positive and negative values achieved by this or other possible actions. Actions that do not include subjective elements cannot give a subjective result.

Due to its objectivity, rightness is similar to goodness. Yet there are also some differences. If an object with specific properties is good, then any other object that has the same properties is also good. If Peter's personality is good, then Paul, who has the same personality, also has a good personality. By contrast, if Peter's action is right, then an action with the same properties may fail to be right when it is performed by Paul. I performed the right action. It is my action with this specific content that is right, but an action with the same content performed by someone in a different situation may result in different consequences, and therefore may not be right. My action is objectively right, but it is only right if it is my action or is performed by someone who is in a similar situation; it is individually right.

Further: the rightness of an action does not only depend on the person performing it but also on the time and place, the nature of the surroundings, the surrounding people and things, and the conditions it was performed in. The same action may have had different consequences in different conditions, and therefore it may have failed to achieve as much good, and it may have failed to be the right action. The nature of the person acting is one of the conditions on which the rightness of the action depends; the situation is different for someone else, having another nature, and the consequences may be

⁶⁰ A similar position on the absoluteness of ethical rules is taken by G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, V, and *Ethics*, V, as well as by B. Russell, *Elements of Ethics*, III. [W.T.]

more or less good. However, even for the same person the conditions of the action and the situation itself may become different in a while, as configurations of reality are ever-changing; then an action that had been right ceased to be so. The results of an action do not only include the most immediate results, so even a situation that seems similar, upon closer examination, often is not actually similar and has its own, different right action.

5. Let us assume that I acted rightly not by sheer luck but because I had considered my situation. Having acquainted myself with the situation and with the relative value of states of affairs that could be achieved through various possible actions in this situation, I formulated a rule according to which I was supposed to achieve the best state of affairs. This rule is the rule of the right action. If I want to act morally — that is, perform the right action — I am bound by this rule. However, only I am bound by this rule, or only these people who found themselves in a situation similar to mine. It is also not binding forever but only in the situation that it was formulated for. This situation may last or it may change quickly. At a specific time, this rule stated: “tell the truth” because telling the truth was the right action at that time, but when the situation changes, telling the truth may be harmful, so it ceased to be the right action, and the rule prescribing telling the truth is no longer valid.

If a given action is right, it is right objectively, but it is right only for certain individuals in certain conditions. The rule is valid but it is only valid individually and conditionally. It must be found separately for every situation. It can only be found by someone familiar with the situation. Neither ethics nor any other science can provide such a rule.

Ethics is expected to provide universal and unconditional rules that will indicate the right action to anyone wanting to act rightly. However, as situations we live and act in are not unique but they are still mutable and varied, the eventuality of universal and unconditional rules must be questioned.

6. Yet, is there not an analogy between good and rightness? Just as certain properties of objects are by their nature good, are certain properties of actions not by their nature right? Is that not true for nobleness, selflessness, or kindness in our action?

However, this comparison is not accurate; there is no analogy between good and rightness. The abovementioned properties are good rather than right properties. Neither they nor any other are right by nature. There are no right or wrong properties at all. There are only right ways to act, and they are right by virtue of their results — namely, the best possible results, and not because they are right by nature.

Consider the property of nobleness. It is good by nature; whenever it is present in an action, the action will be more valuable due to its presence. However, is an action containing the property of nobleness also the right action, just as it is more valuable by virtue of the value of this property? No, the action containing this property may or may not be right. One may do more harm than good with a noble action — for instance, by graciously forgiving someone. The case is the same with honest, kind-hearted, or righteous actions. One who acts honestly, kind-heartedly, or righteously cannot be certain of performing the right action. The rules of moral conduct are all about right actions rather than actions that have value.

7. Having assumed that certain properties are good, we can *deduce* universal rules of good action, but it is impossible to deduce the rules of right action. In order to recognize the right action, we must know the results of actions; in order to know the results of actions, we must know the causal relations; in order to know the causal relations, we must have *experience*. Therefore, every rule of right action must contain an empirical element. If there are universal rules, their universality can only be empirical; they must be based on an inductive collection of individual cases of right action.

An inductive but universal rule of right conduct is virtually out of the question; individual rules may turn out to be similar: they may repeat themselves. Indeed, there are three arguments in favor of the *repeatability* of rules of right conduct.

A. Although the situations in which people act change, certain elements of the situations, the *conditions* of action, are *constant*. Due to these constant conditions, the rule of right action is repeated in various situations and it may be generalized in the form of a universal rule. A constant condition of any action is life, which is why the rule prescribing respect for life, one's own and that of others, could be universal.

B. Certain ways of acting have the natural property of creating *positive results* — for instance, actions motivated by love or simply by kindness towards others. The rule that prescribes such actions will always generate better results than a rule which prescribes the opposite actions.

C. Certain actions are so *good by themselves* and have such high positive value that their value will outweigh negative results; they will always provide more good than any other actions. Noble and magnanimous actions are like that.

These three arguments let us believe that right actions will be similar to each other and will create the basis for formulating general rules of rightness. However, they cannot guarantee the universality of the rules. They constitute

a constant factor in determining right conduct, but the variable factors may prevail and lead to actions that are good in themselves, guided by nobleness, selflessness, and kindness to people, but will not generate the best results; an action that is very good by itself will not balance out very bad results.

Acting according to certain rules *usually* and *probably* results in the right action. However, it is not universally and necessarily true. A different individual case is always possible. A rule that generates good results even in most cases is not valid in a specific case where an even better result is possible.

8. This state of affairs is not dangerous for ethics and morality, as some fear. Demanding detailed rules of conduct, called moral “casuistry,” is not the task of ethics or science. As for morality, the morality of someone who obeys the universal rules is not better than the morality of someone who creates the rule of their conduct each time by themselves.

9. Another thing is that in everyday practice it is impossible to give up generalized rules, even though one is aware of their limits. They have great practical value, both for those who so far cannot create rules for themselves and for those who will never be able to do it, as well as for those who can do it but need help.

Since rules are provided, they must be provided as binding. After all, if a rule allowed for exceptions, everyone would be allowed to take advantage of it and not accept the rule. The rule would lose its practical function. Every society and every authority appointed to provide rules of right conduct insists on the rules to be generally accepted and makes sure they are generally applied. Practice cannot work without general rules. However, theory cannot consider rules provided as universal in practice to be universal.

Therefore, it is natural that rules of right conduct make a claim to be universal, but this claim leads to conflict: internal conflict of an individual and the individual’s conflict with society. The first type of conflict occurs when the individual wants to but cannot obey two rules, as they are absolutely valid but mutually exclusive. For some people, “Support your family” and “Protect your health” are mutually exclusive. The second type of conflict occurs when an individual finds themselves in a unique position, and society demands submitting to a universal rule. Universal rules turn a difficult situation into an impossible one.

Everyone knows, not only having read the catechism and the rules for public morality, but also from their own intuition and experience, that in an overwhelming majority of cases, it is right (even if it is not easy, convenient, or profitable to someone) to tell the truth, act without deceit, and respect the life and property of others. The cases where it is not only permissible but also

right to depart from these rules are rare. Yet they do exist. They are mentioned in Holy Scripture, in the history of Judith or Mary the Egyptian. They are the subject of Greek tragedies as well as contemporary novels and plays: Ibsen did not condemn Nora for forging a signature as she did it to save her husband. They are found in the life stories of people venerated as national heroes. In particular, they occur in special circumstances, such as war: heroes of uprising sacrificed their lives, health, and property, but they also destroyed that of others, but who would blame them? These are special cases in regular circumstances of life, which do not have to be accounted for, but it does not change the fact that they exist, which is why there are no truly universal rules of right conduct.

10. Since the exceptions cannot be ignored, many thinkers have attempted to defend the universality of moral rules and find universal ones. Three of these attempts are worth mentioning:

1) By replacing “ordinary” rules with a unique rule — the *rule of conscience*: “Conduct dictated by our conscience is absolutely right,” “Always act according to your conscience.” This assumes that conscience is infallible, which is not confirmed in practice. When does conscience speak? Does any firm belief constitute its voice?

2) By replacing ordinary rules (specifically enumerating the properties of right actions) with a *formal rule* or rules. This is what Kant did with his “categorical imperative.” “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.” Both the advantages and disadvantages of this rule are well known.

3) By keeping ordinary rules of conduct but providing them with the right *interpretation*. This was the tendency of the brilliant scholastics. A moral rule states: do not steal; according to the legal and common interpretation, this means: do not appropriate another person’s things. There may be exceptions to this rule. Yet we can provide it with the right interpretation: do not appropriate a thing you do not have a natural right to; then the rule becomes universal. If one has a surplus of food and another is hungry, the latter has a natural right to have it; if the person takes advantage of this rule, they are not stealing, although they take the food for themselves. The rule “do not steal” is still valid and universal.

It is essentially universal, but only when words are provided with a different meaning than they have. Indeed, it may be right in special situations to take another person’s thing, but when? It is only when this action is better than another — that is, when it is *right*. This is what the issue is reduced to: the rule of rightness remains the only universal rule.

11. Although there are universal goods, and because of it, there are no universally valid rules. Let us assume that some rules are valid, but it is not their universal property. When we say that a given rule is “valid,” it is an abbreviated expression, as it lacks a qualification telling us when it is valid and for whom.

There are four possible standpoints in the theory of good:

- A. Goods are absolute, and rules are also absolute.
- B. Goods are absolute, and rules are relative.
- C. Goods are relative, and rules are also relative.
- D. Goods are relative, and rules are absolute.

The most common method of settling these matters is the last method. It is drastically different from the one that the above discussion attempted to justify. The discussion is based on the fact that reality changes, and so does the way to achieve good. This is why there are no universal rules of conduct in the world of universal good.

In memory of Władysław Weryho.

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