Józef Tischner's epistemology of "political reason" and the "ethics of truth"

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Abstract

That which connects ethics and epistemology is the concept of truth. The threads concerned with the ethical and epistemological understanding of truth are interwoven throughout the history of philosophy. They are also interwoven in Józef Tischner's philosophy. In Tischner's thought, the description of this interweave and its consequences, as well as ways of dealing with it, are very inspiring. In the present paper, I address Tischner's highly interesting analysis of the development of the "political reason." Then I juxtapose this analysis with Tischner's demand concerning the "ethics of truth." I also show how Tischner, by referring to the Gospel and proposing a peculiar 'Christological imperative,' resolves dilemmas emerging at the interface of epistemology and ethics. Thanks to the reference to Christ, who not only realizes the ideal of the "ethics of truth," but also becomes the privileged "vantage point of the world," and thus a peculiar epistemological centre, the connection between the epistemological and ethical dimensions of truth is established. Also, a sufficiently solid justification for the demand that the "ethics of truth" be realized becomes possible, and the way of defending oneself against the charm spread by the "political reason" and its works is identified.

Keywords Józef Tischner · Truth · Epistemology · Ethics · Political reason

Józef Tischner thoroughly analyzed the ethical problems arising out of man's public involvement—hence his socio-political philosophy had a descriptive dimension. But Tischner also had something else to propose—the normative part of his socio-political philosophy. Those who describe are galore. Those who cannot only describe, but in the process also point to a culs-de-sac and state what things should be like and suggest ways out of the culs-de-sac are few and far between. Those who can do both as thoroughly and convincingly as Tischner are absolutely unique. Tischner was not

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only an ethicist in the world of politics, he was also an epistemologist. Above all, he was a philosopher of man in the world of politics, trying to understand the way man lives and acts. This understanding, supplemented with “Gospel thinking,” gave rise to recipes for a better life and the improvement of interhuman relationships.

That which connects ethics and epistemology is the concept of truth. The threads concerned with the ethical and epistemological understanding of truth are interwoven throughout the history of philosophy. They are also interwoven in Tischner’s philosophy.¹ In Tischner’s thought, the description of this interweave and its consequences, as well as ways of dealing with it, are very inspiring. Let me first address Tischner’s interesting analysis of the development of the “political reason,” the essence of which is a peculiar play with truth. Then I will juxtapose this analysis with Tischner’s “ethics of truth.” Finally, I will show how Tischner, by delving into the Gospel, resolves dilemmas emerging at the interface of epistemology and ethics.

Epistemology of “political reason”

Tischner presents the epistemology of “political reason” in his most important work, *Filozofia dramatu* (Tischner 1999), which explains what it is to roam “in the element of truth”. The issue can also be found in other texts. The deliberation contained in *Filozofia dramatu* revolves around the interrogation of Raskolnikov, a character in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, after the murder he has committed. Tischner attempts to understand the way in which Raskolnikov justifies his actions. He asks: “Does man not need more mental effort to build a house of lies than a house of truth?” And then he adds: “It is very interesting to watch the mind’s work on the construction of such a house” (Tischner 1999, pp. 142–143).

Tischner calls the reason that Raskolnikov employs “political reason.” It is a kind of reason that man uses in order to rise above what is common. On the plane of “common reason” dialogue is pursued on the premise that objective reality exists, but also that truth is a value higher than a lie (Tischner 1999, p. 162). That is why a lie of “common reason” presupposes veracity as its condition of possibility. Raskolnikov does not perpetrate a common lie, because the reason he uses is “political reason.” “Common reason” claims that truth is a conformity of cognition to objective reality. “Political reason” asks where objective reality, truth and falsehood are. It answers that they depend on social recognition of the value of a pertinent proposition—“a proposition that is more valuable to a specific society comes to be recognized as the one more worthy of realization, and hence as more truthful” (Tischner 1999, p. 163).

¹ A. Węgrzecki recalled that “for Józef Tischner truth was, as he once put it, [a great thing]. Arguably, it was great on account of the role that it plays in the life of the individual and the community, as well as on account of its manifold sense: religious, philosophical, ethical, social and political, or on account of its fundamentality. Tischner discerned the multi-facetedness and multi-layeredness of [the question of truth]. Throughout his lifetime he undertook it, centrally or peripherally, for a number of reasons and on various occasions, while addressing other subjects, in a more theoretical or journalistic manner” (Węgrzecki 2005, p. 21).

The principle governing the working of "political reason" is "radicalization of axiology." It is about a specific connection between truthfulness and the ideal that man strives after, and action undertaken in order to fulfil the ideal. As Tischner explains, when we use "political reason" it is only our ideals and actions resulting therefrom that tell us what is true or untrue. An adherent of "political reason" casts aside the choice between maintaining the classical concept of truthfulness and a total rejection of truth. He believes that it is possible to choose a third option which is about the change in the meaning of truth (see Tischner 1999, p. 170). As it uses a changed notion of truth, "political reason" aims to create the world anew. It involves people in the task, using politics, the main tool of which is power. "Why is power tempting?" asks Tischner. In his opinion, power is tempting, because it can dominate both truth and falsehood. Man uses power not only with a desire to learn, but also with a desire to build a new better world. Since it is a tool of creating the world, "political reason" comes to be elevated to the status of a metaphysical reason (Tischner 1999, p. 165).

Those who wield power can use a "political lie," which is different from an ordinary lie in that "the authorities have a conception of truth that differs from the one espoused by the subjects." Hence, it can be said that those with authority both lie and do not lie—"they lie in the eyes of common reason of the subjects, but they do not lie in the eyes of the enlightened reason of the rulers" (Tischner 1988, p. 1). An adherent of "political reason" is capable of using a common notion of truth, which Tischner emphasizes as an extremely important issue. He does not reject it, because there is no reason for him to do so. In the traditional sense, truth can serve as an effective tool of power: it can be used to accuse and judge opponents. Yet, an adherent of "political reason" knows that truth about what is must give way to truth about what will be and what should be (Tischner 1999, p. 170).

"Common reason," which is only oriented towards learning truth, "awakes too late to stand in the way of political practice" (Tischner 1999, p. 167). Politics affects "common reason" not with force or violence, but with the power of a created truth. "Common reason" seeks the truth and only truth. The danger it is faced with is exactly its sensitivity to the truth. Tischner writes:

"The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only after dusk has fallen, and brings to the fore that which political reason has built and which acts as historical truth. For a captive mind to arise no fear is needed. Love for that which is—just because it is—is enough" (Tischner 1999, p. 167).

A disinterested quest for truth, characteristic of "common reason," is for which "political reason" strives.

"Common reason" is vulnerable to further seduction. It may not only recognize truth in the form already created by "political reason," but even start emulating the very manner of creating truth. "Common reason" may begin to be ashamed of itself. It is ashamed of its commonness, and when ashamed it becomes like "political reason." Thus, it has a completely different outlook on the world revealed to itself. It learns to be suspicious and to divide the world into those who are "for" and those who are "against" it. It wants to make others yield. It gets more and more

“developed,” and matures by making promises and threats. For this it needs knowledge about man—true and objective knowledge. It begins to treat learning the objective reality as a necessary tool, but only as a tool. Thinking and speech that arise from “political reason” are very appealing—notes Tischner. Divulgences afford joy. Judgments are a source of satisfaction. And it is this joy, and this sense of being a creator of the new world—as Tischner explains—that make political thinking “contagious,” and even the greatest give into it (Tischner 1999, pp. 167–169).

“Political reason” is a fighting reason. Man needs to fight to get to know himself. Illusion is a crucial element in this fight. What is Tischner’s conception of illusion? It is no mere cognitive bias or an error as to how things are. It is more of a lie from which the awareness of truth has disappeared. Or put differently—it is a thought that is never meant to be true, at least not in the traditional sense of truthfulness. “Political reason” creates beings that begin to live their own lives unbeknownst to the one who created them. One can tell a lie and then believe in the lie, forgetting that one created it—explains Tischner. One can conjure an illusion, and then be firmly convinced that the world has always been the way the illusion tells us. That is the way “my truth” comes into being. It is neither an ordinary lie, nor a symptom of mental disease, nor mythomania—which is what Anna Karoń-Ostrowska suggests in a conversation with Tischner entitled *An Encounter*. The dichotomies: “truth – lie,” “sanity – mental disease,” “truthfulness – mythomania” do not capture the subtle mechanism of “illusion” (Tischner 2003, p. 140).

However, Tischner highlights one more, extremely vital issue: man’s most crucial fight is the fight for salvation. Man seeks salvation, justification, because he feels unconfirmed. He seeks his own identity on the plane of various values (Tischner 2003, pp. 137–138). A man who uses “political reason” might ask: wherever can I find salvation if not in the world which I myself create? Reason becomes a great chance to a man who pins all his hopes on thinking (Tischner 2016, p. 110). Yet, as Tischner emphasizes, reason manifests itself in two ways—as an observing reason or as an acting reason. The observing reason orients itself towards the external world, creating life sciences. The acting reason orients itself towards man’s social life, creating institutions, with a state heading them. “Political reason” wants to redeem itself not through cognition, not through “gnosis,” but through political action (Tischner 2016, p. 116).

“Political reason” is a wonderful tool. It can be very effective. It is easy to understand why people are willing to use it. Moreover, it is not only used for such “low” purposes as ruling or possessing, but it can also serve the highest of purposes, like that of salvation. But are we allowed to use it? The answer to this question can be found in Tischner’s “ethics of truth.”

Ethics of truth

Tischner gave a lecture on the “ethics of truth” under the title, *Człowiek ma prawo do prawdy* [Man is entitled to know truth], at a conference which was held at the beginning of the 1970s, the record of which was published in Tischner (2017). Tischner begins by saying that the thing connecting epistemological,

metaphysical and ethical significance of truth is that truth is a value and as a value it is indefinable. In order to understand what it is, one needs to feel its practical impact, its imperative and its absolute obligation (Tischner 2017, p. 106). As Tischner writes, we define it as a conformity of thinking to reality. However, one needs to remember that thinking is not only about purely intellectual acts, but also emotional acts, and even man's whole mode of being:

In this sense, truth is a conformity of a whole man and his mode of being to existence as it really is. Truth is about some kind of conformity: conformity of thought with reality, conformity of a feeling with a value, conformity of a man with himself. Truth is about the conformity of that which man feels with that which really is and which he really is. (Tischner 2017, p. 107)

Such an experience of truth presupposes that in man there is some kind of crevice, cleft or unfilled space. This crevice can separate man from things, from himself, from other people. Tischner writes:

As we are affected by truth as a value, we are affected by the imperative whereby we are supposed to bring our awareness, our whole mode of being in alignment with the real and true being. Truth can be forever attained, because there has always been and there will be the subtle distance between my feeling and a value, between my thought about a thing and the thing itself, between myself and myself. (Tischner 2017, p. 107)

But where in the hierarchy of values is truth to be found? Tischner invokes Max Scheler's hierarchy of values, noting that truth is not one of the components of this hierarchy. However, as Tischner explains, it is posited in the sense that it acts like a "church gate." One cannot realize the values if one does not know the truth about them. That is why truth is a key value. It is to be found next to every rung on the ladder, because "the way to every value is paved by truth about values." It is also the gateway to the world, thanks to which we do not have to live in a world of fantasy. Last but not least, it is the key to the attitude of oneself. It is not possible to "realize oneself" without knowing the truth about oneself (Tischner 2017, p. 108).

That is why in Tischner's opinion the "ethics of truth" is the fundamental ethics. Errors made in the sphere of truth keep us from realizing other values. The "ethics of truth" is the key to other spheres of ethics. Truth is not the ultimate or the highest value because the values to which it leads are higher. This special situation of the value of truth is the source of a number of choices that man makes every day. The function of truth is ancillary, which means that: "It is not right to act as if truth were the only value in the world" (Tischner 2017, p. 109). Questions about the right to truth and about truth-related obligations follow. But before he answered these questions, Tischner stressed that there is a "middle course" between telling the truth and lying, and this is remaining silent.

The first question is whether every man always has a right to every truth? Tischner answers that there are truths of various orders; truths of greater or lesser import; truths that personally concern a man and truths that personally do not

concern him; non-ethical truths—everyday, scientific, abstract (e.g. mathematical) ones; ethical truths—ones concerned with the way of judging a man's behaviour in specific situations requiring action; metaphysical truths—such truths have a personal character (these include general truths, e.g. philosophical and personal, intimate ones which may be unfit for communication); there are also unethical truths—for instance, a truth about a way to harm someone. According to Tischner, the rule worth observing is as follows: every man has a right to a non-ethical or ethical truth, but no one can claim a right to unethical truths. And what about other truths? In order to make a decision with regard to them, one needs to answer a few questions: “where are they to be found in the hierarchy of truths?” “do they affect [another man]?” Depending on the answers to these questions, one can tell the truth or remain silent about it (Tischner 2017, pp. 110–113).

Regarding the question as to whether man always has a right to truth, or whether there are moments when he is not entitled to know it, Tischner answers affirmatively that man has a right to truth at all times, but that this right may not always and under all circumstances be exercised to an equal degree. Two principles apply here: man is entitled to the truth when he can understand it in the way that it appears and that he is entitled to it if he does not intend to misuse it. If we are convinced that someone will misuse the truth, we have a right to remain silent about it. But if we are sure that a man can rightly understand the truth and will not use it with malicious intent, then the truth must be told (Tischner 2017, pp. 113–114).

A third question reads as follows: is it I or someone else who is supposed to communicate the truth to the person entitled to it? In other words: am I the man who must tell the other the truth? For Tischner not every man has an equal right to tell the “other” the truth, especially if it is a bitter truth. This right needs to be deserved—with cordiality, friendship and a genuine attitude towards the other. There are certain relationships that grant a right to the truth, like the parent–child relationship. There are professions and vocations grounded on truthfulness, like scientists, teachers, doctors. Truth is the chief value in the ethics of these professions. That is supposed to be not only the truth about the world, but also the truth about the truth. One who tells the truth is not only expected to say that the world is like this, but also that it is certain, probable or uncertain that the world is like this. Every man is obliged to respect another man's personal or intimate truths. One needs to learn to sense and share these profound truths that another man carries within him. It is only love that entitles one to delve into intimate matters. It is not a question about another man's truths, but it is trust in his truth that must be the foundation of the attitude to another man. Tischner writes:

The ethics of truth must be concluded with an act of confidence in the other. The point is not to ask, but to silently trust, remembering that there are limits to what can be communicated. For there are intimate things which cannot be communicated to the other. (Tischner 2017, p. 118)

All the caveats that Tischner expresses as he writes about the “ethics of truth,” however legitimate they might seem, open up a vast space for possible manipulation of the truth. A master of “political reason” might find in these caveats a lot of leeway

for himself. Tischner's "ethics of truth" is based on great trust in man, in the human capacity to recognize truth as well as to show fidelity to it. However, it does not safeguard against "political reason." I believe that the "ethics of truth" has the potential to become an instrument of power, an instrument of action by "political reason." The "ethics of truth" is characterised by defencelessness. This is where its greatness and weakness lie.

Two arguments against "political reason"

Tischner's "ethics of truth" serves as a manifestation of the "categorical imperative," which—while allowing for all caveats—demands that one adheres to truth in the classical sense of the word. This is to be understood as faithfulness to the "commonly" construed truth: as a conformity of cognition with objective reality. Tischner's addition to the traditional concept is an extension of the elements of the definition of truth. In Tischner's opinion it is not only about thinking, but about all human powers. Nor is it only about reality construed as an "external world," but about the whole reality, including the "internal" one. "Conformity" is an attempt at overcoming this inner "rupture" that affects everything, including man himself. Here, "*adaequatio*" should be understood, etymologically, as equalization or rather equalizing—striving after equality, conformity.² That, however, is a dramatic process which, as Tischner stresses, might last a lifetime. The way leading to truth is a way

to the surrounding reality, to the world,... to another man,... to oneself. In his striving after truth, man wants to be; he wants to be in a better, more profound and more versatile manner. (Tischner 2017, p. 118)

One might venture a statement whereby "*adaequatio*" thus construed is the essence of drama.

The "ethics of truth" is an argument against "political reason." Tischner's view may be interpreted as follows: while the attractiveness of "political reason" can be conceived of, it is not to be condoned. Giving precedence to the "ethics of truth" over "political reason" is a realization of the "categorical imperative" resulting from the value of truth. The imperative might be couched in the following words: you must not use "political reason." Apart from this 'categorical imperative argument' Tischner suggests another one. Let me call it a 'hypothetical imperative argument.' In essence, it states: do not use "political reason" if you do not want to perish by "political reason."

Raskolnikov's seeming victory in the dialogue he engaged in resulted from the fact that he managed to convince himself that he had done the right thing. The

² W. Stróżewski recalls that: "Truth is a task, *ad-aequatio*, something to (*ad*) be made even, and not an agreement or equality (*aequalitas*) captured straightaway" (Stróżewski 1981, p. 122). Another passage reads as follows: "The term *adaequatio* may be interpreted... as a manifestation of some task that is to be performed (*ad-aequatio*), not as a static and once-for-all established equality—*aequalitas* between a [thought] and a [thing]" (Stróżewski 1992, p. 81).

conformity of the reality he was creating, with the perfect plan of world restructuring, became a truth for him. Raskolnikov turned on “political reason,” and demonstrated that he had not murdered the pawnbroker. He did not disavow truth, but only changed its meaning. As Tischner explains, this move contained the germ of inevitable defeat. Ever since Raskolnikov had to live his life according to the logic of “political reason.” He was left with no choice but to accept that the truth he used to fight was the truth that was going to be used to fight him. Tischner explains:

If he devised a double scene, then he had the double scene. If he devised a double dialogue, then he had the double dialogue. If he demonstrated how to leap on breaking axiological axes, then he had a wonderful show before his eyes. If he demonstrated how to circle around the crime, then he could see how the subjects circled. If he set traps for others, then he could see others set traps for him. (Tischner 1999, pp. 171–172)

The consequences of the change in the concept of truth are terrible and cruel to him who makes the change. If anything can be malleable, then man himself and his power is malleable. He begins to return threats, promises, accusations and condemnations. Retaliatory thinking and speech fraught with pressure develop. “An elaborate structure of lies” rises. Raskolnikov’s kingdom—as Tischner writes—perishes “by slowly going ignoble” (Tischner 1999, p. 173).

‘Christological imperative’

At first glance, a reading of Tischner’s texts offers a sad observation: it is not possible to win the fight, or to attain salvation. If a man looking for salvation walks the path of “political reason,” he will lose, because the reason will turn against him in the end. If he chooses the path of the “ethics of truth,” he may eventually be deceived by him who is using “political reason.” After all, it is the “ethics of truth” that is the condition for the possibility of the operation of “political reason.” Is man reduced to the choice between a lesser and greater tragedy? The “ethics of truth,” although defenceless, does not have to prove to be a germ of tragedy. It may as well be a source of deliverance.

Used by the authorities, “political reason” produces accusations. Among these, the accusation of rebellion is the most serious. The justification that the authorities use is that the rebellion never ends, and thus that they must defend themselves by attacking the anarchist tendencies inherent in man. The only way to free oneself from the burden of the accusations is to deny them. Denying the accusation involves “opening up to someone third, someone or something I am faithful to when I rebel against power” (Tischner 1999, pp. 307–308). The third one that steps in, between the individual and the authorities, may be God, a fellow being or one’s own conscience. But along with the presence of the “third,” the space of good and evil opens up—space for ethics, law, morality, custom or religion. Thanks to the presence of the third it is possible to escape the absolute power. This is where the space for the “ethics of truth” opens up. Its path is trodden by him who does not want to agree to a life determined by the categories of “political reason” (Tischner 1999, p. 308).

I have mentioned before that Tischner attempts to illuminate man's drama with the light of the Gospel. Tischner believes that turning to this source makes it possible to "think within the horizon of good." As Zbigniew Stawrowski observes, such thinking opens up possibilities for forging social bonds based on truth, fidelity, trust and mutual solidarity. He writes, "Thus it constitutes a polar opposite of [political thinking] and the suspicion- and treason-ridden totalitarian world finds it to be a lethal challenge" (Stawrowski 2005, p. 72). It is also the problem of truth, which has both an ethical and epistemological dimension, that Tischner tries to solve by referring to the intuitions contained in the Gospel. The lecture on the "ethics of truth" concludes with a suggestion that in order to attain the truth one needs to look for the right vantage point on the world and ask oneself which is the most appropriate. Tischner writes:

The words of Christ provide the answer to this question: 'I am the truth'. What does that mean? It means: 'I am the world's vantage point from which the truth of the world and the truth of man can be seen in their entirety.' 'I am the truth' does not mean that 'I know the catechism of all truths, theses, outlooks on the world,' but that 'I am the place in the universe from which—if you look at the world—not only will you have truth, but you will yourself be truth as well.' (Tischner 2017, pp. 118–119)

Tischner refers to Pascal, who claimed that only getting to know Christ is the right "middle course" between pride and despair, because it is in Him that man recognizes his own greatness and his own misery (Tischner 1982, p. 7). Knowing God without knowing our wretchedness leads to pride. Knowing our wretchedness without knowing God leads to despair. Knowing Jesus Christ is the middle course, because in him we find both God and our wretchedness (Pascal 1995, p. 64). Inspired by the Gospel, Tischner's solution to the problem concerned with remaining faithful to the "ethics of truth," while realizing the dangers revealed by the "epistemology of political reason," would be as follows: siding with Christ affords man the possibility of becoming free from the pressure of "political reason." Not in the sense that man is fully secured against the threat of violence coming from political action, but that he becomes free from the pressure of "political reason" in the thought categories that he uses. He does not have to take delight in the works of "political reason," because he is in touch with that which is more delightful. Acceptance of the "ethics of truth" does not take place through obedience to the "categorical imperative," because man is dealing with a person, and not with "laws." However, that is not a mere "hypothetical" imperative either. On account of the encounter with Christ, man is free to give up "political reason," because he does not have to engage in the fight for salvation. He receives it for free. Christ is someone in whom *adaequatio* becomes fully realized. This fullness gives rise to the 'Christological imperative,' which is encapsulated in the words: do not use "political reason," because thanks to Christ you can do things differently. The imperative that comes from Christ is a special kind of imperative positioned between the "categorical" and the "hypothetical" imperative.

Thanks to the 'Christological imperative' it is therefore possible to take the side of the "ethics of truth." Tischner openly writes that the "ethics of truth" may become the starting point for the "ethics of work," which is "founded on truth as a value."

As Tischner emphasizes, ethics can save work. He writes: “The greater the hopelessness of work, the more distinct is the experience of the lost truth of work. The more categorical is also the character of the postulate that work have its truth restored” (Tischner 1982, p. 7). As we follow this line of reasoning, one might venture to make the following conjecture: if the “ethics of truth” becomes the starting point for the “ethics of work,” then it might as well become the foundation for other “fields” of ethics. It may become the starting point for all these kinds of “ethics” through which man seeks salvation.

The solution proposed by Tischner is interesting because it points to the possibility of combining the dimensions of the problem of truth, which at first glance appear difficult to combine. Furthermore, it becomes possible to avert the conflict that emerges at the interface of epistemology and ethics. Thanks to reference to Christ, who not only realizes the ideal of the “ethics of truth,” but also becomes the privileged “vantage point of the world,” and thus a peculiar epistemological centre, the connection between the epistemological and the ethical dimension of truth becomes possible. Also, a sufficiently solid justification for the demand that the “ethics of truth” be realized becomes possible, and the way of defending oneself against the charm spread by “political reason” and its works appears.

Tischner finds consideration of the figure of Christ to be of philosophical significance. This is because it is consideration of thinking. It is an attempt at finding the answer to the question of what one needs to think about to think properly. Tischner shows that thinking has an irremovable soteriological character. He writes: “As it asks about truth, living thinking proves to be the condition for salvation” (Tischner 1992, p. 339). The condition for salvation is thinking that leads to truth. Devoid of the thought reference to Christ, the “ethics of truth” is helpless in the face of “political reason.” Devoid of a reference to Christ, “political reason” is doomed to becoming ignoble. Neither the “categorical” imperative of adhering to truth, nor the “hypothetical” imperative of acting with caution in the face of “political reason” will safeguard man against the ultimate defeat, nor will they show him the way to salvation. However, man has the way of the ‘Christological imperative’ to resort to. But this way is by no means characterised by any compulsion.

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