The art of ethics as the art of wise life in the concept of Józef Tischner

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Abstract

The article examines Tischner's views on the meaning of ethics in human life. Tischner opposes positions that treat ethics as a set of recommendations (commands and interdictions). He believes that such an approach amounts to a kind of training in which the final effect is most important and, what is more, imposed. According to Tischner, a man's attitude towards his activity is what is important. Therefore, first we should ask who the person is and what his good is. Tischner does not give precise answers to these questions. He notes that self-awareness is not given to man from the beginning but is shaped throughout his life. Its course is influenced by his upbringing, education and life circumstances. Tischner points out that the most important of those are interpersonal relations. In an encounter one man helps another to discover what is good. Ethics is precisely the art of accurate revelations of the good. It is also the art of planning and undertaking activities that ensure that the good is preserved. Ethics is also an art because every encounter is different and, therefore, unique.

Keywords Technological ethics · Art of ethics · Art of life · Encounter · The issue of man · The other

Tischner's attitude to technological ethics

One can follow various principles in life: seek comfort (utilitarianism) or pleasure (Epicureanism), or the golden mean amongst a multitude of attitudes (Aristotelianism), or strive for universal happiness (Marxism). One can also subordinate life to the struggle for gaining and then maintaining power (Machiavelli).

How is one to live? What is one to live for? Who is one to live for? What should one be governed by in life? Is it worth living at all? The questions referred to here are extremely important, but they do not, of course, exhaust the list of questions that a man, wishing to live his life in a thoughtful and good way asks

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himself. Good, because we anticipate only a good life. A bad, careless life is what we would like to avoid.

According to Józef Tischner, ethics is not so much about formulating proper principles of life as about life itself—a life that is to be wisely lived. In his opinion, ethics understood in this way is closer to art than it is to engineering. Methods of delimiting and categorizing ethical issues into descriptive, normative, religious, and meta-ethical positions do not facilitate understanding what ethics is perceived as the art of a wise life. These categories separate what is an indivisible whole and thereby improperly treat ethics as an non-important human matter (Tischner 1992, p. 5).

The key to understanding Tischner's criticism of traditional approaches to ethics is to capture the essence of normative ethics. Unfortunately, he does not provide a literal definition of normative ethics. Nevertheless, the specificity attached to it becomes clear in his analysis of one of its varieties—technological ethics in the modern world, the sort of normative ethics that is inspired by technical solutions developed in modern Western civilization. It takes technical thinking and its great efficiency as the reference point. Pragmatic thinking, which focuses on a quick and reliable final result, works well in technical and managerial activities. Here, efficiency is synonymous with truthfulness and success is achieved when it is possible to formulate an effective recipe for achieving the intended technical or business goal.

According to Tischner, technological ethics is the attempt to transfer the effectiveness of technological and business methods to the sphere of human activity. The key to understanding the principles on which this ethics is based is provided by observation of nature. In cosmic structures stability is the result of balancing the forces of attraction and repulsion, while the unity of living organisms is accounted for by the balance of nourishment and metabolic processes. For instance, the unity of the bee colony is possible thanks to the instincts of cooperation between workers, drones and queen bees.

An engineer who constructs machines, for example, tries to find the optimum point among the intended purpose they are to serve, the quality of materials used, transport capacity, quality of service, and the price the buyer is willing to pay. According to Tischner, creators of technological ethics (the philosopher does not decide whether he is referring to specific thinkers fascinated by the achievements of modern technology or just the prevailing trend of the era) aim to make man function according to norms in the manner of an optimized machine. Ethics understood in this way, focusing on action, constructs models of proper behaviour in a variety of situations and relationships. The principles developed in this a way are certainly helpful in performing efficient and quick tasks. Tischner's doubts, however, are raised by their impact on man.

Algorithms of expected behaviours required by technological ethics may become a kind of habit over time. Frequent repetition leads to the creation of a "functional structure" in man (Tischner 1998, p. 32). The point here is that a person, when experiencing a situation, would be able to tell to which context it is connected, and thereby which "section of the world" he is dealing (ibid.). And then, given a degree

of ethical and technological knowledge, he would be able to find the right method for this type of reality.¹

The question arises: is behaviour developed in such a way pro-human? Does it serve the good of man? Józef Tischner has many objections to an ethics of this kind.

First of all, the evaluation of man according to this ethics will consist in emphasizing the power and skills of implementing recommendations formulated by originators external to humans. Secondly it is the actions themselves—and therefore the speed, efficiency, effectiveness, and economy of achieving goals—that are considered to be the most important in ethics, and, therefore, they become its essence. Thirdly, this ethics, not taking human experience into account, is akin to a legal framework. The purpose of law is not man himself but merely “building an external order between members of human communities.” (Tischner 1982b, p. 372) Fourthly, technological ethics is not interested in the relationship of man to the actions it decrees, whether he considers them right or accepts them as a result of persuasion, or even under the pressure of violence. And fifth, if the right ethical action relies on models that have been built by others, this results in the restructuring of man, his transformation into someone new unplanned by him. By stimulating a man to specific actions, technological ethics aims to change him² (Tischner 1982b, pp. 363–364).

According to Józef Tischner, to expect that ethics will form proper and reliable algorithms of conduct, separates it from its roots,³ i.e. from questions about good and evil. Such an approach does not respect human subjectivity in light of the natural right to freedom and self-determination. Tischner claims that the good is associated with man and his specific way of being in the world. Technological ethics does not create space for man to “do his issue.” It is not about the internal structure of a human being, nor about his position in the hierarchy of beings, it is about the way in which he recognizes the surrounding reality and his place in it. And also, about his recognition of the conclusions regarding the purpose and the way in which he wants to build his life. It is about answering the question of how not to lose yourself in life. How to survive? (Tischner 1992, p. 5).

¹ It is also worth noting that the technological ethics described here have many common features with the ethics described by Leszek Kołakowski in “Ethics without a moral code” (Kołakowski 1971, p. 137–173).

² It comes close to the methods of social engineering and, in extreme cases, those of totalitarian regimes.

³ His remark concerning roots can be understood in a genetic (what these norms are supposed to build) or historical sense. The historical sense makes reference to Socrates who did not formulate standards but, appealing to human rationality, he recommended acting in such a way that the soul would become noble: “After all, I do nothing else but go and persuade the younger among you and the old not to care about the body or money first of all but mainly about your souls, so that they would be as good as possible: and I tell them that valour does not grow out of money, but money and all other human, private and public goods out of valour” (Platon 1999, p. 569).

In search of autonomy

Tischner's allegations against technological ethics are based on a desire to defend man. It is an ethic that does not consider human autonomy and understanding of what one believes should be done. It treats the human as part of a great system to produce the good. The good that someone (a philosopher, group of scholars, the spirit of history?) has defined and then determined the most effective method of implementation. This ethics aims to form a man without first recognizing what man is and should be. What matters is the results themselves, not the human being.

It is an ethic undefended by Emmanuel Mounier, a philosopher to whom Tischner was attracted who believed that man should be an individual, free, and self-creative subject.⁴ Tischner, in his explanation of 'person', does not refer—as many have—to the category of mask and its role in the Greek theatre, and instead resorts to linguistic analysis. In his opinion, the individuality and self-determination of a person is better reflected by the term 'persona'. Tischner notes that the core of the term "persona" is "per-se", to be 'by-self' and 'thanks to-self'.⁵

Man seeks the truth in order to know and understand himself. He is not a perfect being. He tries, but often errs. Even then, writes Tischner, "when he does something evil, he seeks some good in it. Man's will is weak and often blind, but in spite of this it basically remains a good will. Therefore, man is an exceptional being among all earthly beings. At the same time, however, he is a tragic being. The goodness of his will was thrown into a fragile and ambiguous world of flesh and blood" (Tischner 1982b, p. 366).

According to Tischner, modern man lives in a world deprived of signs. The world has become an axiologically neutral continuum. It does not communicate any message, which is why man does not see God in it or any signs about the purpose and meaning of life (Wildiers 1985, pp. 37–65). The world becomes only a container of resources for survival, and man has nothing but himself as a reference point. It can be said that he lives in the horizon of his self, created by him. What he will invent, do, discover, find—is his. Working to satisfy his own needs, implement his plans, he raises his world. It is not a world deprived of values, they do exist, but their weight, and hence their hierarchy, are related to the assessment as being more or less mine, more or less useful to me. "Me" is always the reference point. In this way, the self-centered man creates his monadic world. This self-centered reference also determines what is true. Normality is related to what he does; what is done differently, in a different way or with the help of other tools, is considered abnormal. Describing this extreme individualism, Tischner uses the phrase "an obsession with himself"

⁴ "But a person is not an object; it is just what cannot be treated as an object in man" (Mounier 1964, p. 8).

⁵ "Man is a 'persona' because in a particularly wide range... he is 'by himself'. Man received existence as a task for himself. Man has the power to give or take away his human face. At first, he is some kind of indefiniteness, someone unknown, to whom a 'call' has been addressed. At some point in life, man discovers this, and then he suddenly confronts the world of values" (Tischner 2003, p. 58).

(Tischner 1982b, p. 368). The “self-directed man” is a monad-without-windows. Potentially, he has windows, but he has not opened them yet.⁶

Sources of ethical experience

According to Tischner, discovering that good and evil is not the same as what is beneficial and pleasant is the beginning of ethical thinking. The philosopher is convinced that the “sources of human ethical sensitivity” (Tischner 1982a, b, p. 364) should be seen in the individual experience that goes beyond the horizon of his concerns and interests. The experience of the encounter is crucial here. According to Tischner, noticing the other in his poverty and concern is the beginning of ethical thinking. The other is always somehow threatened in his humanity. This is particularly evident when he is poor, lost, or simply concerned. To better reflect this situation, Tischner evokes the figures of a widow, an orphan and a foreigner. They are in a particularly difficult situation. Their humanity is jeopardized, and, in a sense, their existence depends on the reaction and the attitude of those who meet them. “To call to human goodness for help is a way of human existence in this world. Such a cry, when it is heard, obliges” (Tischner 1982b, p. 367).

In Tischner’s view, what comes first is the face. It is the “place” where the truth about the situation of the other displays itself in the fullest way. The message of the face is the message of helplessness. The faces of others beg: do not hurt me, do not use me, do not cheat, do not chase me away, “do not kill me” (Tischner 1990, p. 31). Tischner believes that this face is the most “human”. It has the greatest “power” to crush the walls of the monad. It is also the place where the truth about man is most intensely revealed. It is the face of the other, which is a sign that should be taken into account when programming one’s activities. The drama which is taking place is therefore attended by two people—the one that meets and the other who is met.

The man who notices a face in poverty has several possible reactions. He can quickly go by, pretending that he does not see anything or that he does but does not understand the message conveyed by the face or he can see the needy one, identify him as being in a situation that should not take place and, therefore, is non-human; and then bring him out of the difficult situation. Help may consist, for example, in pointing out the way, feeding, finding a job, giving advice, finding a shelter. It may be that the encounter is with a wrongdoer who does not respond in a human way to the challenge presented by the encountered face. He will carry out his evil intentions either through physical destruction of the other or through actions contrary to his requests.

He can also act in the long-term and, through threat, temptation or some form of betrayal, strive to make the other dependent on him. These activities are supposed to

⁶ Dona Elwira, Maria Beaumarchis and The Stranger from *The Controversy over the Existence of Man* are similar to the monad described here. They also have closed the windows. Once they lived in a different way; their windows were open, but due to different life circumstances, these windows were closed (Tischner 1998, pp. 227–243).

lead the encountered one to become like the wrongdoer, becoming his successor in evil (Dymarski 2008, pp. 21–37). But it may also be that the other puts on a mask to hide that he is really an evildoer. He pretends to be lost or miserable to force compassion and solidarity from the other. As a result, he ties the other to himself, and when he has achieved this, betrays him.

If the two persons in the meeting are not people of ill will, they may have fundamental significance for ethical thinking. In Tischner's perspective, a meeting with the other may become a new reference point, a new "Archimedean point". "The way we are able to experience the other is unmatched; we are unable to experience anything else in this way: any object, landscape or animal. Therefore, such experience can be the source of our new ethical self-knowledge. In it, fundamental ethical values are found: truth, justice, faithfulness, etc. In it lie the fundamentals of objectivity for our ethical commitments" (Tischner 1982b, p. 365).

Thus Tischner does not agree that because ethics is a postulative science that it should be kept away from experience.

The art of life

Józef Tischner ascribes a much greater task to ethics than forming standards and rules to be taken into account in a man's life. Ethics is the art of shaping life in a wise way. "Like no other science it is close to all difficult human affairs. It carefully considers the human meaning of guilt, wants to understand and resolve it. It aims to understand the source of anxieties of human conscience, grasp the scope of human freedom, and above all to give some meaningful shape to human hope" (Tischner 2003, p. 59).

Tischner links the beginning of ethics to man's obligation to another man. Man is free, he does not have to do anything. He can do nothing, he can enjoy the pleasures of intramonic existence, but he can also see the other in all the complexity of his situation. So, he can leave his world, open his monadic shutters and help the one who is in need. The expression 'it is needed' represents the challenge and the response to that challenge. As Tischner writes: "What is significant is the Polish 'it is needed' [jest potrzebny]. (...) It confronts me with the whole world and with myself, just as nothing else does. It arouses a sense of duty inside me. Only now do I know what 'responsibility' really means" (Tischner 1982b, p. 366).

Like Heidegger (1962, p. 238), Tischner thinks that man's main concern is connected with being himself. Yet there are differences between them regarding what 'being oneself' means. Heidegger emphasizes the relationship between existence and being. He finds a metaphor, "shepherding being," to define this relationship.⁷ However, Tischner believes that what is fundamental to human beings is connected to the good. Man is himself when he directs his life towards the good. The good is

⁷ "In his essential unfolding within the history of Being, man is the being whose Being as ek-sistence consists in his dwelling in the nearness of Being. Man is the neighbor of Being" (Heidegger 1977, p. 222).

not a being, it is a task and a challenge. It is very close to a worried, wandering man whose face appeals to us and asks for the concern of the one who sees it.⁸ For Tischner, this challenge has not only an anthropological dimension but also a divine one. He writes that the face of another is “a trace left by God” (Tischner 1990, p. 52).

Man wants to be himself because this way of realizing his life appears to him as good. “Man looks to himself where he finds some good” (Tischner 1998, p. 267). But one cannot possess the good because it is not a being. According to Tischner, it is something that occurs, happens, or is itself a gift—more for someone than something. It occurs in the space between man and man. In order to determine its nature, Tischner uses terms such as propagation and radiation. “The good is *diffusium sui* in the sense that it wants itself” (Tischner 1998, p. 318). It wants itself not as a being, but as a gift.

According to Tischner, the occurrence of good is connected with man and the way in which he realizes his existence. Of the four ways of responding to a man in poverty described above, the second situation is rooted in ethics. To be ethical means to live in a way that is not indifferent to others. The philosopher believes that an encounter with a man in poverty has several phases.

The first phase is a revealing experience. There is astonishment or even surprise here that something that should not happen is happening. The truth is difficult and painful. Another man, the one he encounters, finds himself in a difficult, unjust, and undeserved situation. This is not what things should be like. It is evident that this first phase is “negative”, it reveals an undesirable aspect of human reality, which Tischner calls an agathological experience. In stating that this should not be so we are mounting a reflection as to how to act to change the situation of the other. As a result, a more or less complex project is created. At this point Tischner writes about an axiological experience: “An axiological experience and axiological thinking resulting from it are focused on one basic goal—planning an event that can counter the development of a tragic event” (Tischner 1982a, p. 490). If the planned activities have been carried out, certain values will be realized. The first step is to notice a worried face and hear the question asked by a stray, and only then a decision to help and show him the desired path. First, one has to perceive a cold face and then decide about a sequence of actions to warm him. First, there is the perception of a sore face and hearing a complaint, and only then there is a project to remedy the situation... Values are built up on the basis of such actions.

Tischner is convinced that in addition to the result of actions taken by one man towards another, such as feeding the hungry one, showing the way to the wandering stray, consoling the distressed, there will also be a spiritual benefit—creating a

⁸ In “Ethics of values and hope” [written in 1976, appearing in successive issues of the Dominican monthly *On the Road* in 1977, republished in 1982.] Józef Tischner linked human values to goodness with values. Answering their call, i.e. by realizing it, man transforms the world and at the same time builds himself. Man “responds to the call of values and thus not only transforms the world, but also builds himself as a value in this world” (Tischner 2003, p. 89). In later works, Tischner begins to see the order of cognition differently. First, a man in need appears, and only then the values and order of their implementation become important. It is not values that open to other people, but other people open up to values.

value. It arises on a material base by changing the situation of the other person. The value appears on two planes, first, in physical space as a change in the situation of a human being. Now he is either on the right path or he is no longer hungry, or he is no longer worried. Secondly, on the spiritual plane of the person. The existing value becomes an element that builds the agathological interior of a human being (Dymarski 2018, pp. 81–96), joining other already present values due to the earlier activities of this man. All these values constitute his good.⁹ According to Tischner, only the values that he chooses and realizes in a free way are entirely his.

Tischner believes that the real living man enters a relationship with his surroundings, broadly understood. When describing these links, Tischner refers to the category of *ethos*. The philosopher explains what he means by referring to Heraclitus' ideas,¹⁰ who, sitting on a warm bread oven on a cold rainy day, was supposed to tell travellers not to be surprised, for it was his *ethos*. He meant that he was warm there (while it was cold and rainy outside) and that he was in the right place.

Ethos in Heidegger's translation and interpretation is "a place of residence" (Heidegger 1977, p. 233). Tischner understands *ethos* in a similar way. According to him, it is a favourable environment, a home, an area of life where a man is at home (Tischner 2003, p. 56). "As the natural element of the bird is the air, and the natural element of the fish is water, the *ethos* is the natural element of man" (Tischner 1982b, p. 373). *Ethos* is the space where you are in your own place, where you are in harmony with yourself.¹¹ According to Józef Tischner, man is an ethical being, that is, he is someone for whom the form of *ethos* is a basic matter. It is to be or not to be for man (Tischner 2003, p. 56). If he can not find such an *ethos*, he will live at odds with himself.

Man, a being-for-himself, is constituted by values that have come into being through himself. They form his inner good. For Tischner, ethics is the knowledge of the art of creating good. It is difficult for an outside observer to recognize the power of this good because it is internal. Nevertheless, it is highly probable that the power of this good is evident in the world. The signs of it are: the order of the basic sites—home and workplace, as well as the attitude to the temple and cemetery.

People build a home when they trust each other completely. They put up a house because they connect their future with this place. They want to have a house to be fully at home and create a space where their children will find a home and feel safe. When there is no trust or sense of security between people, they want to make their home a hideout. They are filled with fear and suspicion. They think that there is no room for reciprocity in this world. They want to isolate themselves from the

⁹ Tischner distinguishes good from value. He wrote: "Discovery of the dimension of participation in the good is threatened by objectification in value. For a long time, philosophy has been seeking how to replace the notion of the good with the concept of value. In this way, philosophers attempt to bring the good into phenomenological experience. However, has the goal been achieved? In essence, what has been achieved is the aesthetization of the good" (Tischner 1998, p. 177).

¹⁰ It is worth noting that Martin Heidegger also refers to the story about Heraclitus seeking his place (Heidegger 1977, pp. 332–334).

¹¹ Where for Heidegger speech is the home of being, for Tischner it is *ethos*.

world, believing that only in this way will they protect themselves from evil lurking everywhere.

When there is trust between employees then the workplace becomes a space where cooperation takes place in transforming the wealth of the Earth into things useful for people. This joint action builds up labour solidarity. A sense of bond with the place is also created as a result of work; attachment to the place grows, because the worker becomes more and more aware of how much of his effort is connected to it. Convinced of the dialogical nature of work, Tischner states that man draws on those for whom he works to become himself. The one who teaches students becomes a teacher thanks to their presence. The one who heals people becomes a doctor thanks to his patients, the one who bakes bread becomes a baker thanks to his clients. When a conflict arises between people, then the workshop ceases to be the best place to extract what is best and becomes a place for attempting to subjugate the world. Here, man enters the test of power with the earth. Work becomes a punishment. To win, he must unite all forces. This is done not through agreement, but through the fight for leadership. The strongest one strives to subordinate his former work companions. He starts to work according to the principle: "The limits of power are the limits of the law" (Tischner 1990, p. 195).

The desire for good also results in the fact that a man goes to the temple to ask God to get even more good out of himself and open his eyes to a completely different reality. When things go wrong between people, man treats temples in a pagan way. He goes there because he starts to think that it is a source of the power needed to fight. He complains to God about the injustice that afflicts him and expects God to retaliate against his enemies as an act of His justice.

In the human world, the cemetery also plays a special role. Man goes there without fear because he knows that this is a place of "encounter" with those who lived on Earth before him. He calmly accepts the awareness of the fact that 1 day he will join the community of the dead. For a man who is in conflict with other people the cemetery is an unwanted place. This is the place of "meeting" ancestor spirits. He does not want to have anything to do with them. He rejects and neglects the traditions of his ancestors and believes that he will create a better world.

Summary

According to Józef Tischner, reflection on ethics leads to distinguishing two types of questions. Which good is most important to a human being? How should one achieve this good or preserve it?

Technological ethics, like any normative ethics, is not free of these questions either. It responds to them, giving people principles that they should follow, yet it does not reveal the essence of the good.

Tischner unmasks this hidden resolution and protests against it. The order of operation is unchangeable; first you need to determine what is good and then how to achieve it. "Technological ethics which begins with the standard turns the whole thing on its head" (Tischner 1982b, p. 369).

The philosopher is convinced that man is a free and rational being. And that is why he is capable of discovering the real good. Obviously, he often meets evil on this path whose basic characteristic is pretending to be good. Therefore, one should start with the art of discovering the good. Only after recognizing it should one start to plan activities that would lead to the attainment of this good. Tischner does not want and can not define what the good is. He states that the second person is the guide on the way to the good, the other in whom good is endangered. On the basis of his recognition a plan should be developed, and actions should be taken which will save the other in his good.

Tischner thinks that every plan of action is individual. There are no ‘the only real and right’ algorithms for ethical behavior. Everyone is individual and connected to a specific situation in which each is endangered in his own good. It should also be noted that although the philosopher does not state as much directly, actions for the sake of the other should not (and can not) destroy the good of the third, the fourth man, and so on...

Therefore, Józef Tischner believes that ethics is an art, because like art, it does not respond well to unreflective repetition. The art of ethics stands in opposition to habitual activities. The good is threatened in numerous ways, because it is entangled in different situations. There is no one antidote to all ills. We may say that every person who wants to be ethical must be an artist, that is, someone who is able to discover and create. He discovers what the good is and creates projects to salvage and preserve it.

Why does one man have to act for the sake of another? By saving someone else, man saves himself. Helping the other to be, the first man helps himself. He builds himself. “To be oneself, therefore, means: not to be able to be rid of his responsibility” (Tischner 1990, p. 43).

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Compliance with ethical standards

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