

Environmental Ethics as Ethics of the Political State

Etyka środowiskowa jako etyka sfery politycznej

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to prove the existence of the need to develop the theory of environmental ethics for the purposes of political activity. Its arguments refer to the following five observations. The first concerns the changes that have occurred in the area of human activity in connection with separation of the autonomous areas: private and public (including political). The second is related to the effects of globalization process, such as the birth of the global environmental problem and the evolution of international relations towards global policy in which national states are involved with different history, tradition, culture and religion, as well as international and supranational organizations. The third results from the retreat from the *Realpolitik* pattern towards a policy based on moral values (human rights). The fourth concerns the role of politics as the most effective tool of environmental protection. The fifth points to the need for a global environmental policy in a pluralistic political reality.

Key words: environmental ethics, political philosophy, a model of ethics, environmental problem

Streszczenie

Głównym celem pracy jest dowiedzenie istnienia potrzeby opracowania teorii etyki środowiskowej na użytek działalności politycznej. U podstaw podejmowanej problematyki leży pięć konstatacji. Pierwsza dotyczy zmian, jakie zaszły na obszarze ludzkiej aktywności w związku z wyodrębnieniem się w niej autonomicznych sfer: prywatnej i publicznej (w tym politycznej). Druga jest związana ze skutkami procesu globalizacji, takimi jak narodziny globalnego problemu środowiskowego i ewolucja stosunków międzynarodowych w stronę polityki globalnej, w której biorą udział państwa narodowe o odmiennej historii, tradycji, kulturze i religii oraz organizacje między- i ponadnarodowe. Trzecia wynika z odwrotu od wzorca *Realpolitik* w stronę polityki opartej na wartościach moralnych (prawa człowieka). Czwarta dotyczy roli polityki jako najbardziej efektywnego narzędzia ochrony środowiska. Piąta zakłada konieczność prowadzenia globalnej polityki środowiskowej w pluralistycznej rzeczywistości politycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: etyka środowiskowa, filozofia polityczna, model etyki, problem ekologiczny

Introduction

The relationship between eco-philosophy and political philosophy seems a doubtful matter. The first deals with the relationship between man and nature, while the second concerns the relationship between people. In fact, the thing is quite different. Any eco-philosophical theory promotes some program of changes in the relationship between nature and man, which entails specific economic costs that need to be put on someone's shoulders. Distribution of goods between the states and inside the state organism is

one of the most important and most sensitive political issues. Societies and social groups demand equitable distribution of all burdens, which inevitably introduces eco-philosophy into the area of consideration occupied by justice. This is the main problem of modern political philosophy. For eco-philosophy and political philosophy to be close to each other, the inertia of conclusions drawn from eco-philosophical inquiry shall suffice. And yet one could give a number of other reasons. This convergence has been appreciated so much that in some philosophical compendia eco-philosophy and environmental ethics

(ecological ethics, eco-ethics) are mentioned next to typical theories of political philosophy (Passmore, 1998). In other cases, environmental ethics is treated as axiological and normative background of environmental policy (Elliot, 2000). Furthermore, ecological values began to be separated – for example, by Zbigniew Hull – from the socio-political domain (Hull, 2015). Therefore, posing the issue of environmental ethics as more than others adapted to the requirements of the political dimension of social life does not contradict the idea of eco-philosophy. Rather, it fills the white spot on the map of issues of this philosophical sub-discipline.

1. The spheres of human activity

Individualism, liberalism and romanticism and the division of spheres of human activity.

Sigismund Augustus is known as a Polish monarch who conducted the internal policy in accordance with the principles of religious tolerance. He expressed his position in memorable words: *I am not master of your conscience*. They show the changes taking place in the consciousness of the 16th century intellectual elites on the issue of human activity. They included the separation of the sphere of activity that could operate independently from political power. In the 17th century, the distinction between public and private sphere found justification in the liberal philosophy. According to the theses of classical liberalism the private sphere extends to where there is a lack of legal regulations and there is no oversight on the part of government officials. Proclaiming minimal state, liberals sought to progressively enlarge the sphere. For a long time, they attached particular importance to liberating the economy from the tutelage of politics, in order to finally consider the private sphere as a whole range of organizations, associations and institutions created by the will of entities, for which the model was similar economic creations (Calhoun, 1997). As rightly observed by Rafał Proszak: *Private sphere, in this sense, meets the definition of civil society: while the public sphere is nothing other than state institutions* (Proszak, 2004). Liberal thought from the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries set the original boundary between the private and public spheres, but could not keep them at the thus determined positions. The boundary between the private and the public sphere of human life later moved several times due to issues raised in subsequent periods. Important changes occurred in the Romanticism. Specific to this era, the understanding of what is private, has survived to this

day, tying a strong knot between privacy and intimacy. Under the influence of the Romantics understanding of the private sphere grows and moves to a new level of social relations. It grows, because the private sphere now means freedom from state control, and the expectations and interference of other people, freedom – paraphrasing the term by Ernest Gellner – from kings and cousins (Gellner, 1997). In contrast, it moves to another plane of social relations – as the privacy moves out of the area occupied by civil society. The opposition of what is private to what is state-dependent and associated with the civil society has not remained unnoticed. In fact, it led to a change in the meaning of the public sphere. The new definition of the sphere included both the state and civil society. There have also been attempts to incorporate the economy¹. This opposition is also important from the point of view of religion. Freedom of conscience, which originally meant – constitutive for the private sphere – freedom to choose religious organization, has undergone a significant evolution. Religious unions and organizations were on the outside of the private sphere while remaining part of civil society.

Modern degradation of the social function of ethics.

Changes associated with the separation and transformations within subsequent autonomous spheres of human activity have been accompanied by changes in the understanding of the role of ethics. By subjecting the ethics to the process of *privatization*, they led to the degradation of its social role. First and foremost, after the final separation between public and private, it ceased to be relevant to politics. The main current of new ethical theories became increasingly distanced from the Aristotelian definition of politics as the art of governing the country in the name of the common good. The Machiavellian separation of ethics and politics was supported by modern critique of Aristotle's physical theories. On the other hand, the collapse of the authority of Aristotelian theories meant benefits for new cultural and civilization trends. In foreign policy came the era of *Realpolitik*. Morality, and in its wake modern ethics, did not have access to it. And were it not for the fact that in the mainstream of modern ethics the ethics has become a shadow of political philosophy, one could say that it has been completely relegated to the private sphere. When it reached to the fore, as in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, it did not so much explain how politics should be conducted, but rather focused on inventing reasons why politics cannot exceed the threshold of individual's privacy – it provided the

¹ The finding that modern public sphere involves civil society, political society, and perhaps also the economy may seem questionable in light of the work of modern theorists of civil society, who endeavoured to clearly delimit the civil society and political society. However, from the perspective of the present, influenced by romanticism, under-

standing of the private sphere of human activity, the first and the second type of society are now seen as the antonym of private. In turn, the capitalist economy has now become a field of activity of such entities of market game, which in many ways resemble the hierarchical state apparatus and leave as little room for independent individual initiative.

substantiation for the introduced division of spheres of human activity. Ethics was also evicted from the economy. The lively inquiries of medieval philosophy on the social destination of the goods and the resulting consequences, such as a fair price (Hołówka, 2001) in modern thought died gradually until silence overtook these matters (Bell, 1994). The belief reigned that there is nothing to deliberate upon, since the market just like nature has its own rules, guarding order with its invisible hand. Even Karl Marx in some way yielded to the pressure of the notion of market rationality because he translated his anti-liberal ideals in their entirety into critique of political economy of capitalism, abandoning the construction of ethical theory of justice. The process of reducing the role of ethics to the private sphere reached its peak in utilitarianism, which consistently passed every moral problem through the press of personal suffering or individual benefit. In the end, in the mainstream ethics normative reflection on human activity has been pushed even from the private sphere, giving way to the science of ethics, i.e. the history of ethics and metaethics, and science of morality, i.e. descriptive ethics. In the mid-twentieth century ethics has become as dead and useless as Latin.

The modern renaissance of ethical thought.

Bad luck turned at last from the ethics after next two decades. Beginning with the 1970s, philosophers gathered courage needed to challenge the described understanding of ethics dominant in the academic world. Also in this case the impact of a mass social change became known. This time, consequences of democratization of social life came to the fore, especially the introduction of universal suffrage. Without prejudice to the existing division of human activity into the private and the public sphere, they significantly transformed the public realm from the inside. By extending the principle *Nothing about us without us* on the whole of society, they provided every citizen with the right to speak out and express their opinions in matters of the general public. The simultaneous extension of the space of public discourse has opened it to the topics related to the development of scientific and technological civilization. The subject of public discussion became issues of politics, society and culture. Acceleration of civilizational changes and globalization processes provided new problems. Euthanasia, abortion, cloning, *in vitro* fertilization, corporate social responsibility, global justice, intergenerational justice, nature protection, treatment of animals, mass illegal migration, feminism, homosexual unions, human rights are just examples of some of them. These and similar topics constitute the content of radio and television transmissions and the subject of political fights, making a lot of people discuss them in the comfort of their homes, with family and friends. The media uproar, proposals of mutually exclusive solutions make it

difficult not to lose their sense. The traditional beliefs of good and evil are no longer sufficient guidelines. Public debaters need arguments, private listeners – orientation. It's hard to say whether participants in the public debate expected the support of ethics. In contrast, philosophers saw it as an opportunity to return ethics to its former role. Public debate provided incentives to retreat from ethics focused on itself and to jump into the vortex of moral dilemmas of the public sphere and politics. For its part, politics itself increasingly opened the door for ethics. This was due to the experience of World War II. The period of the *Realpolitik* was closed during an international trial of Nazi war criminals, charged, among others, with crimes against humanity. In the absence of adequate legal provisions, the judgment of politics conducted by them was subordinated to the ethical values underlying universal human rights and justice. It is no wonder that the next step of ethics towards politics was a question of justice of social institutions asked by John Rawls. Caused by globalization, the weakening of the position of the nation-state in international relations and bringing closer together the societies have shifted interests of philosophy from international to global justice (Hahn, 2009). Global problems started to become increasingly important in philosophical reflection.

In the last half-century, ethics returned to the borders from before the individualist revolution in culture and the liberal revolution in politics. But this is not a return to the former positions – the wheel of history cannot be turned back. Erstwhile moral universe is still fragmented into parts. The division of human activity into the private and public sphere remains in force. Thus, we have private ethics, though no one uses that name, i.e. ethics of the private sphere of human activity, everyday ethics for everyone. But we also have social ethics, and political ethics is talked about increasingly often.

2. The need to develop environmental ethics for the political sphere

Global nature of environmental problems and the origins of environmental ethics as an ethics of responsibility.

The need to develop environmental ethics for the political sphere appeared at the birth of international environmental policy. Since the environmental crisis, which is at the heart of environmental policy, is a global problem that requires a common solution for all mankind, it has to be a policy of global scope and nature. Its mission is to revise the existing methods and extent of the economic use of natural resources and to counter the negative consequences of human interference in nature. Environmental ethics legitimizes such a policy, referring to assumptions that indicate civilizational and cultural roots of ecological threats, and – due to anthropogenic causes of environmental crisis – the obligation of the people to bear

responsibility for the conduct, the effects of which affect the wildlife. The topic of human responsibility for nature is a new ethical and political issue, to the same extent as global problems. Both issues were in the crosshairs of philosophical reflection and political practice in the same period and under the same circumstances: in the 1960s and under the pressure of adverse changes in the conditions of human life. The existence of global problems became known in 1968, in connection with the activities of the Club of Rome and the United Nations, especially through the speech of Secretary General Sithu U Thant at the 23rd Session of the UN General Assembly. Both issues have become part of the public discourse under the influence of the threats posed by the effects of civilization development. First, the danger of the outbreak of a world nuclear war was strongly emphasised – here, one must remember the shock of the Cuban crisis of 1962; then the information about the risks carried by the global ecological crisis encountered a wide range of responses. The same can be said about the issue of responsibility. In his article from the mid-1970s, Georg Picht regretfully stated that he found only one monograph on the concept of responsibility (Picht, 1981), thus indicating the marginal importance of this issue in contemporary ethical considerations.

The name *ethics of responsibility* is used to describe the group of theories comprising the broader environmental ethics. The topic of responsibility combines a number of theories of environmental ethics with theories of ethics of responsibility so closely that it is difficult to clearly resolve belonging of a specific position to one or the other ethical theory. And not just because they take the same issues, such as the issue of environmental crisis, and look at them through the prism of global problems. This is mainly due to the fact that these are the positions belonging to a new type of ethics, which makes responsibility the very foundation of existence of morality and the law (Picht, 1981). Environmental ethics is therefore also the ethics of responsibility and reflects the shape given to reflection on morality as a result of the revision of an earlier understanding of the term *responsibility*.

The new type of ethics was initiated by the pursuit of environmental ethics to broaden the subject of ethical reflection with an assessment of human behaviour towards nature. Enriching the subject of ethical reflection with issues related to conservation and the defence of spontaneous good and the interests of non-human living beings has made ethicists face a new problem. It was a question of estimating the effects of humans refraining from acting in the field of phenomena and processes independent in their genesis of human activity, but susceptible to its effects. Precursors of philosophical reflection on global issues were the first to undertake the task of addressing this issue. They tried to deal with it by expanding the area of individual human responsibility for affairs

not connected by causal relationship with human actions. This led to a shift in emphasis within the main themes of the concept of responsibility. The responsibility towards someone or something went by the wayside against responsibility for someone or something. While the result may seem trivial today, because apparently the issue may be boiled down to refraining from relevant action, a new formulation of the problem of responsibility overcame the modern scheme of moral reasoning adopted by the ethics of the mainstream under the influence of Cartesian philosophy. The proper effect of exposing the limitations of the prevailing scheme of moral reasoning is the new definition of the subject of morality, according to which the subject of morality is constituted by claims of someone or something. Another outcome is a releasing responsibility from the tight corset of causal relationships, initiated by the acts of will of specific *I*, someone recognizable by name. Another consequence is to return to a still questionable concept of collective responsibility, e.g. responsibility of institutionalized target groups or generation, which differs in meaning from the concept of shared responsibility as responsibility borne by an entity arising from the degree of its participation in the activities of the assessed group.

Responsibility in the private and public spheres from the perspective of the subject of responsibility.

Of great importance in the argument for the development of environmental ethics for the political sphere are considerations leading to the identification of the subject of morality with the subject of responsibility. In the article *The notion of responsibility* Picht argued that man is responsible for everything that is not a natural process, that is, *not only for human-induced processes, but also those which a man can influence, although they occur without human participation* (Picht, 1981). The desire to go beyond the existing ethical individualism also marked the actions of Hans Jonas. Published at the end of the 1970s, *Principle of responsibility* tried to do that by *expansion of the issues covered by individualism into new areas of complexity and strengthening its identity in a collective action, in which the place is found for a new dimension of power that requires harnessing and control* (Ciążela, 2007), thus duplicating Picht's intentions concerning the extension of the notion of individual responsibility. Both philosophers have chosen this path in the belief that following it is the right answer to the universalization of human responsibility, in which *public and private awareness moves indeed, regardless of whether we want to admit it or not* (Picht, 1981).

Although the position of both philosophers seriously contributed to the understanding of the importance and the problem of responsibility and marked the path for many followers, in the next decade it was subject to substantial revision. Picht's and Jonas' followers realized that the difficulties encountered by

those philosophers, result from the omission of difference between the spheres of human activity. Picht's and Jonas' attempt to extend to the public sphere, including political, the concept of responsibility grown on the ground of the experience acquired in the private sphere of human activity was doomed to failure because of disregard of the differences occurring between them. The forerunners of the modern concepts of responsibility did not take into account the fact that »universalized global activity«, as »responsibility of humankind« would be possible only if the changes taking place in the historical process led to unification, as noted by, among others, Sztompka, of collective memory and culture, which at present seems unlikely (Leźnicki, 2010).

New approach in the theory of responsibility to the spheres of human activity is characterized by the work of Dieter Birnbacher. In the final parts of the book *Responsibility for future generations*, he concludes that private preferences, expressed in the market choices, and public preferences, reflecting the political choices are divergent to an extent that makes it impossible to support universal ethics on the private sphere. In contrast to the private sphere only the public sphere, or, in principle, politics, has the potential required to implement the principles of universal responsibility. Birnbacher says: *awareness of participation in community preventive activity and contributing to a common goal can be an additional incentive to ensure responsible behaviour towards future also when community does not rely on anything other than on «factum brutum» of state coercion* (Birnbacher, 1999). He explains this fact in three ways. From the point of view of morality, it is important that, in comparison with the market decisions political choices as a whole are subject to stronger influence of norms and moral ideals. In turn, the psychological perspective allows to accept that the political decision acts as a mechanism of external motivation. It is particularly important in the case of elimination or minimizing the phenomenon known in economics a *free rider problem*.²

Responsibility and shared responsibility from the perspective of scientific and technological civilization. In arguing for the development of environmental ethics for the political sphere, one cannot also ignore another, apart from a redefinition of the subject of ethics, of the aforementioned consequences of the revision of the concept of responsibility. This time, we are talking about a new approach to the relationship between the conscious action of the individual and its social consequences. This topic has been specifically developed in the philosophy of technology, delineating the boundary between the old and the

new version of the philosophical discipline. Andrzej Kiepas, during polemic with the views of Henryk Skolimowski on pro-ecological science and environment-friendly technology, points to the need to move away from the traditional approach to responsibility, where the subject of the action and subject of responsibility are the same, and the field of agency and area of responsibility overlap. The understanding of responsibility as self-responsibility, i.e. responsibility before oneself, own conscience, no longer fully agrees with the present. It came about to include such complexity of many social relationships that the will and the individual agency in many cases are an illegible element of network relations. *In the case of network structures, there may appear consequences that might be a result of accidental disturbances and side dependencies, including also those which will not have direct and clearly identifiable perpetrators*, (Kiepas, 2001) says Kiepas. Therefore, qualitative difference between the private and the public sphere of human activity arises from the differences between their respective structures and objects of responsibility. While in the private sphere structure of responsibility retains the shape of simple, mechanistic causal relationships, the responsibility in the public sphere consists of anonymous network connections, which make it impossible to assign an individual responsibility for all the consequences of their actions. While in the private sphere object of responsibility is the welfare of the subject of action and the entities united with them by the bonds of direct contact, in the public sphere it is about well-being of an anonymous community, which consists of both current and future generations. Therefore, in the private sphere if one can still speak of personal responsibility, in the public sphere one should also bear in mind the shared responsibility of the individual for what as the result of their complicity stems from the decisions and actions of the community with which they operate.

As follows from what has been written above, environmental ethic for the political sphere is not the correct answer to the call of Leszek Kołakowski, in which he outlined the need for *metanoia*, to change the mentality of humanity (Kołakowski, 1996). In contrast, it is an attempt to create the position matching the situation in which the responsibility for the ecological crisis is embroiled in a depersonalized, network structure of dependence in which the subject of responsibility is constituted by claims on the part of individuals, groups, entire communities and institutions affected by the effects of the crisis or capable to assess them, and perhaps even by claims put forward on behalf of the interests and rights of non-human beings. Such structure of responsibility has

² Free rider is an entity which benefits from a given good or service to a higher degree than its participation in the costs of providing that good or service. Free rider problem stems from a situation where one cannot provide a particular good or service to some, without providing it to everyone.

This is a problem characteristic to, among others, environmental policy. A classic example of such free rider is still the United States, the largest producer of air pollution per capita, which have not acceded to the *Kyoto Protocol* and do not bear the associated economic costs.

the characteristics of responsibility in the public sphere. The subject of responsibility in this area includes institutions of a political nature, distinguished by the ability to organize life of large and diverse populations and the ability to use mechanisms of strong external motivation. The need to develop environmental ethics for the political sphere thus results from the assumption, according to which foreign policy is an effective tool to overcome the limitations imposed on the global responsibility by the specificity of the private sphere of human life. The ethics, on which such a policy could be based, should therefore be able to meet the challenges arising from cultural diversity of pluralistic global society, this social mixture of fractions with different histories, distinct traditions of other cultures and cultural resources of experience, diversified in terms of ideology and religion, morality and customs.

Conclusion

Emphasizing the need for developing environmental ethics for the political sphere should not be perceived as an attempt to challenge the values of these eco-ethical concepts that are focused on the private sphere of human activity. Any attempt to create ecological culture must refer to the positions reflecting the historical tradition of the community, its past cultural experience, religion, customs, basic ideas and beliefs, including metaphysical claims about the nature and human beings. Ecological culture of the community cannot develop in isolation from the dialogue, which is maintained with beliefs from the past about good and evil, right or wrong lifestyles, goals worthy and unworthy of implementation. A lot can be done by starting from the moral intuitions typical for the community, reviewing its valued assets, assessing the consequences of conduct in accordance with its system of values before and after making the *ecological* adjustments. The revision of social practices destructive from the perspective of the quality of nature will lead nowhere, if it remains blind and deaf to these issues. The need to develop specific environmental ethics for the use of politics simply comes from the fact that in international politics, in the environmental policy pursued on a global scale, there is no such thing as a common tradition, which can be referred to, and from the conviction that any attempt to impose one style of living in such conditions surely will not be well received. In other words, this need follows from the fact that the conceptual models and systems developed in relation to the private sphere of human activity cannot be accurately transferred to the specific problems of a globalized public sphere. This need is thus conditioned by the fact that the usefulness of these conceptual models and systems for theoretical description and explanation of phenomena and processes from the private sphere is not confirmed within the phenomena and processes belonging to the public sphere.

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