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## SIGNIFICANCE OF ONTIC DUTY\*

**Abstract.** What are the relationships between value and duty? Which ontic status has a duty and why? This article aims at clarifying these concepts. It is indicated that in Kant's writings, we come across texts that enable a slightly different interpretation of his philosophy. And so: the matter of good will is the goals themselves; good will must act according to the maxim that the members of the kingdom of goals follow. And this is a moral good since the highest principle of morality is the desire for autonomy of will. Thus, the form of universal legislation is a community of autonomous beings in which the humanity of each of them is realized. In such a community, the a priori content – the content of an ethical reality – is created. It can be said that relationships between people are various forms of ontic status of a duty.

**Keywords:** value; duty; Kant's law

1. Introduction: Posing a problem.
2. The concept of duty.
3. Humanity realized in two worlds.
4. Conclusions: The relationship nature of the ontic duty.

### 1. INTRODUCTION: POSING A PROBLEM

“The duty to know the duty is therefore not ‘infertile’, not having a chance to change a person”, L. Koj wrote in one of his books<sup>1</sup>. This is the first reason for my interest in this issue. I share his conviction that practicing ethics is, above all, “the desire to know resulting from the desire to fulfill a duty or to influence the relevant beliefs and actions of other people<sup>2</sup>. That is the conviction that I obtained

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1 L. Koj, *Powinność w nauce. Określenie i poznawalność powinności*, vol. 1, UMCS, Lublin 1998, 228.

2 Ibid.

during my studies at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, where I had the opportunity to get acquainted with the thought of K. Wojtyła and T. Styczeń.

The second reason for my renewed interest in the subject of duty was the book written by Andrzej Kaniowski *Supererogacja. Zagubiony wymiar etyki* [*Supererogation. A lost dimension of ethics*]<sup>3</sup>, in which the author maintains that in Kant's views one can find a basis for stating that the philosopher from Królewiec [Königsberg] accepted the existence of an ontic duty. Is he indeed right? And if so, what is the ontic duty and what is its significance about? In order to answer these questions, one should think a little bit about the attempts made so far to understand the duty, and especially its understanding by the philosopher from Królewiec.

The third reason for my interest in the issue of ontic duty is related to the claims of some philosophers that the essence of ethics is the issue of a value, not a duty. Moreover, they claim that ethics should be built through the references to the virtues, not the duties. According to the, W. Ockham is the main culprit<sup>4</sup>. Others say that one should live according to the value, not duty. And therefore – a value or a duty? Or maybe both, as it was indicated e.g. by Wojtyła?

The fourth reason for my interest in the issue of ontic duty is related to the views of Hans Jonas. And the fifth one, finally, is the desire to find an answer to the question of what the duty is at all, what is its existential nature.

What is a duty then? What is its ontic status? Isn't it an anachronism to talk about the ontic duty in the post-metaphysical era? Isn't this concept of crypto-theological character? Isn't the duty only formal, as I. Kant thought? Or maybe Kaniowski is right claiming that in Kant's system, it is possible to find something that is a content, ontic, and not only formal duty? Is it therefore possible to explain the ontic duty without referring to religious concepts? And finally, why is it significant? It seems that all the questions can be

3 A. M. Kaniowski, *Supererogacja. Zagubiony wymiar etyki*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 1999.

4 Cf. W. Giertych, *Rewolucja w moralności*, 2 (<http://list.media.pl/archiwum-list-katolicki.php?lng=pl&pg=71>), [accessed on: 12/2004].

reduced to the one asked by H. Jonas: Do we take part in the axiological decisions voluntarily or is it our duty?<sup>5</sup> Jonas means nature's "decisions", but I think this question can be generalized and related to any consideration of the binding nature of reality, regardless of the philosophical direction we represent. In other words, it is about showing the relationship between freedom and duty, freedom and value, or, as others would say, good and freedom. How does good "stimulate" us to act; does it oblige us absolutely, "seduce" us, or is it just our choice without any justification, a manifestation of a specific free decision?

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF DUTY

It is commonly believed that the issue of duty appeared with Kant. The issue of duty, however, is much older and reaches back to the ancient thought. I will not present the whole discussion on this topic here. If you are interested, I would like to refer you to the book by A. Kaniowski.

The departure from the Greek understanding of *enetelechia* as a basic ontic category and the development, under the influence of Christianity, of the concept of freedom contributed to the emergence of the concept of duty. The duty started to come down to the will of God declared in prohibitions and orders. Wilhelm Ockham, who treated freedom not as an act of reason, but only as an act of will, had a great influence on the development of this concept of duty. He decided that humans have no inclinations for good and that they are completely undetermined. If a human being was determined towards good, he or she would be enslaved. Moreover, there is no increase in freedom in human beings. Everyone is born as a completely free being. God is also completely free and has therefore provided human beings, on a random basis, with a law that can be changed at any time. In everyday life, therefore, there is a clash between freedom and God's order, which a human being perceives in his or her conscience as a duty. This duty is not based on any

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5 H. Jonas, *Zasada odpowiedzialności*, transl. M. Klimowicz, Platan, Kraków 1996, 146.

principle. Conscience is something like a stamp that certifies a recognized duty<sup>6</sup>.

Therefore, Ockham separated the concept of being from the concept of good, freedom from reason. With social changes, especially as the result of the progressive individualization and creation of the sphere of privacy and the weakening of the power of external and legal orders, moral theories began to focus on the question of duty.

It should be treated as an independent phenomenon which cannot be reduced to either desire, value or norm. F. Brentano had a great influence on this understanding of duty through his work *O źródle poznania moralnego*. His students began to juxtapose a duty with a value. Some considered these concepts equivalent, others separated them, giving priority to the value (e.g. N. Hartmann or M. Scheler). However, it is impossible to analyze the whole discussion on this subject here. I'll just add that Herbert Spiegelberg contributed a lot to explain what the duty is. He made many distinctions. He spoke of duties, permissions, claims and rights<sup>7</sup>. Each of these terms referred to a different object. He believed that these objects create a certain ideal state, referred to as the *kat' exochen* order, that is, something that is ideal in itself, a goal. He assumed that in addition to the ideal order, there is also an order of certain directives and mutual assignments. It is artificial in nature. This order "exists by itself and has its foundation in the nature of things"<sup>8</sup>.

According to Spiegelberg, we grasp this order directly, when in our everyday life we oppose the order to disorder, without referring to any directive<sup>9</sup>. The advantage of Spiegelberg's concept is that it is not limited to the activities themselves. For it indicates what this world should be like, or rather should not be, that is, what states should never occur. The advantage of this concept is also the fact that it is not limited to moral duties. It rather shows the ideal state

6 See: W. Giertych, *Rewolucja w moralności*, op. cit., 2.

7 H. Spiegelberg, *Sollen und Durfen, Philosophischen Grundlagen der ethischen Rechte und Pflichten*, Klawer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht – Boston – London 1989.

8 Idem, *Gesetz und Sittengesetz. Strukturanalytische und historische Vorstudien zu einer gesetzfeien Ethik*, Max Niehans Verlag, Zürich und Leipzig 1935, 143.

9 Ibid.

of affairs, a certain reality that connects what should be a moral duty and what should be a duty from a different, non-moral point of view.

Kaniowski's main objection to the Spiegelberg's concept is that (like any phenomenological concept) it refers to intuition<sup>10</sup>. Neither does it answer the question of what are the sources of the duty, which is very important because, as soon as the duty is no longer bound to the will of God, the question of the origin of the duty and its nature became more legitimate. After all, many people believe that compliance with duty depends only on the existing social relations and that it is only psychological. Duty is an accepted compulsion. So it is neither a datum nor does it have a subjective character<sup>11</sup>.

Nevertheless, Kaniowski believes that the advantage of the concept of duty in Spiegelberg's understanding is that it does not only focus on what I should do, but it considers what state should not exist, as well as the fact that he uses the method of discourse to establish universal duty, which makes its character content-based and not only abstract and formal. Thus, the accusation made against Moore's ethics and value ethics concerning the fact that they drag with them "the mortgage of mysterious, intuitive mystification and crypto-metaphysical and quasi-theological construction" does not concern it<sup>12</sup>.

Kaniowski is right when claiming that Spiegelberg's concept of ontic duty, although it has a certain connection with metaphysical thought, does not define in advance a certain ideal state to be realized, "according to some proper being, a state of perfection", but gives the opportunity to define the type of this state, or rather what state should never occur. It protects against ideologizing the content of the duty. It also does not indicate an unambiguous way of realizing this duty, assuming the impossibility of realizing all states of affairs, thus better showing the rooting of the duty both in the subject and in social relations, in inter-subjective references.

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10 Cf. also H. Buczyńska-Garewicz, *Uczucia i rozum w świetle wartości. Z historii filozofii wartości*, Zakład Narodowy Imienia Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo PAN, Warszawa 1975.

11 H. Krämer, *Integrative Ethik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt – Mainz 1992, 22.

12 Ibid, 413.

Kaniowski believes that in Kant's concept, one can also find the basis for distinguishing the ontic duty. He refers to those fragments in which the philosopher from Królewiec deals with the issues of human responsibility for the world around him/her, when he mentions a certain debt we have in relation to the reality around us. Agreeing with this statement, I would like to go a little further and show that the ontological (ontic) duty appears not only in connection with the issue of responsibility for the natural world, but that it is possible to discover its ontological, and not only formal, character by considering Kant's understanding of humanity.

### 3. HUMANITY REALIZED IN TWO WORLDS

The Kant's ethic, as I understand it, makes it possible to state that duty is a being, or even that it is more a being than a duty, and that the content of what duty is indicates the objective reality of the idea of human freedom and enables the empirical world to be linked with the ethical world. In order to avoid any misunderstandings, I would like to note that Kant did not do so. His earlier assumptions did not allow him to do so by. However, he had a good intuition about certain dependencies. And that's what we need to examine.

As we know, Kant was convinced that moral content cannot serve as a criterion to distinguish it from other content. So it is not the content that should be compared with each other, but the content should be adapted to the form. Thus, Kant writes: "The principle of happiness can provide maxims, but never the ones that would be suitable for rights [for] the will, even if universal happiness is taken for granted"<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, one can risk a thesis that Kant's concept of happiness, although undefined, is not only formal.

As we know, Kant talked about a goal in itself or about a kingdom of goals and pointed to the idea of humanity as the greatest limitation of individual goals, which he treated as a new characteristic of formal law. The idea of humanity is a principle determining the

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13 I. Kant, *Krytyka praktycznego rozumu*, transl. J. Gałęcki, PWN, Warszawa 1984, 63.

will, it constitutes the basis of the law itself. Goodwill must follow the maxims that the members of the kingdom of goals follow. And this is a moral good since the highest principle of morality is the desire for autonomy. The concept of humanity is special. It is different than universal concepts. Although we can say, after Lévinas, that the universality comes through the concept of humanity imperceptibly, and due to this fact a human being becomes one of the elements of a larger whole (for this reason he rejected the Kant's concept), it is difficult to deny that the content of the concept of "humanity" is special. And it cannot be determined in a purely formal manner.

Taking into account the specificity of the notion of humanity, we can show that the duty to treat both one's own humanity and the humanity of others has the appropriate content, which exists as binding in both the ethical and empirical world, i.e. sensually cognizable. Such an interpretation may seem strange, incompatible with Kant's thought. Nevertheless, *Uzasadnienie metafizyki moralności* [*Justification of the metaphysics of morality*] contains a fragment that allows for such interpretation. Discussing the role of practical reason in that work, Kant writes: "The will of such a [rational] being can only be one's own will when the idea of freedom is assumed, and must therefore be granted in practical terms to all rational beings"<sup>14</sup>.

The above quotation, however, does not allow us to state that Kant transfers the understanding of freedom from the theoretical sphere to the practical one. However, it allows us to assume that he wanted to draw the reader's attention to the equality of human beings who form a certain community, and to the fact that every rational being is a member of the "intelligent world", and thus is capable of the same perception of the world and of free, autonomous action<sup>15</sup>.

The freedom of man as an autonomous being is revealed in the fact of lawmaking. However, the law cannot be established outside the community. Thus, the form of universal legislation is a community of au-

<sup>14</sup> I. Kant, *Uzasadnienie metafizyki moralności*, transl. R. Ingarden, PWN, Warszawa 1984, 89.

<sup>15</sup> See more on this subject, P. Baumanns, *Kants Ethik. Die Grundlage*, Königshausen und Neumann GmbH, Würzburg 2000, 95f.

tonomous beings in which the humanity of each of us is realized. As H. Cohen aptly put it, Kant's main thesis should be as follows: "In this community, the content *a priori*, the content of ethical reality is created"<sup>16</sup>.

Thus, the pure content of the will is the idea of humanity realized in a community of autonomous legislators. Therefore, the concept of pure desire refers us to the concept of a community of beings who establish the law on their own. Consequently, particularistic will can and must be combined with the will of a general legislator, who defines the ethical content that is realized in every human being as the representative of humanity, that is in a community of law-establishing beings. Hence, the Kantian pure will is not, as it is commonly believed, something completely undefined, but it is the ability to self-determine oneself in a community as a world of intelligent beings. However, this will is realized in two worlds to which man belongs, that is in the world of reason and the world of the senses. The recognition that the human will makes a self-determination in community, which is expressed by the idea of humanity, is, in my opinion, Kant's greatest ethical discovery, which is probably not fully appreciated. Thus, Kant had a brilliant intuition and wanted to show, better than today's neo-Kantianists or neo-Hegelianists do, that in order to understand reality, a certain moment of idealism is necessary and that the recognition of this idealism helps to overcome what is sometimes called the rule of nature. For Kant brilliantly sensed that there is some kind of ontological duty, which many individuals see as an obligation.

Max Horkheimer accused Kant of being naive, claiming that he failed to see that economic interests cannot be reduced to psychological ones because they are determined by the material base and not the human will. However, as Adela Cortina correctly observes, it was Horkheimer who overlooked something very important. He did not notice that in human society we are defined by both natural (economic) and moral laws<sup>17</sup>.

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16 H. Cohen, *Kants Begründung der Ethik nebst ihren Anwendungen auf Recht, Religion und Geschichte*, vol. 2, Berlin 1910, 130.

17 A. Cortina, *Würde, nicht Preis: Jenseits des Ökonomismus*, in: *Ethik aus Unbehagen, 25 Jahre ethische Diskussion in Spanien*, ed. J. Mugerza, transl. R. Zimmerling, Verlag Karl Albert, Freiburg – München 1991, 230.



The law of nature is inextricably linked to egoism, which is particularly evident in the free market economy. But even there people come to the conclusion that it is in the interest of the whole community to overcome this egoism<sup>18</sup>. The world of reason, that is, the community that gives itself appropriate rights, is sometimes ready to abandon a world that constitutes a kind of “social lottery”, in which there is inequality between people, to live in a community where everyone is equal. The history of mankind shows various attempts, unfortunately, most often unsuccessful, at moving from one community to another. John Rawls had a similar intuition. That is why he placed people making the original choice behind the veil of ignorance. Horkheimer’s proposals, although they were a dream in a way, also showed what the philosopher from Królewiec discovered. They constituted a desire to turn such a perfect community into a reality.

As claimed by Adela Cortina, who has just been mentioned now, ethical content expressed in the form of pure desire cannot be realized in any community for a very simple reason. It expresses something that cannot be converted into material values that would then be subject to exchange. The thing that cannot be attributed any advantage and thus has no equivalent that would have the opposite value and that could be compared with something else is human dignity, not value (price). And it is this dignity that we discover in synthetic moral judgments a priori.

A similar understanding of duty can be found in T. Styczeń, who says that: “A moral duty is ... a specific figure ‘is’, a peculiar, irreducible manifestation of the specific living dynamism of the person. This ‘duty’ cannot be reduced to or derived out of anything”<sup>19</sup>.

Therefore, it can be said that the ontological duty is first and foremost a relational reality and that it is founded on the fact of being human in the human community, that is, on the dignity of those who discover, often intuitively, that they live in two different worlds: the real one, which can become even worse, and the one they would like

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> T. Styczeń, *Problem możliwości etyki jako empirycznie uprawomocnionej i ogólnie ważnej teorii moralności. Studium metaetyczne*, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 1971, 150.

to make real, and even more so, they do not want to let this world become worse, as they have an idea of a better one, only they do not know how to improve it practically. That is what its significance lies in.

As G. Simmel noted, duty is a derivative of reality and of that which is perfect, of what is and what is not yet there, although we would like it to occur, or better still, something that we fear could occur<sup>20</sup>. And while Simmel treats duty only in psychological categories, his observation seems to explain well what ontological duty is. It is a derivative of an already existing state and a state we are trying to realize or avoid. Thus, is there any way to characterize this duty more precisely and to show that it is both common and individual, that is that it has a specific addressee? To answer this question, it is necessary to look more closely at the relational nature of the ontological duty. Such a reflection will allow us to better understand what Kant had an intuition of and what, for obvious reasons, he did not develop.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS: THE RELATIONSHIP NATURE OF THE ONTOLOGICAL DUTY

In considering duty, attention should be paid to all those statements that are found in both Kant and his commentators (both supporters and opponents), showing the relationship between ontological duty and responsibility – addressed and non-addressed. For if we understand the concept of duty more broadly, without limiting it to a duty in the legal sense, we notice that it defines the area of interpersonal relations and determines the relationship between the actions of individual people, or even entire societies, towards the world. That is why Kant spoke about our responsibility for the world and our debt to the world.

These relations can be cognitive, volitional or emotional. They have the duty-creating content and oblige to appropriate actions. A more detailed reflection allows us to state that a person does not strive to know only because they are guided by simple curiosity. They

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<sup>20</sup> G. Simmel, *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft. Eine Kritik der ethischen Grundbegriffe*, Cotta's Nachfolger, Stuttgart – Berlin 1892, 40–46, (new edition: [http://socio.ch/sim/em\\_1\\_1.htm](http://socio.ch/sim/em_1_1.htm)).

often discover that they cannot avoid the effort of studying certain truths, because otherwise they would find themselves in a state that they would not want, that is one that should never happen. They are also aware that many dangers can be avoided if one learns more about reality or interpersonal relations.

For example: A good teacher knows that the fruitfulness of their work depends on the knowledge of the relations in the class, on the knowledge of the students' talents, etc. They create a certain reality. The duty to get to know the pupils is not yet clearly addressed. It applies to all teachers. Nevertheless, something can happen that will prompt a particular teacher to take special care, to make more cognitive effort. In such a case, we will say that the duty was clearly addressed. The above example shows that an addressed duty does not have to be imposed by a particular subject, whether it be God or man. On the contrary, it comes from an object. A specific reality appears to be more duty-creating than any other, and therefore requires the deepening of cognitive relationships. And it is impossible to evade this obligation.

The situation is similar when it comes to volitional relations. People may want to do something or try to avoid it. However, they have the foresight to know that it is impossible not to want to change the situation, because otherwise something worse will happen.

We should all fight for peace, for environmental protection, for economic development. However, there are those who are particularly affected by a given duty because they have special predispositions, even if they do not know it. It is to them that the duty is addressed, e.g. the duty to arouse in themselves the desire to cooperate or to give up too fierce competition. How often do they realize only after taking some action that they had the necessary predispositions to perform this particular task.

Human behaviour is accompanied by feelings that determine the quality of interpersonal relations to an even greater extent. And it is not insignificant what they will look like. We are constantly experiencing the need to change or consolidate them. Discontinuation of actions that aim at organizing feelings often leads to misfortunes, resulting in states that one would rather avoid. However, it is easy to identify people who

perceive the prevailing emotional relations as unbearable and want to change them or try to cultivate the good ones. And they do so because they are more sensitive, that is more predisposed to make out the duties imposed by the surrounding reality. Then, duty is addressed in nature.

Therefore, duty appears to be a source of moral responsibility for man, who is faced with others, who “grasps” that he cannot do otherwise. I put the word “grasp” in inverted commas consciously and deliberately to show that I mean more than just theoretical cognition.

The arrangement of interpersonal relations and those that define our relationship with the world around us create a certain reality in the cultural dimension which determines specific ontic duties. Therefore, an ontological duty is different from a legal duty.

An ontic duty should have a relational character. It arises with the appearance of all kinds of interpersonal relations, as well as the relationship between man and the reality that surrounds him. The resulting intersubjectivity is also binding. However, it is difficult to read what whole nations should do and what individual people should do, which can be strictly calculated and codified, and which is only a matter of our sense of duty. The perception of ontic duty often gives rise to a moral duty.

Duty is not opposed to human desires. Every value, in order for it to exist, needs interpersonal cooperation and the existence of an opposite value. Every work is a hardship, great artists painted pictures in order to earn a living. Thus, great works were created. Free time does not bring joy to an unemployed person. There is no pure duty or pure desire. The fulfillment of a duty leads to a new desire, the fulfillment of a desire gives rise to an obligation. It is not possible to logically infer a duty. It is, after all, expressed in the form of a judgement. Since the ontic duty is the arrangement of the relationships that we want and need to consolidate or change. Kant was therefore right when juxtaposing freedom with duty.

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