MARCIN JARANOWSKI¹

Victim and Guardian: A Short Ethical Reconnaissance

ABSTRACT

The article *Victim and Guardian: A Short Ethical Reconnaissance* is a proposal for fundamental rethinking of the phenomenon of care and support in the context of the experience of evil. The author analyses the phenomenon of transitivity of evil, and describes suffering of a guardian as an extension of the harm done to the victim. He notices that the expectation of care occurring in a difficult situation is one of the fundamental claims in social life, and not receiving it is one of the most painful moral experiences. Finally, the author emphasizes the moral value of guardian's participation in the defeat of the victim. He says that we do not need the notion of triumph over evil to recognize this value.

Keywords:

victim, guardian, care, evil, responsibility, ethics

1. TRANSFERABILITY OF EVIL

The fifteenth-century passion painting of Rogier van der Weyden, depicting the Descent from the Cross, shows the resonance that grievance and death of the

¹ Institute of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland, Marcin.Jaranowski@umk.pl.

victim cause in people gathered around the body. The impact of evil embraces the entire group of people crowded together with lamenting women bowing their heads. Maria can no longer despair because she fainted due to anguish, and her pale body just sinks to the ground. Those standing over her are trying to hold her arms and, as a result, her body assumes the position of her son being removed from the cross. These two figures, falling in the same way and occupying the central part of the work, express the transferability of evil.

I suggest the reader a moment of focus on several aspects of the relationship between the two moral figures, to which the title of the text corresponds and that are presented in the context of experiencing evil. I hope that raising this reflection to a certain level of generality will give us both a chance to deepen moral deliberation and to expose some essential characteristics of this relationship, which are worth taking into consideration. The reflection will compare a person with an undesired burden causing irreparable damage with someone who – to put it briefly – takes care of this person and cares about his/her welfare. Experiencing moral evil, namely this passive overwhelming by the unwanted which deprives a subject of what is valuable when it is, in itself (just as undesirable), a goal of another subject. Introducing yourself such understanding of experiencing moral evil, as if it was not transferable, is certainly a mistake of simplified thinking. This is, for obvious reasons, a simplification tempting for the perpetrator. However, in the majority of cases of serious irreversible damage, a grievance of a victim transfers to a grievance of other people, and in the first place (though not exclusively of course) to someone who we would call a guardian, and recreates in his/her suffering and sometimes even calamity, what is illustratively shown in the work of van der Weyden.

Harming someone in that defined sense, namely in such sense that gives us the right to use the word “evil” and “victim”, does not usually mean imprecating the undesirable on only one person, as if he/she was a lonely planet in a neutral space. Probably a step forward in the search for a more appropriate metaphor would be at least an act of striking a billiard ball which then moves other balls with the impetuosity corresponding to the force with which it was struck. However, this metaphor is also losing the qualitative differences of changes caused by evil in interpersonal relationships of all kinds. Nevertheless, in the midst of this diversity, we can provide a unique moral status of the guardian as a person resonating with the condition of the victim in a special way. The guardian not only accepts the repercussions of the victim’s grievance, with which we deal in the very act of compassion or pity, but since he/she assumes the role of the guardian, becomes responsible for the actual repelling act of the unwanted, which – in the case discussed here – does

not follow, or does not bring the desired effect. Making someone the victim is most often a defeat of someone's guardianship at the same time.

2. EXPOSURE TO EVIL AND EXPECTATION OF HELP

The issue of guardianship rests on the earlier and more basic topic of exposure to undesirable experience and dependence in the fight against evil. The prototype of such jeopardy and dependence on guardianship is helplessness characterized by early childhood. In the earliest period of our life, our well-being depends entirely on the will of others. Therefore, the status of a ward is one of the fundamental aspects of human existence, which virtually disclose our identity and personality, as well as moral, in its character, expectation of help in difficult situations. In an effort to counteract what is undesirable, self-reliance may increase or decrease, but it is difficult to imagine how an unwanted thing could be subject to permanent total control of some individual, so that she/he would never have needed the support of any other person. There are natural limitations of a single person to counter potential threats, breaches, and loss of what is valuable, which are partially supplemented by the competences of others. Sometimes this potential of those providing aid originates from the acquired knowledge and experience, from social roles, and sometimes from the fact of being in a better position in certain circumstances. In our culture, support and guardianship are the values giving legitimacy to the existence of mechanism around which an understandable moral and affective discourse develops, associated with a particular experience of "being in need." No matter how much we emphasise the positive values of self-reliance in the struggle with the undesirable, there is a moral requirement of support from others, when we succumb to it, and as a result we are in trouble.

This expectation may not be heard when we are not experiencing evil, but is exposed in an interesting way when such an experience takes place without any support from others, and so when harm or misfortune have no counterweight in the form of moral support. The Austrian philosopher and writer Jean Amery carefully analysed such an experience basing on his own example. During World War II, as a young activist of the resistance movement, he was subjected to torture at the fort located in Belgium. The room which he was interrogated in did not have even windows through which the cries of Amery could spread. It was obvious that the victim would experience suffering without any social support and without any moral relief in these conditions. After years, Amery wrote about this experience in the following manner:

‘Just a moment’ says mother to her child moaning in pain ‘I’ll give you a hot water bottle, a cup of tea, nobody will let you suffer like this!’ ‘I’ll prescribe you a cure’ says doctor, ‘it will help you.’ Even on a battlefield the Red Cross paramedics will find their way to the wounded. In almost all situations we feel physical jeopardy with the expectation of support at the same time: one is supplemented by the other. With the first blow of police fist, against which there is no defence and no helping hand parrying it, ends some part of our life which can never be resurrected (Amery, 2007, pp. 78–79).

The paraphrase of the mother’s words creates undoubtedly the greatest contrast with descriptions of experiences encountered by the author in the Fort Breendonk, as if the attitude of the aggressor, whom Amery called an anti-fellow human being, towards the victim was the opposite attitude of guardianship, especially the attitude of a caring parent. Inflicting extreme suffering to a fellow creature also applies to his/her guardian – someone who wants or wanted to protect him against the undesirable. Breaking resistance of the victim, who cannot defend from evil, becomes, at the same time, the defeat of one’s protection and security. The victim reveals this way that it is possible to stand out only “against him/her”, without simultaneous “behind him/her” or “with him/her.” Experiencing a grievance in such a moral vacuum is described by Amery as causing irreparable damage in the sphere of social trust. It instils in the victim the lasting sense of alienation in the world (Amery, 2007, p. 76, 98).

According to Gabriel Marcel, the common susceptibility to experiencing evil in its close connection with experiencing guardianship provides the basis for the moral relationship between people. Exposure to evil, which also involves helplessness, is a common, interpersonal denominator, the subject of concerns known to all. Marcel – still struggling with avidity of the systems of abstract and objective knowledge – would like to emphasize that the moral bond tightens due to existential similarities associated with the uncertainty of human fate. This universal uncertainty and anticipation of future helplessness against the undesirable enhances our closeness better than a plane of common, objective knowledge. We read:

I am closer to a specific creature and effectively bound with it not in the least by the fact that I know that it is able to check and confirm the addition or subtraction, which I made for myself, but rather by the belief that it has experienced, as I have, some attempts, and that it is subject to the same miseries, had childhood, was loved, and that other creatures cared about it and

pinned their hope on it; as well as the thought that its vocation is suffering, decadence, and death. (Marcel, 1965, p. 14).

3. GUARIANSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY

Guardianship is relatively a permanent care for someone else's welfare when such welfare could be harmed. The same as the exposure to losses and the related expectations of help when in need, guardianship can be interpreted in very basic ethical terms. The subject of guardianship in the Polish ethical thoughts has its representation in the form of a role model "of a reliable guardian" contained in the famous essay by Tadeusz Kotarbiński. Fundamental moral mechanisms associated with the concept of goodness and broadly defined protection converge in the characteristics of the guardian formulated by him. He writes:

And here's the good heart of a good man beginning to spread the feeling for all beings worthy of love, what is more, for all beings capable of experiencing pain, and his dream is the world so arranged that no one was forced to inflict blows that bring misfortune, but that all were helping each other in defence against disaster (Kotarbiński, 1976, pp. 66–67).

For Kotarbiński, the tragedy of the guardian is based on the conflictuality of life. The strong emphasis on this aspect makes his "trustworthy guardian" described primarily as a person constantly involved in the fight, unwavering and persistent in this struggle. And because a true guardian must be – as defined by Kotarbiński – "a good man", a coercion of constant confrontation is obviously some personal burden for him/her, and sometimes it becomes a cause of difficult dilemmas. Hence, the dream of paradise of non-conflictuality, which echoes in the quoted citation.

In my interpretation, the same sense of duty and a combination of protection and steadfastness, which Kotarbiński illustrates by invoking the memory of Korczak, is called the "infinite responsibility" in the Levinas's ethics. From the perspective of the French philosopher, the goodness, which is the source for morality, does not consist in brotherhood, equality or reciprocity, but in the sense of responsibility for the fate of another human being, which one cannot lose. Goodness appearing between people is an asymmetric relationship. I demand nothing from man who I care for. The burden of obligation rests entirely on me, the only guardian. Goodness, as a response to the call for responsibility for another person, never runs out.

On the contrary, in serving another I fuel my own moral failure. I am afraid that I have not done enough. Thus, goodness does not lead to satisfaction, but rather to perdition in the ministry. This escalation of moral dissatisfaction unusually introduces the idea of infinity to the ethics of Levinas (Levinas, 1998, p. 41). And also the Kotarbiński's guardian, as a man with a good heart, seems to be heading for moral goals, which must be unachievable in the intolerant world around us. The desire to care for all who can suffer and fall has to be unfulfilled. Guarding over someone's fate means taking the blame without involving others in need and fighting for the welfare of protégés (Derrida, 1995, p. 68).

Kotarbiński focused on the heroism of such attitude, detached from the subject of the helpless guardian's tragedy, i.e. the one deprived of even the sense of own "steadfastness" by circumstances. Janusz Korczak, in an essay by Kotarbiński, who died in the Nazi extermination camp at Treblinka with young wards of the orphanage after refusing the possibility of saving his life, is presented primarily as a guard who never left his post. Therefore, let us add here that he was also a hero condemned to the tragedy of helplessness against the deaths of his wards. Korczak witnessed the martyrdom of young people whom he cared for. He saw the defeat which could not be preceded by a peer-to-peer fight, and which could not be prevented by any effective defence. He offered children his presence in the common failure.

There is an interesting book published in Poland *Wrażliwość a podmiotowość. Teoria Emmanuela Levinasa i praktyka Janusza Korczaka* (Kamińska, 2012) in which the author, Anna Kamińska, is trying to prove that the activities of Korczak can be understood as a practical illustration of the ethics of the author of *Całość i nieskończoność*. Kamińska is trying to collect as many analogies as possible, sometimes very specific, between the title theory and the life and deeds of the Polish teacher. She cites statements showing a very wide range of Korczak's responsibility, who felt obliged even to the world as a whole. He had a tendency to think of childhood in a broad sense, including various forms of dependence of also mature people. "I emphasize – he wrote – that each helplessness, each wonderment of ignorance, an error in applying experience, unfortunate attempt at imitation, every dependency – resemble a child regardless of age. You can easily find traits of children in a sick, an old man, a soldier, a prisoner" (Korczak, 1996, p. 76). In this way, Korczak becomes personification of the fundamental moral attitude (expressed in thought and deed), both in the light of Kotarbiński's deliberations and the ethics of Levinas, and in turn he makes the child's helplessness a moral figure, which refers to every case of human inability to counter evil. We should support each other in reliance on care.

On the basis of Kotarbiński's and Levinas's view, looking at the human being from the perspective of his/her guardian appears to be a moral perception in the strict sense. Goodness is expressed precisely in guardianship and protection of a person under care regardless of his/her merits. The adoption of this understanding leads us to the conclusion that there is not a more uncomfortable thought for the one who feeds hatred than to look at the enemy from the perspective of his/her guardian (even unrealistic or difficult to imagine), especially from the perspective of the father or mother – namely those who cared for a still dependent and unaware person, and thus exposed to all evil. The outstanding film by the Dardenne brothers titled *Son* presents a story of a carpenter who employs a young student, the murderer of his son. The student has no idea that he is dealing with the father of his victim, which gives the carpenter an opportunity to closely observe the killer on a daily basis. The teacher, steeped in suffering and hatred, follows the student and arranges individual meetings without witnesses. However, despite the created conditions, he is not able to avenge his son. He cannot hurt the murderer because the apprenticeship and talks with the lost juvenile delinquent began a parallel moral process: the man inevitably adopts the role of the person responsible for his fate. The moral attitude associated with that role cannot be reconciled with aggression, which is required by revenge. The carpenter is under the influence of two opposing impulses, of which a sense of responsibility for the fate of the young man is prevailing, regardless of indelible harm the man is guilty of. The apprentice, unaware of the danger, is confidently staring at the teacher. Not knowing who he is dealing with, he is quite vulnerable. Exposed to harm. The man cannot hurt someone like that because he became, gradually, imperceptibly, but in a way that determines the end of the story, his guardian.²

4. SHARING AN EXPERIENCE OF EVIL

As I stated earlier, the theme of guardianship and support in downfall emphasizes the possibility of transferability of experiencing evil from the victim to the guardian. This transfer does not have to be the only repercussion, the weaker reflection of suffering. Sometimes it is simply shifting the core of suffering to the person

² Bringing on a similar confusion, as a result of a collision of a moral aversion with an instinct of concern that refer to the same object, was – I think – the intention of Wisława Szymborska when she wrote the poem “{Pierwsza fotografia Hitlera}” (First Photograph of Hitler). The poem, full of ambiguous sensitivity, urges the reader to imagine the dictator as a charming child. The poem is available on the website: poema.pl/publikacja/16056-pierwsza-fotografia-hitlera (accessed 09/01/2016).

responsible. This is, for example, the case when a guardian recognises the evil better than the victim, and yet the guardian is helpless in the face of the victim's failure. He is forced to watch the victim's doom (Jaranowski, 2015, pp. 241–257, 271). The reportage by Wojciech Tochman titled *Jakbyś kamień jadła* (Tochman, 2008) gives us an insight into the pain of guardians who have failed to save their wards. In this book we follow the fates of people struggling with grief after the loss of relatives who died during the massacre of the Muslim population carried out by Serb military units during the war in Bosnia. Mothers, who in the course of this conflict lost their children, are often mentioned here. The moral attitude of guardianship turns, in this case, toward the relatives of people who are no longer alive. That is why it is so important to find their bodies in one of the mass graves, to take special care of even their bones or scraps of clothing, and to ensure their proper burial. The sons and daughters, whose bodies still have not been found, seem to be still alone in their death, left alone with the evil that had taken place, while the guardians feel the incessant moral concern, because they still feel needed to the victims they cannot find, and whose fate is not fully known by them (Tochman, 2008, pp. 67–77, 81–89, 105, 111–113, 121). The evil crimes of those committing genocide transfers to a long-term suffering of those who – once again referring to the words of Marcel – used to take care for their victims and placed their hope in them.

The culmination in the Kamińska's book about Levinas and Korczak is the interpretation of the ultimate sacrifice of the Polish educator, in the light of understanding goodness as the one conquering death (according to Levinas, goodness takes place outside the problem of being and non-being). The concept of triumph over death appears in this book on several occasions (Kamińska, 2012, p. 219), which, in the case of Korczak – in the view of the author – was eventually a kind of fulfilment of ethical sensitivity and behaviour of humanity: both his and the children. This interpretation is consistent with Levinas's idea of goodness as elevation (Levinas, 1994, p. 212). Responsibility in its infinity becomes independent of the profit and loss accounts, and even successes and failures.

However, this elevation of Korczak over death to the transcendent Goodness, consistent with the thought of Levinas, which opens up the rhetoric of victory over evil in the book of Kamińska – in my opinion – excessively marginalises the bond of the victim and the guardian accompanying the victim to the end and gives him/her own presence in peril, in distress, and in the most brutal dying. This devotion does not eliminate either the dominance or the triumph of evil, because it does not eliminate the unimaginable moral loss caused by the killing. Perhaps the inevitability of guardian's defeat, visible in the previously cited words of Marcel

(those about suffering and downfall meant for the other), should lead us to the description of that pattern of human goodness more in terms of participation in the experience of evil than in the personal exaltation in goodness. We do not care to be saved, we do not care about someone to triumph over evil. We do this to save someone. Maria, on the *Descent from the Cross* by Rogier van der Weyden, is not accompanying the Son in the exaltation, but falls down with him. The moment, captured by the painter, is a moment when evil prevails. But –

I dare to say – just at that moment, not at the moment of dominance or glory, that we see clearly the moral value of standing by another person.

References:

- Amery, J. (2007). *Poza winę i karę. Próby przełamania podjęte przez złamanego*, [Beyond Guilt and Atonement] trans. R. Turczyn. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Homini.
- Derrida, J. (1995). *The Gift of Death*. trans. D. Wills. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Jaranowski, M. (2015). *Rekonstrukcja zła. Etyczne aspekty opresji w świetle refleksji „ocalonych”*. [Reconstruction of Evil] Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK.
- Kamińska, A. (2012). *Wrażliwość i podmiotowość. Teoria Emmanuela Levinasa i praktyka Janusza Korczaka*. [Sensibility and Subjectivity. Theory of Emmanuel Levinas and Janusz Korczak's Practice] Kraków: Instytut Wydawniczy „MAXIMUM”.
- Korczak, J. (1996). *Jak kochać dziecko* [How to Love a Child], [in:] „Dzieła”, [Papers] vol. 7. Warszawa: OWL.
- Kotarbiński, T. (1976). *Medytacje o życiu godziwym*. [Meditations on Decent Life] Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna.
- Levinas, E. (199). *Całość i nieskończoność. Esej o zewnętrżności*. [Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority] trans. M. Kowalska. Warszawa: PWN.
- Levinas, E. (1994). *O Bogu, który nawiedza myśl*. [Of God Who Comes to Mind] trans. M. Kowalska. Kraków: Wydawnictwo „Znak”.
- Marcel, G. (1965). *Od sprzeciwu do wezwania*. [From Objection to Appeal] trans. S. Ławicki. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy „PAX”.
- Szyborska, W. *Pierwsza fotografia Hitlera*. [Hitler's First Photography] poema.pl/publikacja/16056-pierwsza-fotografia-hitlera
- Tochman, W. (2008). *Jakbyś kamień jadła*. [As if You Eat a Stone] Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo „Czarne”.