

# WHAT DO ISAIAH BERLIN AND LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI TEACH US? – A SHORT LECTURE IN SOCIAL ETHICS

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## *Abstract*

*The purpose of the article is to reflect on the issue of social ethics for liberal democracy. The analysis carried out relates particularly to the current social and political situation in Poland. An important element of the article is the comparative analysis of the thoughts of Isaiah Berlin and Leszek Kołakowski. This analysis was based on selected essays of the indicated philosophers. The main methods used for research are my own interpretation and an attempt to make a synthesis.*

We often tackle the question—as citizens but I hope also as politicians—of what form social and political life should take, i.e. which social values are worth realising and caring about. One should find an answer to these questions by referring to social ethics which aims to formulate the list of moral principles indicating which social behaviours are acceptable within a certain community and which are not. My goal is to consider which social ethics would be desirable in the Polish context where, in fact, there has been a struggle for the shape of Polish liberal democracy for already twenty-six years and where simultaneously it is possible to observe many misunderstandings about the essence of modern liberalism as well as democracy. I see it as a battle for souls, being unfortunately led by representatives of extreme positions. This phenomenon leaves the impression that Polish reality is black and white when it is precisely the opposite: there is a variety of colour in the human world; it is rarely just black or white.

Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997) and Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009) are important and extraordinary thinkers and their impact on contemporary social ethics is undoubtedly great. Both devoted their lives to reflecting on values and human relations. Hence an inner compulsion to recall them and surely not to forget about them. Both struggled for freedom and democracy with intense precision. Their general take on liberalism, both as a philosophical world view as well as a political and economical concept, was characterised by balance and moderation. Both strongly distanced themselves from the libertarian (neo-liberal) way of thinking which, for the absolute freedom of the individual, eliminates all other social values. Berlin, by declaration and *de facto*, was a modern and

moderate liberal; Kolakowski, instead, most often called himself conservative-liberal socialist.

What these philosophers mostly have in common is their deep “sense of reality”—to use explicitly the title of one of the Berlins collections of essays<sup>1</sup>. This sense is to be treated here as a symbol for an attentive observation connected with the ability to balance ideas, seemingly deriving from a profound understanding of Karl E. Popper’s famous dictum *No idea is absolute, no man is infallible*.

For long decades of his life and intellectual activity Isaiah Berlin defended in particular a proposition stressing the infinite variety of the human world, particularly of the world of ideas, thoughts, views. Without a doubt Kolakowski also had a good understanding of analogical beliefs. This thesis has a particular importance within the present Polish framework and reality, especially due to the fact already mentioned, i.e. the near exclusive dominance of extreme positions in public discourse.

The pluralistic viewpoint of the human world is based, both in particular and in general, on the acceptance of the thesis that people differ by nature. Therefore their understanding of the world can be, and often is, very different, sometimes even antithetical. Thus, despite giving human persons common definitions and classifications, i.e. we find in them many common characteristics, the essence of each person is thoroughly different from that of other persons. To provide a characteristic example, psychology formulates typologies, e.g. between extroverts and introverts. The so-called ideal types, while being very useful within this science, always and only constitute abstractions and psychology (at least this humanistic one) is aware that no two persons are identical, just as there are no complete extroverts or complete introverts. These types of notions constitute merely the tools which can simplify the description of the person but can never constitute one’s complete characterisation.

Philosophical and ethical categories of good and evil are analogical. Most ethical concepts are required to assess human actions and not the persons as such, i.e. persons in their totality. It would be difficult to even imagine a person who would be “an absolute evil” as such<sup>2</sup>. Hence Kolakowski in his essay *Can the Devil Be Saved?*, amongst other things, concludes that the eternal controversy of whether human nature is fully good or fully bad should be rejected. This extraordinary paper of the Polish philosopher is moreover—in my opinion—an expression of the fight for a renewed Augustinian understanding of the

1 Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History, Fiction, Pimlico 1997*.

2 Leszek Kolakowski, *Can the Devil Be Saved*, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Encounter-1974jul-00007?View=PDF>. Accessed on June 21, 2015.

imperfection of the human being. Kolakowski's multi-threaded and multi-dimensional analysis of original sin, of the nature of evil, shows us a philosopher who clearly states that human being is by nature deeply ambivalent. Hence, the pluralism of the human world necessarily expresses itself in the duality and deficiency of the person.

Alongside social pluralism, the following notion which appears in the framework of social ethics is that of tolerance. Both Berlin and Kolakowski defend the rule of tolerance as a social value. It applies both to tolerance for diversity as well as for imperfection of the human being. However, we must emphasise that the abstract notion of tolerance is not to be understood as meaning that one can act however one likes. For Berlin this understanding of tolerance always leads to absurdity. In a very famous essay, *The Pursuit of The Ideal*, he emphasises that there are some actions that should never be tolerated<sup>3</sup>. Broadly speaking, these would all be the actions depriving a human being of dignity. Within the liberal tradition the notion of dignity is connected—foremost—with the notion of liberty. We are therefore faced with the three probably most controversial notions of liberal social ethics framework: pluralism, tolerance and liberty.

Berlin rightly recognises that human beings cannot be deprived of their freedom, i.e. they cannot be enslaved (negative freedom as freedom *from*), because freedom is one of the essential traits of human nature. It means moreover that the human being has the right to choose her/his own life path (positive freedom—freedom *to*). However, none of the distinguished rights, i.e. neither positive freedom nor negative freedom, in analogy to the rule of tolerance, are absolute, of which Berlin was also aware<sup>4</sup>. Kolakowski presented this perfectly in the following synthetic statement: “the unlimited freedom of each person means the unlimited right of stronger person; hence [...] absolute freedom equals absolute slavery”<sup>5</sup>. To enable the notions of tolerance and freedom to operate as social values requires further detailed clarification. This means, amongst other things, that not every understanding of the concept of tolerance deserves to be called a value and, analogically, not every understanding of the notion of liberty deserves to be treated as a value.

What then could provide an antidote to any false notions of freedom and tolerance and what, concurrently, could be the most important concept for shap-

3 Isaiah Berlin, *The Pursuit of The Ideal*, <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/s9983.pdf>. Accessed on June 21, 2015.

4 Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, [https://www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de/fileadmin/wiso\\_vwl/johannes/Ankuendigungen/Berlin\\_twoconceptsliberty.pdf](https://www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de/fileadmin/wiso_vwl/johannes/Ankuendigungen/Berlin_twoconceptsliberty.pdf). Accessed on June 21, 2015.

5 Leszek Kolakowski, *Samozatrucie społeczeństwa otwartego*, (in:) *Cywilizacja na lawie oskarżonych*, Res Publica, Warszawa 1990, p. 173, (own English translation).

ing contemporary Polish liberal democracy? From this point of view, Berlin's concept of axiological pluralism (the pluralism of values) appears to be the most useful. According to Berlin there are various values, sometimes even conflicting ones. Therefore, the differences among people are caused by the fact that they have different values and *vice versa*, the variety of values is caused by the fact that people are different by nature. So or otherwise it needs to be emphasised that Berlin separates his axiological pluralism from any type of relativism. He argues that pluralism designates the system of values which are rationally justified or justifiable. Within relativism there are instead only pseudo-values because they are deprived of justification. It means that for Berlin for a value to be a value it must possess rational justification and is therefore communicable and explainable. At this point, Berlin presumes another persons openness for understanding as a necessary condition.

It has an essential importance for his theory, because this attitude of openness to others constitutes the condition for the functioning of a pluralistic society. It is just as essential as, e.g. not possessing a rational explanation for one's values would be the sign of a *stupid* person. He states directly that if one worships a tree because it is a tree, one is not in his opinion a rational being. Therefore, in order to have a justification for a belief there is usually required a profound reflection, and analogically, to be characterised as having an attitude of openness towards others, especially to those who have very different beliefs from one's own, there is most often required a profound humility.

Therefore we have to enquire: what does it mean to be rational? In Georg Picht we find a definition as simple as it is fraught with consequences: "A person thinks rationally if he/she can predict the consequences of her/his thinking and acting, who is ready to take responsibility for these consequences"<sup>6</sup>. Prediction of the consequences, as well as readiness to take the responsibility, constitute the two elements that occur together in the definition mentioned. In practice it means that we can consider one's behaviour as rational if, and only if, one can predict the consequences of her/his thinking and acting and at the same time take responsibility for them. The point of Picht's definition is precisely that: the complete link between (my personal) prediction of consequences with (my personal) acceptance of responsibility. Moreover, it means that one can make a mistake, can fail (it follows quite often either due to ignorance and/or due to rashness). However, also in this case, one should be able to take responsibility for that. We have to take notice that the last point leads to the necessity of readiness also to change one's beliefs. The rationally thinking person, seeing that

6 Georg Picht, *Przedmowa do wydania polskiego*, (in:) *Odwaga utopii*, Polish edition, Znak, Warszawa 1981, p. 35, (own English translation).

the beliefs of another person on a certain topic lead in consequence to more positive results, is ready to change her/his beliefs. One should do it, moreover, in the name of responsibility for the consequences. In the definition of Picht, rationality and free choice are completely connected with responsibility. It should be added straight away that both Kolakowski and Berlin think similarly.

In both thinkers considerations around accountability appear almost as often as analysis on liberty and rationality. Shifting responsibility to others, Kolakowski argues, is one of the most serious sicknesses of our times. Significant are his words: “Ignorance does not exempt from liability, because there are situations when knowing is a moral duty”<sup>7</sup>.

In my interpretation, Berlin’s category of rationality is intrinsically linked with the principle of responsibility, furthermore, the latter is essential to the former. It constitutes an antidote for *falsely* conceived freedom and *falsely* conceived tolerance. In the opinion of Berlin, as already noted, neither negative freedom nor positive freedom is absolute. They are limited by the rationality of thought and rationality of choice, which assume responsibility for the consequences. The human being as a social being, unless she/he decides to lead the life of a hermit, should therefore develop her/his rationality, requiring also to deepen her/his sense of responsibility. One would like to suggest outright, that in the perspective of social life she/he has the right to possess beliefs only if they are rational, justified. If someone in her/his solitude expresses such a conviction as “I have a faith in a tree because it is made of wood”, it doesn’t matter at all. Only in a social life, where approval is usually required, justification becomes crucial. The statement that the human being has the right to possess beliefs only if they are rational must also mean that she/he has the right to make mistakes. In the present context it is acceptable only if she/he takes the responsibility for them. In conclusion, one can assess that within the liberal tradition here presented, being free and rational also means being accountable.

The essential indicator for social life which emerges from the analysis presented is the requirement of rational communication. Recalling that, according to Berlin, possessing rational beliefs means also being able to communicate them, that is, to transmit them and to make them intelligible. For a society to be pluralistic, tolerant and free in a proper sense it should communicate rationally, meaning that social relations would be considered as good only under the condition that people would not be fighting on the ideological level, but would communicate using rational arguments or justifications.

7 Leszek Kolakowski, *Odpowiedzialność i historia* (1957), (in:) *Pochwała niekonsekwencji. Pisma rozproszone z lat 1955–68*, t. 2., Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1989, p. 73, (own English translation).

Based on the thought of Kolakowski there are also many considerations on the subject of tradition and authority. He treated them as important social values, however, his approach was connected to demanding common sense reflection on these values for the sake of their development. This approach is present explicitly in the already mentioned essay *Can the Devil Be Saved?*. When, at the end of this paper, the philosopher assesses that “we need Christianity, yet not just any kind of Christianity”<sup>8</sup>, but wise Christianity, he directly requires a critical, profound reflection on this tradition. He clearly does it because of his care about its development and its proper understanding which, moreover, cannot omit the actual historical situation.

He was always far from calling for a blind fight, devoid of reflection, i.e. for believing in something just because it was traditional. Again I have to make a comparison with the actual Polish political and social situation, since its discourse involves plenty of speeches on tradition, which some would like to use as an a priori antidote *against everything*. Tradition without rational and dialogical (i.e. based on dialogue) reflection, hence lacking in reference to the given cultural—social—political situation, becomes *the very abstraction* and as such it loses the right to exist in the real world. Therefore, it becomes as a type of *tiresome mantra*, provoking an attitude of resentment and non-acceptance and often also of a deep hypocrisy. In this regard the issue of contraception would undoubtedly constitute a glaring example in Poland. The value of inalienable dignity of the unborn (surely right in my opinion), based on traditional Christianity, is being repeated like a mantra. Unfortunately, in Poland, this is moreover extended to a complete irrational moral condemnation of the use of contraception. Consequently, at the legal and education level, great efforts are made against contraception being the common method of preventing unwanted pregnancy. The dramatic result of these activities is an alarming number of Polish backstreet abortions, estimated to reach up to 150,000 per year. In Poland there is a narrow but crucial part of society making decisions about this issue in law and education (however, they should rather be called pressure groups) which still seems to live in the Middle Ages. The example indicated clearly shows the social effects that can result from—and actually in this case do result—the lack of real, i.e. rational and dialogical, reflection on the tradition or on some part of it.

In my search for social ethics, let’s now proceed a little further, simultaneously tracking another convergence between Kolakowski and Berlin. It leads us to the following very important, perhaps even the most important, dimension

8 Leszek Kolakowski, *Can the Devil Be Saved*, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Encounter-1974jul-00007?View=PDF>. Accessed of June 21, 2015.

of their philosophies, i.e. to so-called situational ethics. As we have already seen, a conviction about the deficiency of human nature underlies both of these philosophers thought. This otherwise pessimistic anthropology did not lead either of them to nihilism.

The bulwark against it in the case of Berlin was his axiological pluralism, demanding the recognition of the objectivity of the diversity of values (moderate version). In Kolakowski's case it was foremost his abandonment of the Augustinian interpretation of Divine Grace, as the only antidote against human misery. Kolakowski accepted its Pelagian interpretation, i.e. he recognised that man has a so-called moral potential, therefore, one can, with a particular effort, choose good on his/her own. It follows that both Kolakowski and Berlin advocated the situational ethics which consists in "balancing claims" (Berlin), "practising the art of balancing of opposing dangers" (Kolakowski) in order to "fight against social oppression and human misery", because "the first public obligation is to avoid extremes of suffering"<sup>10</sup>.

Both indicators: balancing claims and fighting against oppression and misery, are based on a certain anthropology assumed by these philosophers. People are different by nature and also are imperfect. Hence, the world created by human beings varies in the sphere of views about the good life and values, and, moreover, is always imperfect. Berlin claims: "We must take men as we find them, and seek to improve them along possible, not impossible, lines"<sup>11</sup>.

To improve men along possible lines means foremost to have a sense of responsibility for the misery existing in the world, i.e. to try to fight against its extreme form. Secondly, in the name of this sense of responsibility, it is required to try to balance demands (especially one's own demands), to continuously confront them with the demands of the other. To improve men along possible lines means, moreover, to abandon the illusion about *the ultimate reconciliation of all things*<sup>12</sup>, i.e. to abandon the belief in one absolute truth, one absolute system of values which would be shared by the entire humanity.

"It is important for us—we read in Kolakowski—to be uncertain about the deep motives for our own deeds and the grounds of our convictions, since this is the only device which gives us protection against an all-justifying fanaticism and intolerance. We should remember that the perfect unity of man is impos-

9 Ibid.

10 Isaiah Berlin, *The Pursuit of The Ideal*, <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/s9983.pdf>. Accessed on June 21, 2015.

11 Isaiah Berlin, *The originality of Machiavelli*, [http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published\\_works/ac/machiavelli.pdf](http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/ac/machiavelli.pdf). Accessed on June 21, 2015.

12 Leszek Kolakowski, *Can the Devil Be Saved*, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Encounter-1974jul-00007?View=PDF>. Accessed of June 21, 2015.

sible, otherwise we would try to impose this unity by any means available, and our foolish visions of perfection would evaporate in violence and end in a theocratic or totalitarian caricature of unity which claimed to make the ‘Great Impossible’ an actuality”<sup>13</sup>. Written in a similar vein is the whole paper of I. Berlin *The Pursuit of the Ideal*, where the author holds a profound belief that such an absolute ideal does not exist. One can read there: “If your desire to save mankind is serious, you must harden your heart, and not reckon the cost”<sup>14</sup>. Both of these philosophers often rely not only on arguments of a philosophical nature, i.e. theoretical, but also of a purely empirical nature, e.g. on the bloody consequences of twentieth-century totalitarianism. Nonetheless, in the context being analysed here, the most criticised by them is the phenomenon of the abandonment of the rules of tolerance, pluralism and responsibility. According to both, this phenomenon is nearly ubiquitous.

The last one undoubtedly found its confirmation in actual Polish reality again. In that regard, I find in Poland the fanaticism caused mainly on religious grounds especially important, i.e. dangerous. Neo-liberalism is deceptive from a completely different angle (I definitely set it apart from moderate and modern liberalism).

The fanaticism motivated by religion stems in Poland from falsely understood Christianity, i.e. directed by the principle of hatred rather than the principle of love for neighbour. It emerges as a kind of programmed reluctance towards anything that does not fit under certain narrow lifestyle and cultural norms. A striking example is e.g. *the campaign/witch-hunt against gender* from mid-2014. Sociological and anthropological-cultural gender studies, conducted for at least thirty years, in Poland are lead by certain groupings—I call them here the fanatics—into a controversial ideology that would aim for the destruction of human nature as well as humanity as such. And yet *gender*, if anything, is a social movement rather than ideology, with the major goal of struggling for equality and social justice. So, it is not only about the form of a *witch-hunt* of this *campaign*, but also an evident lack of knowledge in terms of achievements of these studies. All of this is directed by a shallow emotion of fear of the unknown. Unfortunately, in Poland also other discussions concerning important philosophical-social-political issues take the form of a *witch-hunt*, such as regarding *in vitro* fertilisation or the rights of sexual minorities, and the very rhetoric sometimes is downright vulgar. When Kolakowski emphasised that we need “wise Christianity”, he had in mind, moreover, prevention of just such type of fanaticism.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Pursuit of The Ideal*, <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/s9983.pdf> . Accessed on June 21, 2015.



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Social ethics aims for the discovery of the concrete truth, rather than the abstract one, i.e. it attempts to discover the truth for the service of life. What is the list of social values that emerges from ethical-political reflections of Berlin and Kolakowski, which should be considered as important in actual social and political situation? Pluralism, tolerance, freedom, openness, rational communication, humility and responsibility—taken in conjunction, here is the synthesis of their beliefs. One might be tempted to give a separate definition for each of these values, however, it would not result in anything new. It is better to pay attention to the deep internal connection between indicated concepts which characterise the philosophies of Berlin and Kolakowski and which constitute a prerequisite for the viability of these terms as the real social values for a liberal and democratic community. Therefore, I recognise this internal connection as the most precious dimension of their theories. There is no freedom and tolerance without responsibility and rational communication just as there is no pluralism without openness and humility.

The methods of “balancing demands” (Berlin) and “balancing opposite dangers” (Kolakowski) are to constitute the primary bulwark against absolutizing the principles of tolerance and freedom in particular. Instead, openness and rational communication are to be the keys to the acceptance of the principle of social pluralism and, moreover, they must always go hand in hand with the sense of responsibility. We do not change the fact that people differ, they have different views of life and values, however, we can and we have to expect from ourselves and from others communication that is rational, i.e. justifications for our attitudes, in order to—once again—balance our demands, in this case in order to aim for a compromise. In any case, neither a rhetoric of hatred nor of intolerance serve liberal and democratic society, just as the absolutization of freedom does not serve it. One could ask: does the installation of *Rainbow* on the Saviour Square in Warsaw<sup>15</sup> bother me. There is no need for a profound reflection, with only a little bit of common sense one can answer “it doesn’t”. Surely, there are many problems that are much more serious, sometimes very serious, but always the attitude of humility in relation to our own beliefs constitutes an indispensable value for the sake of good social relations. Let’s repeat the maxim of Karl E. Popper: *no view is absolute, no man is infallible*, it stems even from the impossibility to deny imperfections of human nature. We may

15 It was a very famous artistic action against sexual intolerance in Poland in 2014. However, foremost, it was a source of profound disputes and controversies in Poland, that was only the confirmation of the problem.

absolutize our own point of view and consistently work towards its implementation, but usually it leads to a partial or complete enslaving of other people, meaning, no more nor less, the deprivation of their dignity in terms of their individuality and freedom. Therefore, the absolutization of freedom is equally harmful as intolerance and/or the lack of openness. Here we have found the answer to the initial question of what do Isaiah Berlin and Leszek Kołakowski teach us. They also talk much about the principle of social equality; the issue undoubtedly important in present context. However, due to the breadth and richness of this subject, it is required to devote it a separate paper.

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