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## OPEN SOCIETY AT THE CROSSROADS

After the acclaimed book of K. R. Popper, *Open Society and its Enemies*, the claim of absolute certainty in ethics is often dismissed as unfounded and even dangerous to democratic order. What is more, in some currents of liberal thought the very notion of truth is rejected as at least potentially oppressive, e.g. for postmodernist thinkers freedom and truth are irreconcilable. To put it in the words of R. Rorty: democracy should be prior to philosophy. In this perspective, sophists rather than Plato are the patrons of modern society.

The new collection of essays *Absolute Ethics and Open Society*<sup>1</sup> by Ryszard Legutko – one of the most interesting political philosophers in Poland – is mainly focused on the modern version of the controversy between Plato and the sophists. The author does not conceal that his sympathy is rather on the side of Plato; his questions are similar to those put once by the Founder of the Academy: Can a free society really do without absolute ethics? Can we discard the notion of truth as far as our social life is concerned? These questions – as ancient as political philosophy itself – are particularly alive in societies on the road of constructing (or reconstructing) their democratic order. They also have a distinctive face here, due to the background of a totalitarian past; for this reason an anal-

ysis made from this perspective is particularly valuable.

The principal thesis of Legutko reads as follows: liberal society needs some elements of non-liberal culture in order to function properly, and among these elements is the set of absolute moral values acknowledged as indisputable by the majority of citizens. In other words, liberal society is indebted in the non-liberal sphere of culture. But, on the other hand, the actual dilemma of liberal society consists in its natural tendency to question everything that claims to be indisputable. This was the diagnosis of Plato regarding democracy – according to his analysis, put forward in the *Republic*, democracy naturally tends to associate itself with moral relativism, and in this way it undermines the conditions of its existence. Interestingly enough, towards the end of his long life, Popper – who in the book by Legutko is remembered as espousing the view of society based solely on commonly accepted formal procedures – came to the conviction that formal procedures can function only if supported by non-liberal morality. “Moral relativism is one of the most dangerous poisons of democracy; democracy exists only if there is law, and law is based on ethics, not on permissiveness” (in: R. Buttiglione, *Il problema politico dei cattolici*, Piemme 1993, p. 316).

Legutko would probably not identify himself with any of the common political classifications, though it is clear that the

<sup>1</sup> R. Legutko, *Etyka absolutna i społeczeństwo otwarte*, Cracow 1994, 209 pp.

conservative perspective is much closer to his philosophical standpoint than the liberal one. His main objective, however, consists in “making both parties perceive each other” and in analyzing arguments of both conservatives and liberals. On the other hand, and not without certain concern, he observes that contemporary culture is marked by the progress of the liberal mentality. As a result of that process, the domain of non-liberal culture is shrinking, which also means that there is always less room – if any at all – for elements of absolute ethics. While the equilibrium of different traditions (since synthesis does not seem possible) would be the best for social life, it seems that today this balance is prejudiced in favour of liberalism. The least dangerous consequence of that situation is the progressing impoverishment of public discourse.

One of the most interesting essays (in my opinion it belongs to the classic texts of contemporary political philosophy) is dedicated to the evolution of the understanding of the notion of tolerance (*On Tolerance*). As a rule, the more a word is used, the more vague becomes its meaning, and the word “tolerance” belongs undoubtedly to the most widespread notions from the vocabulary of liberal philosophy. Tolerance – according to the supposition of Legutko – is probably the only undisputed value of liberal society. His brilliant essay leads us through the winding roads of the theory of tolerance – from its first theoreticians to its contemporary advocates. It is interesting to note that for its classic proponents (Locke, Wolter) tolerance referred to the questions difficult to solve with the use of the criterion of truth; its first realm was the realm of religion where disagreements among people of different denominations often led to violence. Since it is difficult to say who is right, it is better to

let everybody believe what he thinks is true. It was – as Legutko calls it – “negative tolerance,” since nobody was obliged to change his convictions. On the other hand, tolerance did not mean that people should give up classifying any view as true or false; from the fact that some questions cannot be determined as true or false does not follow that any question cannot be settled according to these categories. But this is exactly what some contemporary advocates of tolerance seem to demand from us. In some versions of liberal philosophy the very category of truth is regarded as repressive, and therefore contrary to the attitude of tolerance. Such a version of tolerance – Legutko calls it “positive tolerance” – requires an essential change in our perception of reality, since it involves the rejection of the most fundamental category of Western philosophy. It is certainly not a minor requirement, and in contradistinction to negative tolerance, it does not leave human convictions intact. What is more, such a notion of tolerance requires the creation of an utterly new type of human. Says Legutko: “Now it turns out that in order to be tolerant we should become liberal, and essentially reshape our mode of perceiving reality. What is more, we have to do it not because it turned out to be false, but because its very structure is politically and socially discriminating. To say it in other words, such an understanding of tolerance involves a more or less explicit programme of thorough social re-education.”

Some interesting remarks are also dedicated to the American counterculture of the sixties. What is the meaning of that phenomenon? It proves that an affluent and seemingly stable liberal society is no less liable to the revolutionary ideas of new ideologues than other types of society. New revolutionaries, unlike the

old ones, do not try to radically change the structure of economy; their ideas refer rather to the sphere of culture. But new types of social utopia are no less dangerous than the old ones. A society which is losing its certainty about the criteria of what is good and what is bad, a society which does not know what can be accepted and what should be rejected, is especially susceptible to experiments which in the end can undermine the foundations of its existence. (It is sufficient to remind ourselves of the characteristic myth of the flower power movement counterculture which claimed that one could have consumption without production.)

Finally, to this short survey of the content of the book, I would like to add two remarks. First, the question of what is conservatism. In his essay *Three Conservatisms* Legutko distinguishes versions of conservatism according to the type of reality which should be preserved. Thus, we can have conservatism interested in preserving eternal reality (conceived as Platonic ideas or as the unchanging hierarchy of moral values), conservatism referring to reality created in the long historical process (a culture), and conservatism interested in preserving the present situation. It might be worthwhile asking what is the relationship between the first form of conservative thinking and the remaining two. As Legutko rightly notes, conservatism which defends the unchanging hierarchy of moral values is not necessarily obliged to defend present institutional forms of their realization. It may – in the name of unchanging values – strive for institutional change or the change of power relations. The contrary is also possible – we can have, for instance, a conservative party which is mainly interested in preserving the existing power relations and respective privi-

leges. On the other hand, there can be a party of reform that is interested in changing existing power positions, or a party of reform that strives to change the value structure of the society. Thus, value conservatism and vested interests conservatism can be directly opposite positions. One can allow great cultural changes to preserve one's vested interests (it seems often to be the case in postcommunist countries where the rejection of communist ideology frequently goes together with the preservation of the privileged position of old party functionaries), or one can try to disrupt power positions in the name of unchanging values. Cultural conservatism can bring forth political reformism and *vice versa*.

The combination of conservative metapolitics (as the sphere of unchanging values is sometimes called) and non-conservative politics is perhaps difficult, but not impossible. Of course, it will be criticized by anti-conservatists as another version of fundamentalism, but it may still count on the support of voters – which in this case is not a minor merit. This seems to be the message of the midterm elections in the United States; people who wanted change in the economy did not necessarily want change in the value structure of their country. The mistake of Democrats – at least in part – consists in mistaking political reformism for a cultural one.

Secondly, it is worthwhile saying a few words about the role of religion in society. Legutko does not dedicate much attention to this question; it seems that he takes for granted an ever diminishing role of religion in the liberal society; the crisis of religion would necessarily accompany liberalism. It is undoubtedly true that in Western Europe, traditional religious institutions (Christian Churches) are today in crisis in terms of the number of

their members, though I am not quite sure if the same is valid in the case of American society (even if some signs of "Europeanisation" are present there, too). Nevertheless, I would not agree with the supposition of the author that we witness the decline of Christianity in Europe. It may be true that a certain form of European civilization – Christendom – is in crisis. We certainly cannot rule out that this form of civilization will one day disappear in Europe. But it does not mean that Christianity as a religion will disappear. The sense of religion is too deeply engraved in human nature to be erased from it one day. And Christianity will always remain a promoter of non-liberal elements in culture (e.g. it will always be a reminder of absolute moral values), even if cultural trends will not favour such a defence. A great interest in recent papal documents – the Universal Catechism, the encyclical *Veritatis splendor* and the book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* – points to the fact that even people who do not identify themselves confessionally with Catholicism see the Catholic Church as an important moral authority.

Theoretically – but only theoretically – we can also imagine a situation in which all the non-liberal elements of culture are eliminated, and, as a result, private and public morality are also totally liberal. In such a case, the diagnosis of Plato from his *Republic* seems to be still valid today. According to Plato, in a society in which the sphere of morality is totally liberalized, human life is at first pleasant. But gradually, and inevitably, corruption begins to take its toll: all norms of social life are put into question, words are used in a completely arbitrary way, concepts do not express truth, law is no longer observed – in the end, human life becomes impossible and people

are ready to give all power to a strongman. That, of course, is the end of democracy. A perfect illustration of such a diagnosis is provided by the current political crisis in Italy. The only viable alternative to a kind of dictatorship is a return to moral and civic virtues, and it is the Church which still teaches these.

Maybe this is the actual intention underlying the model of society elaborated by Plato in his *Republic*. A role which Plato ascribes to the republic governed by a philosopher-king is fulfilled in great part by the Church. The creation of a new man and a new culture is the proper responsibility of the Church and not of the state. If the state possesses the means of coercion, and in this sense it represents the principle of power in social life, the authority of the Church is not based on power. Of course, the abuse of such authority is also possible – we know this from history in the form of alliances between the throne and the altar; but it need not discredit the positive cultural role of the Church as guardian of the absolute sphere of culture and the educator, on the condition that the principle of separation of both authorities – that of the state and that of the Church – is observed. For instance, in totalitarian states the Church was sometimes the only institution to defend the autonomy of culture and of social structures independent of the political power. In this respect, the role of the Church in liberal society does not change; only the forms of its realization are different. And only such a Church, i.e. a Church that defends absolute moral values – and not a Church that assumes all the characteristics of liberal mentality, following it rather than judging it according to her own criteria – is a true ally of a free society.