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## MORALITY AND REASON. SAMUEL CLARKE'S RATIONALISTIC ETHICS

### 1.

The British philosophy at the break of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century was marked by a conflict which had very significant consequences. The developing civic society and the emerging public opinion were starting to be a power, which was gradually limiting the influence of the contemporary political and religious authorities. The above mentioned conflict took different forms. One of them was a debate over the place of reason in ethics. One of the key figures in this conflict was Samuel Clarke (1675–1729), a philosopher and theologian, an Anglican priest and a friend of Newton's. Clarke wanted to develop such a moral philosophy which would have the same conclusions as the orthodox approach, but use different argumentation. Being a theist, he obviously believed that revelation is an unquestionable source. At the same time, he believed that the contents of revelation could be translated into the language of reason. This would show the strength of both dimensions and prove that the proper way of reasoning leads in the same direction as faith. Thus, Clarke endeavoured to create two parallel ethics within one philosophical system: the ethics basing on Christian faith (this one was practically ready) and rational ethics, which would, in a way, duplicate and confirm the first one. The author's intention was that these two ethics should be created as separately as possible. At the same time, he thought that it was not possible to formulate an ethical system on the basis of a certain zero point, like Cartesian *cogito*, because what forms the grounds of "true" ethics is the metaphysical basis of all beings, which appears to be the reality of divine being.

Ethical issues are the subject of one of Clarke's two main works, i.e. *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation*. This publi-

cation was the second part of Clarke's most important endeavour as it was supposed to be an ethical development of metaphysics, which is the subject of his most famous work, i.e. *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*.

Clarke's ethics was supposed to be purely rational and demonstrative in every aspect, and its conclusions – practically significant. And its demonstrativeness was supposed to make it irrefutable. Clarke's intention was to show the rationality of morality itself by means of quasi-mathematical argumentation. He wanted to justify accurately and in detail the logical dependence of moral principles on the nature and attributes of the ultimate reality, i.e. God himself. But not the God of revelation, but the God of philosophy, i.e. on the basis of a supreme and ultimate being defined by the philosophical reason.

The essence of Clarke's ethical method is that moral distinctions and the resulting obligations are only acceptable when they appear to be obvious, i.e. when they are recognized by reason as unquestionable. Contradictory theses are either preposterous themselves or lead to preposterous consequences. And the notion of preposterousness is very wide here. Clarke simply defines its scope arbitrarily, according to the standards of apologetics he practices. "Absurd" – the notion he uses extensively in his texts, encompasses all beliefs which contradict his theses. He believes that moral truths belong to a general system of necessary truths, which also includes the truths relating to the existence of God and His attributes, as well as mathematical truths. According to him, all necessary truths belong to the system of rational truths. Morality, which is essentially intelligible, must by definition belong to such a common system of truths. This is the assumption which forms the foundation of his ethics. At the same time it is one of the fundamental weaknesses of his ethical system.<sup>1</sup> It is because Clarke's ethical rationalism is a rationalism entangled in theology even though the author of this doctrine is persuaded that the initial assumptions are strictly reasonable and do not, in any way, interfere with the purely rational character of ethical argumentation. Hence, it can be said that what we find in Clarke's are not so much two different scales of values (religious and secular) but rather two different ethical structures and one of them – the rational structure, is not, contrary to what the philosopher claims, independent because its initial assumptions include not only the reality of divine being (determined philosophically), but also some statements from the Gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> See E. Albee, *Clarke's Ethical Philosophy. II*, "The Philosophical Review", Vol. 37, No. 5 (1928), p. 409.

2.

Clarke typically starts his argumentation not with the notion of God, but with the notion of the nature of things, which is construed as a system of the most fundamental differences and relations of beings. A component of such a nature are moral values and principles. They constitute what we call the law of morality. The law of morality is embedded in the deepest layer of the world, thanks to which it gains the status of objectivity. The law of nature and its moral principles are not autonomous as they are ultimately created by God, whose status guarantees their constancy and independence from historical and cultural circumstances. Thus, Clarke attempts to place morality in such a point of metaphysical structure that would make it both rationally graspable and unchangeable, i.e. absolutely certain and obligatory. He writes that if fundamental moral principles were not founded in the nature of things, which constitutes the causal layer of beings (reasons of things), morality would not be at all possible. Clarke liked very much to compare moral judgments with mathematical propositions, which he considered to be almost perfectly symmetrical. It would be absurd to explain mathematical truths as something that is the result of human conventions, which can undergo changes. To understand mathematical truths means to perceive them as necessary. Therefore, recognizing their truthfulness is not conditioned by whether everybody or only some people agree with the contents of mathematical statements. The same structure of argumentation should refer to proving the principles of morality.<sup>2</sup>

How does Clarke formulate his rationalistic ethics? Moral principles can be understood a priori, regardless of individual experience or religious beliefs. The notion of good and evil do not reflect the human expectation of happiness or the avoidance of suffering. According to Clarke, these notions are a logical consequence of the mere nature of reality. It contains a certain metaphysical code, a fundamental structure covering the basic relations and differences between beings. All events and all actions are either consistent or inconsistent with this metaphysical structure. If they are consistent – we deal with the fitness of event, action or being; if they are inconsistent – we talk about the unfitness. The notion of fitness is essential in Clarke's ethics. It is with our mind that we have to discover this harmony of relations and differences and understand the resulting moral categories, on which the ethical principles are built.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 409.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter N. Miller, 'Freethinking' and 'Freedom of Thought' in *Eighteenth-Century Britain*, "The Historical Journal", Vol. 36, No. 3 (1993), p. 604.

Clarke writes:

There are therefore certain necessary and eternal differences of things; and certain consequent fitnesses or unfitnesses of the application of different things or different relations one to another; not depending on any positive constitutions, but founded unchangeably in the nature and reason of things, and unavoidably arising from the differences of the things themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, fitness is a quality of a certain action, which means that this action corresponds to the system of eternal relations, i.e. the nature of things as the nature of things is nothing else but these unchangeable relations. Hence, fitness is a moral category – the category of “good”. Unfitness is the moral category of “evil”. As a result, the human mind is able to recognize whether the entity’s actions and its relation with other beings fall into one or the other category. It can also recognize the relations and actions of others and pass different moral judgments. This proposition of Clarke’s is very abstract. One of the questions that may appear here is what we can read in the nature of things in the situation of a concrete choice, in the context of a given situation. Clarke’s answers are always general and vague, they hardly ever contain any material illustrating the essence of the solution. A certain attempt at making this issue more precise is the introduction of two kinds of obligations, which will be done further on in this text.

Thus, Clarke’s reasoning concentrates on showing the basis of all morality, where we should look for the validity of all moral notions and judgments. In other words, this basis is supposed to be the source of the objectivity of ethical norms understood with the help of reason. The law of morality (which Clarke also refers to as natural religion or natural morality) is embedded in the nature of things. This law is unchangeable, necessary and eternal. Contrary to what Hobbes says, it is infinitely more perfect and independent of any law imposed by human political power as it is a part of the metaphysical structure of the world. Its basic elements are moral principles and the related obligations. Among the former Clarke lists the principles of equity, righteousness, justice, goodness, truth (not caring too much about the clarity of the terms used). Their logical consequence is the obligation to respect them. These obligation refers to absolutely all people, all rational

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (next as DISC), in: *A Discourse concerning the Being and Attributes of God, the Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation*, London 1732, p. 185 (reprint: Kessinger Publishing’s Rare Mystical Reprints).

beings. Thus, by means reason itself, without any religious beliefs, we can characterize the law of nature as:

- common – i.e. binding for everybody regardless of religious, cultural or social differences;
- eternal – it has not been imposed by humans, it had existed “before first towns and empires were created, before first rights were written down”;
- constant – “like mathematical truths, like darkness and light, like sweetness and bitterness”;
- embedded in the nature of things;<sup>5</sup>

On numerous occasions, Clarke refers to a fragment of Plato's *Euthyphro*, where the Plato's dilemma appears – the dilemma relating to the final sources of morality. Does goodness result from reality itself or the divine arbitrary establishment? Clarke tries to reconcile Euthyphro's attitude with that of Socrates in the spirit of Christian apologetics, which is characteristic for this stream of British philosophy initiated by Plato's adherents from Cambridge. Clarke's compromise is as follows: the source of fundamental moral differentiations and ethical obligations is the deepest layer of nature, whose ultimate validation is God – the creator of nature, and, in particular His natural attributes (infinity, almightiness, omnipresence, eternity) as well as His moral attributes (goodness, truthfulness, justice, love, mercy and all other perfections), which are reflected in eternal and constant reasons and relations of things, i.e. the rules of common moral law.

This attempt of the English philosopher at the reconciliation of Euthyphro with Socrates becomes more clear in a slightly wider context. According to Clarke, the differentiation between the good and evil as well as the whole moral law are based on the metaphysical foundation of nature. Thus, in a way, they are reality in themselves, which is independent of particular human interpretations and desires. In relation to God, however, the law of morality is dependent – dependent on His will, but, to some extent... it is also independent. That is because God is the unchallenged creator of all beings. He creates the world according to His will, which is first reflected in those eternal and unchangeable relations, differences between beings and fundamental reasons of things. However, God's creative activity is not completely arbitrary, it is not motivated by a whim or random option, but rather by the well-being of the whole world: the well-being – if we may say so – regarding the whole world, not its particular fragments such as suf-

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 216.

fering individuals. At the same time, the nature of things, i.e. the aspect of essential relations, emancipates from God, with His consent, which is to say that once the world has been created on the basis of certain reasons, God respects them within His ruling power. Hence, the law of morality is a work of God, but once it has been established, God voluntarily accepts its requirements.<sup>6</sup> This conclusion of Clarke's can be described as the idea of self-limited voluntarism of God.

### 3.

The major component of Clarke's ethics is the concept of obligations. It is an attempt at showing the practical context of an ethical theory, which, for the British philosopher, was a matter of primary importance. He repeatedly writes that ethics should aim at influencing as many people as possible trying to make them feel a need for changing their behaviour if it is vicious. (He attached more importance, however, to religion believing that its impact is stronger than that of philosophy and that it is capable of changing the world, where vice and sin are so widespread).

The first and basic obligation ("formal" or "primary" obligation) is general in nature; it is a formal order to undertake only such actions which are consistent with the law of morality, which is decoded by means of reason. This is what Clarke writes about formal obligation:

Thus it appears in general, that the mind of Man cannot avoid giving its Assent to the eternal Law of Righteousness; that is, cannot but acknowledge the reasonableness and fitness of Men's governing all their Actions by the Rule of Right or Equity: And also that this Assent is a formal Obligation upon every Man, actually and constantly to conform himself to that Rule.<sup>7</sup>

Then, the mind ("easily") deduces "secondary" (additional) obligations, which are the next stage of making moral obligations more precise. Clarke lists three types of such secondary obligations (arising logically from the law of nature):

1. We should worship and respect God, we should adore Him with all our power and skills as He is the Author and Ruler of all things. This obligation takes the form of piety. And its validation is based on divine

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<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 218.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 199.

attributes of infinity, eternity, omnipresence and wisdom, which should be admired by all rational beings. At the same time, it is also a symptom of fitness to the law of nature whereas all disobedience and disrespect towards God are the synonyms and symptoms of unfitness to the eternal relations which constitute the law of nature. Therefore, the majesty of divine being is a metaphysical basis of this obligation.

2. As regards other rational beings – we should show others respect, goodness and justice as it is reasonable to expect that other people will treat us the same way we treat them. What is more, the reason tells us that in interpersonal relations we should imitate God in His relation to ourselves. This obligation takes the form of the love of one's neighbour and good will, which are grounded in the divine attribute of mercy,<sup>8</sup> but they can also be deduced from the analysis of the true human nature. Fitness realized in such a way must lead to universal well-being and happiness while unfitness leads to destruction and damage.
3. We should also show respect towards ourselves, which entails the necessity of restraining one's desires and curbing our passions as they are the source of all moral defects and depravation; but we must also develop the talents we possess. This obligation takes the form of continence.<sup>9</sup> In other words, fitness consists of self-perfection and unfitness – disrespect of oneself, the extreme form of which is suicide.

Clarke makes these three types of obligation even more precise and constantly emphasizes that all of this happens within the framework of a logical deduction performed by our mind. And so, within the first obligation (towards God), he lists the whole catalogue of additional duties, all of which are also grounded in different aspects of divine being. He talks about the duty of utmost admiration for God, which is supposed to result logically from certain divine attributes (eternity, infinity, omniscience, wisdom). The omnipresence of God imposes the duty of utmost respect, the fact of God being the Creator and the Preserver of the world – the duty of adoration and worship, also in the form of ritual cult. The singularity of God results in the duty of worshipping only Him. The attribute of divine power and justice imposes on us (logically) the duty of fear of God whereas God's mercy – (as paradox as it sounds) the duty of hope, just like God's goodness – the duty of love. Truthfulness and changelessness are the grounds for the duty of reliance or trust in God. Other duties are not based on divine attributes,

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 204–206.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 209.

but on beliefs, which the mind has to acquire otherwise. Since we have received from the Creator our existence and talents we have a duty to develop ourselves in our service to God while the inescapable awareness of being completely dependent on God, both in our existence and in what we really need, obliges us to constant prayer.<sup>10</sup>

In Clarke's theological discourse, these conclusions are absolutely unquestionable – “as plain and conspicuous, as the shining of the sun at noon-day”.<sup>11</sup> Those who cannot see that not only commit a sin towards the Creator, but also a mistake in reasoning because: “(...) ‘tis the greatest absurdity and perverseness in the world, for creatures indued with reason, to attempt to break through and transgress this necessary order and dependency of things”.<sup>12</sup> As regards the other two obligations, Clarke particularizes these imperatives by means of justification and explanation. The obligation towards others is reflected, as already mentioned, in love and good will or “universal” love and good will. And here the argumentation of the English philosopher resorts to the assumptions, which are, in Clarke's opinion, indisputably resolved in his metaphysics, where he proves the existence of God and His attributes, and, thanks to that – the objective difference between good and evil. Let us look at his typical argumentation, where very often he uses tautologies in the place of definitions of basic ethical terms.

Clarke writes as follows:

For if (as has been before proved) there be a natural and necessary difference between good and evil; and that which is good is fit and reasonable; and that which is evil is unreasonable to be done; and that which is the greatest good, is always the most fit and reasonable to be chosen: then, as the goodness of God extends it self universally over all his works through the whole creation, by doing always what is absolutely best in the whole; so every rational creature ought in its sphere and station, according to its respective powers and faculties, to do all the good it can to all its fellow-creatures.<sup>13</sup>

And for this purpose, the best and the most dependable means is universal love and universal good will.

The way of demonstrating the obligation towards oneself is slightly different. Here, Clarke once again resorts to God's metaphysics and claims that

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 200.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 201.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 201.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 206.

the imperative of protecting one's life and the prohibition of suicide<sup>14</sup> result undeniably from the fact that God is the giver of life, which implies the obviousness of this imperative. Within this obligation, reason obliges man to "(...) take care to keep himself at all times in such temper and disposition both of body and mind, as may best fit and enable him to perform his duty in all other instances".<sup>15</sup> All these "other instances" are the situations determined by the first two obligations, i.e. we must take care of ourselves so as to best fulfill the duty of worshiping God and the duty of loving others in the name of universal happiness. It must be noticed again that the utilitarian context, interpreted in a Christian way, is very often present in the ethics of this English thinker.

Such is, in short, the moral philosophy of this Anglican philosopher, which pretends to the status of a purely rational doctrine. And for which the ethics formulated in the religious order is supposed to constitute a structure, which is independent, but fully consistent – a symmetrical reflection, in a way. We have seen, however, that this "secular" reasoning of Clarke relies on religious statements, which are not logical conclusions of his argumentation. It can be assumed then that ethical rationalism is not independent as it is entangled in religion and its hidden premise is the belief that morality needs the support of religion.

Samuel Clarke, just like Henry More and Ralph Cudworth, the apologists from the Platonic School in Cambridge, saw clearly the changes in the intellectual discourse of the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the first decades of the following century. From the point of view of a Christian theist, these changes were alarming, to say the least, and their consequences must have seemed fatal for the revealed faith. Spinoza and Locke, to some extent, and, most of all, British deists were starting to be dangerous opponents that Clarke wanted to fight with their own weapons. Hence, from this historical context comes the inspiration of the English philosopher and theologian to defend Christianity on the grounds of reason, i.e. in the field which had been dominated by "atheists", as he often called them. However, the ethics, which had been intended as rational, eventually appeared to be a natural theology of morality.

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Blount – a renowned British deist, who in his essay *Defense of Self-murder* postulated the right to suicide, made Clarke especially furious.

<sup>15</sup> DISC, p. 209.