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Review of Andrzej Przyłębski, *Etyka w świetle hermeneutyki* [*Ethics in the Perspective of Hermeneutics*] (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2010). 218 pages.

The wording used in the title of this review is, of course, an answer to the postmodern postulate “anything goes.” However, it does not mean that the author of *Ethics in the Perspective of Hermeneutics* is trying to overthrow the foundations of this popular contemporary attitude. He is not doing it by design, at any rate. Andrzej Przyłębski’s work is not claiming to be a coherent, already completed vision of ethics, which may grow on the ground of hermeneutic philosophy, or even more, hermeneutics itself. Therefore, is this “not everything goes” statement a kind of abuse, imputing a plan which was not the real aim that this Poznan-based philosopher set sights on during the writing of *Ethics*? It seems not. Despite the fact that this book aims to merely outline a certain framework that only with time would be filled with a concrete program of ethics, the framework itself is worded in a clear and transparent manner.

Before discussing the most important part of the book, which is intended by the author to be the “crown and also goal,” we will look at the structure of this publication. In the first six chapters we can find coverage of the ideas in the field of ethics by selected (but also representative) exponents of philosophical hermeneutics. The ideas are not pulled completely out of context, proving only that every philosopher quoted by Andrzej Przyłębski has remained sensitive to ethical issues. In each case we deal with the ethics of a philosopher in the broader context of a comprehensive view of their overall project.¹ Such a procedure allows us to understand that ethics in the perspective of hermeneutics is not only possible, but that there have already been attempts to build it.

In the first part of the book Przyłębski brings us figures such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Nietzsche, not only showing how they fit into the mainstream of philosophical hermeneutics, but seeing in each of them at least the beginnings of a theory of morality or ethics, emerging out of their specific hermeneutic attitude. Multiple times Przyłębski mentions that he was surprised to discover the important part played by ethical issues in the work of some of the above mentioned philosophers.

¹ Of course due to the book’s slight 200 pages format, the author cannot afford to become too much entangled in the various nuances of the issues discussed. However, he tries to lead the reader in such a way that they can see the close connection between ethics and ontology in the works of the various philosophers.

While the importance of ethical research for Ricoeur is obvious and well known on the basis of his recent works, published shortly before his death, as is the discussion of whether the fundamental ontology presented by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* is also a fundamental ethics, and while some people are familiar with a little puzzling declaration of Gadamer's, that his thinking actually belongs to practical not to theoretical philosophy, *so much the discovery of the fundamental importance of ethics for the comprehensive concept of Schleiermacher's philosophy was for me a surprise*[emphasis mine].²

In another place, concerning Dilthey, Przyłębki writes: "When we look closer at the intellectual biography of Dilthey, we notice, not without surprise, that already his dissertation, announced in 1864, was dedicated to ethical issues by the Berlin philosopher. Ethical issues were important to him since the undertaking of his scientific activity."³

But what deserves more attention because of its creative character (without minimizing the significance of the earlier part) is the second part of *Ethics in the Perspective of Hermeneutics*, more modest in volume, but containing Przyłębki's main intuitions about what form hermeneutic ethics might take in response not only to the requirements of hermeneutic philosophy but also to the requirements of our times. Elaboration of that seems to be necessary in the face of the obvious crisis of ethics, caused inter alia by the collapse of "grand narratives," and thus of the fundamental principles expressed in any universalistic concepts. However, this is not a definitive break with a certain form of universalism, which is necessary to preserve if you do not want to deal with rivalry and consequent conflicts arising between different ethical systems. As Andrzej Przyłębki notices, the only way out "is to work out a minimum universal ethics, for every human and the human species as a whole, an ethics, that all concerned would be able to agree with."⁴

Understanding, one of the fundamental and most important categories used by the hermeneutic philosophy, presupposes a claim for justice; proper understanding means doing a human being justice as an individual, but also a human as a being who lives within a certain group or community. So considered, human means indeed the *substantive* human. Forgetting about this specific entanglement, also in history, redounds to a deepening atomization of ethics, which can lead to continuous discourse, which is, unfortunately, sometimes transformed into a vicious discourse. However, the excessive universalization of a certain type of morality, "drawing the human "out" of the context of their historically-formed times may do the same. So, can Andrzej Przyłębki's sketch of hermeneutic ethics be considered a "golden mean?" It seems that this statement is not entirely false. For Przyłębki obvious embedding of ethics (as

² Andrzej Przyłębki, *Etyka w świetle hermeneutyki* (Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Oficyna Naukowa 2010), 7.

³ Przyłębki, *Etyka*, 31-32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

part of cultural heritage) in concrete history does not precede the possibility for universal ethics.⁵ In the same way, there is no reason to treat a universal (or universalizing) ethic as completely a-historical.

According to Przyłębski (as a philosophical ethics) hermeneutic ethics should accomplish two or three main tasks. The first of these would have the nature of a, so to speak, first-person demand. Here, among other needs emphasized by Przyłębski, the need for an ethical education which would lead to *the development of moral consciousness* can be clearly seen. This does not mean some form of indoctrination, leading up to an imposition of “the one and only right” concept, which would in an authoritarian manner govern moral evaluation of human actions and attitudes. It is rather to emphasize the importance of human moral self-realization, discerning human will as a factor shaping their ethics, and learning to “remove the screen, which we stretch in front of ourselves to justify our own unethical behavior.”⁶ Hermeneutic ethics, according to Andrzej Przyłębski, is an *ethical realism*, and thus demands of the human no more than is humanly possible.

The second of the tasks is of third-person character. It involves reflection on the social, legal, and economic order, acting somewhat as a “revision” of currently prevailing solutions. Thanks to this, hermeneutic ethics would have the ability to combine some form of universalism (only in its indispensable manifestation) with a particular historical grounding. Through the constant “flow” of ethical thought, this kind of ethics would correspond to the concept of “becoming” in active participation, leading to a gradual elimination of the elements that socially do not work. This is obviously not a matter of a near future, because the third task, which hermeneutic ethics sets for itself, must require the recognition of its value in the discourse of morality, although this would only be a “task of the interpreter who mediates between the discourses, negotiating understanding, then agreement.”⁷

Although *Ethics in the Perspective of Hermeneutics* by Andrzej Przyłębski provides only the first step in creation of a concept that can bear the name of hermeneutic ethics, it is a very valuable step. Przyłębski has prepared the ground for an ethics that balances justice for an individual (who carries out their will as an autonomous unit) with society, which is responsible for organizing social structures in order to satisfy the demand for a “good life.”

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⁵ Ibid., 169.

⁶ Ibid., 187.

⁷ Ibid., 195.