

# What Is Thinking in Values?

Adam Węgrzecki

Translation of “Czym jest ‘myślenie według wartości’?” [What Is Thinking in Values?], in *Pytając o człowieka* [Asking About Man], ed. Władysław Zuziak, Kraków 2002, pp. 91-98.

Translated by Anna Fraś.

Adam Węgrzecki (b. 1937) belonged to the inner circle of Roman Ingarden's disciples, alongside Józef Tischner, Władysław Stróżewski and Danuta Gierulanka. He holds the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Economics in Kraków. He specializes in the philosophy of man and the philosophy of values. He is a distinguished researcher of Max Scheler's philosophy – he has written an excellent monograph entitled *Scheler* (1975). He has also translated some of Scheler's works into Polish: *Istota i formy sympatii* [The Nature of Sympathy] (1980), *Pisma z antropologii filozoficznej i teorii wiedzy* [Essays on Philosophical Anthropology and the Theory of Knowledge] (1978; a work translated together with S. Czerniak), *Problemy religii* [Problems of Religion] (1995). He also prepared Roman Ingarden's *Wykłady z Etyki* [Lectures on Ethics] (1989) for publishing. He is the author of *O poznawaniu drugiego człowieka* [On Knowing the Other Man] (1982 and 1992).

Józef Tischner's philosophy forms a whole which strikes one with the great range of problems he considered, the multitude of threads he developed and the variety of inspirations he sought in the works of many authors. Yet, this diversity is not diffuse. The whole of Tischner's philosophizing is highly developed in certain directions, but it is marked by cohesion. Its sources are varied, but undoubtedly there are a few ideas which particularly focus Tischner's philosophical reflection. The idea of thinking in values is clearly one of them. It became one of his guiding ideas quite early, and quite significantly, Tischner used the phrase “thinking in values” as the title for one of his books.<sup>1</sup> I do not think the significance of the idea ever diminished. However, is it only an idea? How should one understand thinking in values

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<sup>1</sup> A. Bobko believes that thinking in values is a “result of the first phase of Tischner's inquiries.” He also speaks of the period of thinking in values (cf. A. Bobko, “Poszukiwanie prawdy o człowieku” [Searching for the Truth of Man], in *Znak* 550 (3), 2001).

<sup>12</sup> itself? Is it essentially just a kind of thinking? What are its sources and what perspectives does it open? What is it intrinsically connected to? What vision of man emerges out of such thinking? These questions seem worth considering and sketching some answers to, at least.

The origin of the phrase “thinking in values” seems less than essential, but it does have its significance here. It verges on the paradoxical that Tischner took it from a passage by Heidegger, who decidedly spoke out against such thinking. Heidegger claimed—oddly enough in an essay entitled “Letter on ‘Humanism’”—that thinking in values is:

Here, as elsewhere, ... the greatest blasphemy imaginable against Being. To think against values therefore does not mean to beat the drum for the valuelessness and nullity of beings. It means rather ... [to think] against subjectivizing beings.<sup>2</sup>

In a short foreword to the second edition of the collection of essays *Thinking in Values*, Tischner mentions that for Heidegger, thinking in values “travestied the truth of Being.” He does not accuse Heidegger of axiological nihilism, nor does he launch a detailed critique of his standpoint, which would reveal more of its premises. Nevertheless, he does express a view that an axiology lies at the foundations of the key concepts of Heideggerian philosophy. However, Tischner decidedly distances himself from Heidegger’s standpoint, by conducting a positive explication of the phrase “thinking in values” in his own reflections on various values. One might see this as something deeper, something which seems commanded by thinking in values if it is to be treated as a postulate. Such a reading would mean that one needs—in a manner of speaking—to let values themselves speak. This would be the return to the values themselves, which phenomenologists so desire, and would allow axiological ignorance and many axiological illusions to be overcome.

As for Heidegger, Tischner formulates a charge which has a broader meaning, as it refers just as well to other philosophers. He charges Heidegger with formalism, being confined to empty form devoid of matter: “Heidegger seems to know *how* man looks but does not know *what* man is.”<sup>3</sup> A form, however, must needs be filled with content, which, according to Tischner, is constituted by a value. A philosophy which is literally valueless is not capable of satisfying man’s expectations, because “man first needs answers to *what* questions.”<sup>4</sup> It might be added that only thinking in values provides a philosophy with this desired dimension. In a much later text, Tischner formulates an even more general critique of Heidegger’s philosophy, remarking that “Heidegger sees no possibility of experience which would be absolute, transcendental or axiological... Heidegger does without the concept of the good and evil. His vision of man does not allow for a full authenticity in way of Being.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> M. Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings*, HarperCollins, pp. 213-266.

<sup>3</sup> J. Tischner, *Myślenie według wartości* [Thinking in Values], Kraków 1982, p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> J. Tischner, *Nieszczęsny dar wolności* [The Infelicitous Gift of Freedom], Kraków 1993, p. 75.

Thinking in values is something more than thinking about values.<sup>13</sup> However, there is no thinking in values without thinking about values, without some knowledge about them. This knowledge has been built by great contemporary philosophers such as Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann, Dietrich von Hildebrandt, Roman Ingarden and others. They strove to show the diversity of values themselves and the relationships between them. Their aim was often to build a system of values or at least to sketch a system of this kind. Józef Tischner's philosophy is close to their orientation, to their directions of inquiry, though not to all the results they achieved. Tischner himself worked in the field of thinking about values, which is typical for contemporary axiological inquiries, but in his thinking in values he always focuses on what values are and might be for the human being. This does not involve any relativization of values, because they only become implemented in the choices that man makes and in human relationships.

Why does thinking in values seem so important for man? It is Tischner's belief that values are an irreplaceable matter of man's Being, "Man is like a song passing through time. Who plays this song? Man himself is both the instrument and the artist."<sup>6</sup> The score for this song is created by values. Relating to them, realizing them in his life, man "builds himself as a value—a special value whose name is I."<sup>7</sup> There is no compulsion to recognize the existence of values and take them into consideration while acting. It is worth remembering, though, that they bring salvation to man; for if we do not receive them, if they remain absent in our life, then "we might be subjected to violence,"<sup>8</sup> and our freedom is limited. This song might also be beautiful, which Tischner brings into focus, as well. However, there are far more important matters at stake than its aesthetic dimension. That's why it is difficult to agree that "Tischnerian thinking in values ends in an aestheticization of the truth of man. To live truly, to be oneself, ultimately means to live beautifully; that is, to make one's life a work of art."<sup>9</sup>

Tischner finds values in the whole of human reality, including man himself. It is extremely significant that Tischner is convinced about the axiology of the human self. This conviction is already present in his early works. In "Axiological Pieces" (1970) he claims explicitly that he identifies the transcendental ego with the axiological-I. It is the axiological-I that is to constitute the foundation for egoticity. It is endowed with primordality and originariness. The axiological-I is a condition for other levels or kinds of egoticity, while it is not conditioned by anything. This seems to echo – though not uniquely – the transcendental quality of this I.

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<sup>6</sup> J. Tischner, "Etyka wartości i nadziei" [The Ethics of Value and Hope], in *Wobec wartości* [Facing Values], Poznań 1982, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> J. Tischner, *Myślenie według wartości*, op. cit., p. 486.

<sup>9</sup> A. Bobko, "Poszukiwanie prawdy o człowieku" [Searching for the Truth of Man], op.cit., p. 62. Cf. also A. Bobko, "Philosophical Anthropology as the Main Thread of Tischner's Work," in *Thinking in Values*, issue 1 (2007), p. 17.

In a closer study of the axiological-I, Tischner notices that it does not derive its axiology “from the fact of realizing some type of values or from being qualified by already realized values.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the I is not axiological, because man has done something relating to values. The axiology of the axiological-I is, as Tischner assures us, “its immanent and whole reality.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, the question arises immediately as to whether this reality is totally independent from human actions, whether nothing in them can influence the axiology of which Tischner writes. To some extent, Tischner answers this question by stating that the value of the I is opposed by “all negative objective values, in particular negative ethical values... The axiological-I is threatened by injustice, hatred of what is worth loving, infidelity, unreliability, etc.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, negative values will have a destructive influence on the axiological-I. Why shouldn’t positive values have an influence, (positive, obviously)?

A particular moment of the axiological-I is its privativeness, which has nothing to do with axiological negativity, or nothingness, as Sartre and Heidegger wrongly believed. Axiological privativeness is something like hunger or insatiability. It manifests itself in the axiological-I’s directedness towards objective values and unchartered territories in the surrounding world, which must be axiologically chartered, filled with the presence of some value. Nevertheless, there is no chance to satisfy this hunger fully, to achieve a completeness, satiation in the axiological sense: “As long as there is the dilemma between an unrealized value and the world lending itself to the realization of values, the human drama of privativeness will last.”<sup>13</sup> There appears a vision of continuous, never-ending work over filling the unchartered territories, and clearing—in a manner of speaking—“blackened areas,” which could signify the presence of negative values and, by the same token, the further importance of the dilemma. At any rate, the unchartered territories do not seem to be the reason for the privativeness of the axiological-I. It bears this characteristic on its own, and it only so happens that there is a correspondence between the lack manifesting itself in the axiological-I and the lack appearing in the form of the axiologically unchartered territories of the world.

The privativeness of the axiological-I was not described comprehensively due to a lack of appropriate, unambiguous concepts, among other reasons. Nevertheless, the idea of this privativeness is clear enough to engender the thought that thinking in values may have something to do with the privativeness of the axiological-I. It may even be the case that privativeness is the source, at least a subjective source, of such thinking. It is hardly possible to claim that such a deeply residing axiological insatiability in man has no influence whatsoever on his axiological searches. So is it hardly possible to deny that the axiological-I sometimes takes delight in their results, though never finding complete satisfaction.

<sup>10</sup> J. Tischner, *Świat ludzkiej nadziei* [The World of Human Hope], Kraków 1975, p. 173.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

The axiological-I is, according to Tischner, something unreal, and thus, beyond time and space. However, it lends itself to realization, as the outcome of which it takes on the form of such and such social self. Each form of the social self has an assigned sphere of values and an area of uncharted territories. Each realization is a realization of some possibility of the axiological-I and, by the same token, it leaves its other possibilities dormant, at least for the time being. We are presented here with a limitation which affects at least the scope of uncharted territories, which may become charted. Doubtless it increases the axiological want. A dilemma is engendered here as the axiological-I must realize itself in order to proceed to chart the uncharted territories, but realizing itself it can do this in only a limited way. <sup>15</sup>

Thinking in values characteristically captures our world as hierarchically ordered, “[w]e observe affairs, objects, and people follow a more or less firm hierarchical pattern.”<sup>14</sup> Our thinking turns out to be preferential. Is it then a quality of the human manner of thinking? Or are we dealing with a projection of our preferences onto the world? Is thinking in values nothing other than ordering the world according to values? Or is it a reflection of an order existing in the world, an order which, due to its axiological dimension, is organized according to values? Is it, however, legitimate to speak about an order if the world is—if we might put it thus—axiologically indefinite, if there are so many uncharted territories and if there have been so many—I should add—imperfect chartings of those territories? Here is the fundamental question of the existence of values that should be answered by thinking in values. Tischner does not launch a systematic deliberation on this matter, he rather remains on the level of describing how man conceives the world, yet various statements of his are marked by an objectivistic view of values.

The preferential thinking which is so characteristic of thinking in values does not necessarily impose itself. It is not true that we cannot go beyond thinking in values, just as we cannot abstain from using some categories, as Kant believed. Values do not limit our freedom at all. If a value is made “the matter of an order, then it is torn away from the experience of freedom.”<sup>15</sup> For Tischner, freedom is inseparable from thinking in values, which is constantly accompanied by “a subtle experience of freedom.”<sup>16</sup>

An encounter with another person provides situations and impulses to think in values. It is the beginning of a drama, which does not mean that the relationship has to end tragically. In the encounter we know that “we find ourselves in the realm of good and evil, values and antivalues. I can touch the Other, harm him, I can bring him joy... In this way, the encounter invites me not only to preferential feeling, but also to preferential thinking.”<sup>17</sup> It may be said that thinking in values develops in the interhuman space which has been defined by the encounter. It constantly gives

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<sup>14</sup> J. Tischner, *Myślenie według wartości*, op. cit., pp. 483-484.

<sup>15</sup> J. Tischner, *Nieszczęsny dar wolności*, op. cit., p. 172.

<sup>16</sup> J. Tischner, *Myślenie według wartości*, op. cit., p. 496.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 487.

<sup>16</sup> food for thought, as there is a call from the other to save something in him.<sup>18</sup> In order to receive this call there needs to be, according to Tischner, an agathological experience which reveals being in light of the good. To thwart, to prevent a possible tragedy, one needs the axiological experience and thinking that can enable one to project a solution to the problem of tragedy. Thus, thinking in values also turns out to be projecting thinking that actively participates in a particular human drama, “it is in the nature of thinking to project an event which is able to overcome tragedy.”<sup>19</sup>

Thinking in values finds its complete expression in what Tischner called assimilation. Freedom allows man to choose and, furthermore, “to assimilate: make himself healthy, courageous, hopeful.”<sup>20</sup> In fact, assimilating embraces the choice itself, for “choosing is a manner of assimilating values. In choosing a value, I make it my own.”<sup>21</sup> The word ‘my’ may seem to be slightly misleading. It indicates not the relation of possession, but a formation of a person who, as a result, becomes truthful or false, fair or unjust, merciful or vengeful.<sup>22</sup> As the result of the assimilation of a value, the subject should comply with its demands as far as possible, which would mean living according to this value. Then, it might be said that the value is ‘mine,’ which would be revealed in various situations, but it would never be ‘mine’ as a part of myself.

Tischner looks at value assimilation from a similar angle in *The Controversy over the Existence of Man*. However, he points out that value assimilation appears in the agathological order. That’s why, “only what is good lends itself to being assimilated.”<sup>23</sup> It is a modification of the previous standpoint, which will also have a bearing on freedom. It should be well considered as to whether this modification can be defended, especially since both assimilation and dissimilation are possible – the latter being a process of getting rid of what has once been assimilated. Many a time it might involve getting rid of something negative, which would enable one to turn over a new leaf:

Thanks to assimilation-dissimilation, conversion and a new beginning are made possible. In a new beginning, a person enters a different drama and constitutes himself anew as a subject of this drama.<sup>24</sup>

The extremely crucial role of assimilation and dissimilation is that man can start from the beginning. Besides, this starting over needs to be understood as the beginning of the good and the end of evil, for “only the agathological horizon opens the possibility of a beginning.”<sup>25</sup> Tischner

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 488-491.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 495.

<sup>20</sup> J. Tischner, *Nieszczęśny dar wolności*, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 212-213.

<sup>23</sup> J. Tischner, *Spór o istnienie człowieka* [The Controversy over the Existence of Man], Kraków 1998, p. 305.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

expects that man does not cease to be the same person then, although he <sup>17</sup> may lose his dramatic, agathological identity.

In his later works, in *The Philosophy of Drama* (1990) and in *The Controversy over the Existence of Man* (1998), Tischner rarely speaks of thinking in values in a direct manner. It does not, however, mean any change in his views. I believe that thinking in values simply blended in with Tischner's whole philosophy and ceased to be a problem requiring a separate discussion. But in the final parts of *The Controversy over the Existence of the World* Tischner points out yet another aspect of thinking in values. This aspect becomes visible only in theological thinking, though not in each of its types, whose specific trait is the gratitude toward life, the treatment of all as God's gift:

The existence of the world and the existence of man on the world are gifts, man's freedom is a gift as well. Theological thinking means thinking in values. The world of values is given through the experience of faith.<sup>26</sup>

If we then move onto the plane of theology, we will find the ultimate Source of thinking in values.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 326.