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Roman Dmowski's nationalistic ethics

Summary

The author has been decided to illustrate the problem discussed in this text – concerning Dmowski's nationalistic ethics – in the context of the following areas of reflection of the ideological leader of Endecja (National Democratic Party): treating the nation as a subject of moral obligations of an individual; anthropological pessimism and assumptions of man's social nature; perception of a relationship between an individual and the nation; views of the humanity; evolution in the value judgment of religion.

Keywords: nationalistic ethics, Roman Dmowski, nationalism, morality, anthropology

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Introduction

As opposed to Zygmunt Balicki,¹ Roman Dmowski did not publish any text which could be treated as a systematic lecture on morality. Therefore, a synthetic description of ethical views of the co-author of independence – which is the research goal of this study – requires confrontation of thoughts outlined in books and articles from various periods of his writing. This is problematic insofar as Dmowski's world outlook underwent changes which manifested themselves in the evolution of his nationalism toward the „integral” form,² as well as with respect of his views regarding the issue of paramount significance for morality: religion.

¹ Balicki (1903).

² It was, among others, Andrzej Walicki who considered Dmowski to be an integral nationalist. Walicki (2000): 12. If we were to use the definition of integral nationalism devised by Jacek Bartylewski as a „new type of nationalism – calling itself «integral» – was of a right-wing, counter-revolutionary and antidemocratic character (...)”, it should be stated that Dmowski was not its representative *par excellence*; only with respect to how he conceived the relation between an individual and the nation, positive assessment of religion and objection to parliamentarianism. Bartylewski (2000): 248. Even in the late period of his writing Dmowski appreciated the influence democratism exerted on the understanding of a nation. The statement, which he expressed in „The decline of conservative thought in Poland”, that „the French Revolution let such forces on stage which later turned against it”, remained emblematic for his thought. Dmowski (2004): 93.

On the side of these deliberations it is worth noting that, as Nikodem Bończa-Tomaszewski describes it, that at the time when he worked for „Głos” for Dmowski, but also for Balicki and Popławski, „the concept of democracy of the latter 19th century” was „a point of departure for developing independent concepts”. Bończa-Tomaszewski (2001): 57. What should be emphasized – Polish nationalists envisioned national democracy which in its substance was non-liberal.

Roman Dmowski's understanding of nationalism

Already the very way in which Dmowski understood nationalism discloses many ethically significant questions. His discourse about this notion, which after all arouses many semantic controversies,³ turns out to be ambiguous. On one hand, this arises from scepticism the leader of endecja expressed towards „nationalism”, which he directly called „an unfortunate term”, weakening the value of the contents it embodies, which follows from the fact that „each and every«ism» comprises the notion of doctrine, direction of thought, beside which there is room for other equivalent directions”.⁴ On the other hand, Dmowski's reflection on nationalism embraces controversiality which arises from a rather journalistic character of his writings and is manifested by a somewhat imprecise use of certain notions, including „nation” and „society”.

In *Thoughts of a Modern Pole* Dmowski presents nationalism in opposition to the earlier tradition of thinking about community. Pointing out the dichotomous division of patriotism into its „old” and „modern” forms, he presents the meaning of nationalism from the angle of identity with respect

³ Both colloquial and academic use of „nationalism” causes that this notion seems to be devoid of content which would make it distinct from other terms in the language of politics. Suffice it to recall a frequent practice of identifying nationalism with chauvinism, which if after all merely one of its forms, but also presenting this ideology in total opposition to or total identification with patriotism. On the other hand, one should also mention one of the most fascinating issues of, in particular, 20th century studies of nations – the relationship of nationalism with the emergence of nations. More on this subject, especially in the context of a paradigmatic debate on the status of nationalism see Majka (2017): 67–73.

⁴ Dmowski (2013): 21.

to the other elements of this dyad.⁵ In his discourse, this ideology appears as a phenomenon of modernity,⁶ which could emerge thanks to the progress of democratism.⁷ The substance of the above division – which should be considered especially fascinating from the viewpoint of ethics – is focused around the object of moral obligations of an individual. The importance of territory, but also of state and symbols that exemplify it, defining the sense of „old” patriotism, is replaced by modern patriotism’s primary orientation towards nation.⁸ This does not mean that in light of Dmowski’s world outlook state is treated indifferently. Even though the journalist of „Polityka narodowa” magazine perceived the issue of a political system as subordinate to the needs of the nation,⁹ it was the state that he saw as a means without which it would be impossible for the nation to be constituted on the bases of tribal differences.¹⁰

Let us note that quite frequently it was how membership in a national community was ascertained was recognised as a determinant of the substance of nationalism. This was done, among others, by Hans Kohn, whose typology into „Western” and „Eastern” variants of that ideology corresponds with the civic and ethnic definition of nation.¹¹ In light of the ways of thinking about membership in a nation

⁵ Dmowski (2015): 76. Dmowski does not explicitly use the term „old patriotism”. His statements – such as e.g. „old-school patriots” – warrant the use of such terminology.

⁶ More on Dmowski’s views about modernity see Maj (2009), Kawalec (2006).

⁷ Dmowski has in mind democratisation of culture and democratisation of the political system, which means political involvement of the masses. Dmowski (2008): 76.

⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁹ Dmowski (2008): 45.

¹⁰ Schrade (2004): 87.

¹¹ Kohn (2005).

distinguished by Józef Maria Bocheński – „cultural”, „racial”, „formal”¹² – Dmowski's vision of a community as „a cohesive whole linked by strong moral ties, connected by a single feeling of attachment of a common cause, characterised by collective thought and collective will”¹³ should be recognized as closest to the first one. The vision of a „modern” Polish nation is based on the faithfulness to definite values reflected in national culture, but also on a certain way of understanding national interests and acting for their realisation, which forces out transformation of Polish national character from „passive” into „active”. Such classification is not obvious, however. The world outlook of a Polish nationalist was shaped under the influence of positivist ideas, which was manifested in the organic understanding of nation as a „live social organism”, one of the bases of which was to be race.¹⁴ Against the narration of Grzegorz Krzywiec, who classified Dmowski's views as racist,¹⁵ it should be stated that in the nomenclature of the journalist of „Głos” it carried the contents diverse from the conviction of the supreme status of biological features as a basis for appraising the value of a man.¹⁶

¹² Bocheński (1989): 9–10.

¹³ Dmowski (2008): 41.

¹⁴ Dmowski (2015): 78.

¹⁵ What is symptomatic: Krzywiec identifies racism with antisemitism. Krzywiec (2009)

¹⁶ Not consenting for recognizing Dmowski as a racist in the sense of physical anthropology, Ulrich Schrade turned attention to how the Polish nationalist comprehended a nation as a mixture of nature, but he treated the inflow of alien blood as a factor perfecting the nation. Schrade (2004): 88. In the context of this position it is worth reminding Dmowski's following statement: „In society, like in nature, selection takes place which results form a greater or lesser viability of various racial types. Our nation is by no means racially more uniform than others: Slavic elements are mixed with sometimes quite considerable Germanic

Quite frequently declaring the understanding of „descent” as a criterion that does not determine the possibility of being recognized as a Pole,¹⁷ Dmowski did not underrate its importance. He saw „racial community” – which in the opinion of Ulrich Schrade this member of the National League conceived as „a scientifically unverifiable faith and sense of originating from common ancestors”¹⁸ – as a factor of paramount importance for survival of a national community and keeping its unity.¹⁹ On the other hand, Dmowski spoke in a completely opposite manner on „formal” definition of a nation, i.e. treating it from the perspective of „the population of a state in its entire mass”.²⁰

Social anthropology. At the sources of thinking about morality

As stated by Carl Schmitt – every social concept is an anthropological proposition.²¹ Following the thought of that German

ingredients of various origin, from High German to Scandinavian, Finnish in a great number, Lithuanian, Tartar, Mongol, etc.; in the past it was present to a lesser degree and nowadays in a larger quantity arrived the Jewish ingredient”. Dmowski (2008): 32.

¹⁷ It is evidenced, *inter alia*, by the statement from the National Democratic Party’s programme written by Dmowski:

„Those individuals from among Jews, who have adopted Polish culture and without objection unite with our society in its national aspirations, sharing those aspiration even when the restriction of the social role of the Jewish element is at stake – are absolutely considered by the Party to be Poles.” Quoted after Wapiński (1989): 112–113.

¹⁸ Schrade (2004): 87.

¹⁹ R. Dmowski (1917): 229. In that text, Dmowski lists the factors which are decisive for the cohesion of a nation, contribute to „the sense of nationality”. These are: common origin (race), homeland, religion, common type of culture.

²⁰ Dmowski (2008): 41.

²¹ Schmitt (2011): 95.

philosopher of law, it should be found that there is an definite position with respect to the understanding of human nature that could be identified in the nationalism of the Polish thinker, which, after all, culminates in a definitive understanding of national community. In light of this assumption as well as anthropological views explicitly expressed by Dmowski, it seems justified to claim that Dmowski's perception of moral obligations of an individual towards the nation arises from two foundations: anthropological pessimism and the assumption of social human nature.

Dmowski builds his anthropological narration basing on the vision of primitive man. However, he does it differently than Thomas Hobbes or Jean Jacque Rousseau, who illustrated the state of nature from the perspective of individual existence. The position of the founder of the National League is decidedly closer to that of Aristotle. Perceiving man as a being with social nature he sketches a picture of the pre-political situation as an arena of fights wages between tribal communities.²² Expressing this conviction in the text published in „Polityka narodowa” he wrote the following: „human society is as ancient as man himself”.²³ The importance of the second pillar – anthropological pessimism, is manifested in recognizing man as a being whose nature includes an elements of evil: egoism.²⁴ Dmowski's views concerning human propensity to treat their own interests as superior require more in depth elaboration. The Polish nationalist makes the way in which egoism manifests itself dependent on a number of conditions: level of development of a given society, relations between societies, civilizational factors. Hence,

²² More on this subject see Dmowski (1917).

²³ Dmowski (1938): 3.

²⁴ *Ibidem*: 6.

he differently describes this attitude with respect to the primordial situation treating it in the categories of unreflective „instinct of self-preservation”, and differently in the context of developed societies, when man has made advances on the road of rational thinking, describing it as a threat arising from undisciplined „individualism”.²⁵ Dmowski’s view as regards the possibility of limiting or even eliminating this negative inclination of human nature remains debatable, however. Special controversiality in this respect is caused by his belief in a „strong sense of nationality”,²⁶ thanks to which an individual is to become capable of „disinterested efforts, sacrifice, even giving their life”.²⁷ We do not know whether this „capability” was recognized as something accidental, manifested only in certain situations, or rather a permanent disposition leading to total stifling of egoism.

²⁵ Dmowski presents man as having a torn soul, which should be understood in the context of a struggle between the animal element and the need to behave in accordance with social requirements. Without expounding this issue in greater detail, the ideological leader of Endecja states that at a certain moment human nature undergoes specific transformation. Even if as a result the self-preservation instinct is not totally stifled, to behave in accordance with external pressure becomes a trait arising from „within” man. This state is to prevail until mutual relations between societies are established. A meeting with „others” is considered by Dmowski as a factor undermining the existing ideas of an individual about their own community, in consequence leading to a greater force in opposing it. Thus born individualism, which allows for the development of man, may be, however, utilized in two ways: either providing the society with „new, more sublime ideas and new ties, to tie their members in a whole of an ever higher order”, or becoming a force „loosening or breaking old ties”, which thus „liberates lower instincts and lets primitive egoism loose”. Dmowski (1938).

²⁶ Dmowski (2008): 23.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

Justification of the primacy of a nation

The principles of Dmowski's thinking about ethics should be seen in the above outlaid contexts. The theoretician of Polish nationalism considers to be moral whatever corresponds with social nature of man, and immoral whatever situates itself in opposition towards it, that is a conduct according to the directions of equally natural egoism. It should also be noted that Dmowski recognized exemplification of this negative propensity of human nature also in being guided by class interest identifying materialistic perception of own interest at its roots.²⁸ One should ask, however: Why the Polish nationalist believed than an individual should be guided by the principledness of interests their own nation?

Formulating an answer to this question one could restrict oneself to the laconic formula coined by Dmowski that „patriotism is not a philosophical system which is accepted or rejected by people of equal intellectual and moral standing; it is a moral attitude of an individual towards the society; its recognition is a necessity at a certain level of moral development”.²⁹ On the basis of this argument it is possible to reconstruct more interesting answers to this question; by the way, mutually linked because arising from the same concept of rationality. It is worth quoting them, even if as a result of his experiences acquire during a stay in Japan he later stated that rational justification of patriotism is not sufficient, and the sources of this attitude should be sought in instinct which is independent from will, „stronger than any reasoning”.³⁰

²⁸ Dmowski (2008): 21.

²⁹ Dmowski (2015): 23.

³⁰ Dmowski (2015): 107.

Dmowski encompasses his ethical views in the context of recognizing man as a being whose status is in fundamental dependence with their own society. Man is a debtor; their moral duty should be, therefore, striving to repay the involuntarily incurred debt. Otherwise – failing to be active for the nation – they become „a beggar living thanks to the generosity of his community.”³¹ The fact that in his „National Egoism and Ethics” Balicki raised the same argument should be considered symptomatic.³² On the other hand, one may venture to state that patriotism is a form of non-egoistically conceived own interest. Benefitting from community existence, acting for the community an individual contributed to multiplication of the good of which they themselves are a beneficiary. In this way „self-love, regardless of attachment to the homeland, makes them recognize national duties, work for the homeland, fight for it, give it as much as possible in return from what they take from it”.³³ However, the latter of the above invoked arguments cannot be justified from the perspective of the concept of the nation voiced by Dmowski – as a specific sequence of generations: past, present and those that will come – in the context of which man should act for the community as something that goes beyond their mortality.

An individual and the nation. The nation and the humanity.

Unlike Dmytro Doncow³⁴, a theoretician of Ukrainian nationalism, Dmowski does not praise „amorality”. Instead, he

³¹ *Ibidem*: 22.

³² Balicki (1903).

³³ Dmowski (2015): 16.

³⁴ Doncow (2008): 180.

presents a concept of two ethics: „national” ethics, regulating the political sphere and thus concerning relations between nations, and „Christian” ethics³⁵, which does not go beyond relationships between people as individuals and therefore reconcilable with the former. The possibility of their symbiosis is based on recognizing man as a being with as if two identities which refer to incommensurate areas of activity: „human” and „national”.

National ethics – considered to be superior – is an almost mystical system. Dmowski treats conduct in accordance with the commandments of this „moral spring of human soul”³⁶ as a consequence of instinct which lies dormant in man and remains independent of their will. The pattern of reasoning presented in „Thoughts...” leads to two main conclusions: the nation is an absolute object of reference of morality; relativity of national ethics and thus its having no roots in natural law.

This manner of treating the nation by Dmowski follows from the fact that apart from national existence no morality is possible: with respect to the opportunity for its practicing, and even the possibility for it to arise. Therefore, conduct according to the directives of national ethics – preventing destruction of „this dearest legacy of the past” – is a precondition for man's progress in all spheres of existence. In other words, Dmowski's narration allows one to state that man faces the following dilemma: either to obey the principles of national ethics or allow for a decay of social ties and return to the state of nature in which *homo homini lupus est*.³⁷ The relativistic character of his concept is evidence

³⁵ Dmowski (2015): 105.

³⁶ *Ibidem*: 106.

³⁷ *Ibidem*: 108.

by the treatment of nations as separate moral unions, each of which has its own national ethics, "national conscience". What would, therefore, be a guarantee of ethical behaviour of an individual?

The co-founder of endecja does not resolve this issue, although he seems to assign this role to civilizational progress and moral „moulding” of an individual as a result of social pressure, especially under the impact of customs.³⁸ Dmowski's views on this issue could be also described as based on faith in „common sense”. Somewhat against his earlier views, he expressed confidence in the „critical ability of human brain”, which should not be weakened even by „attachment to the nation”. Without expounding on this thought any further, he directly indicated morally unacceptable attitudes. Suffice it to mention indignation expressed by Dmowski as regards teachers persecuting students because of their nationality.³⁹ It does not change the that the theoretician of Polish nationalism does not try to work out a natural law substantiation for his views. In the context of this observation it is worth noting that with his consideration of „humanity” as a supranational subject of moral obligations he inscribes himself in conservative criticism of this notion. He treats it similarly to e.g. earlier mentioned Schmitt, calling it a „fiction” with „ungraspable rights and interests”.⁴⁰ However, the statement that „humanity” is alien to the horizon of the concepts outlined by the Polish national is untrue. In his discourse, it brings to mind the understanding of this notion by Henryk Elzenberg – as constituted by the division into autonomous nations the value of which is appraised

³⁸ *Ibidem*: 105.

³⁹ *Ibidem*: 94–95.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*: 81.

by the pressure they exert on it.⁴¹ For this reason, Dmowski perceives the antagonistic character of international relations in the dimension of a condition for the possibility of progress of humankind.⁴²

Evolution of the view on religion

Dmowski's earlier outlined understanding of „Christian” and „national” ethics renders the essence of his view on interdependence between those two moral systems in the „early” period of his writing. The view of the author of the incorporative concept could be also rendered in the context of Jan Jakub Popławski's statement, which was invoked in „Christian nationalism” with respect to endecja's thinking about religion before Poland regained independence. This statement reads as follows: „Catholicism is only one of the values of our national character and the defence of the interests of the Catholic Church is merely one of many tasks of national policy only insofar as the Church is Polish”.⁴³ The national democrats' formula of understanding of the Church was, therefore, reduced to treating it as one of national institutions. Therefore, what did change in Dmowski's perception of Catholicism?

One should be aware that the theoretician of nationalism only „a year before death succumbed to the authority of the Church and returned to religious practices”.⁴⁴ Therefore, we deduce that in „The Church, Nation and State” – a book published twelve years before his death – he saw

⁴¹ *Ibidem*: 97.

⁴² *Ibidem*: 83.

⁴³ Quoted after Grott (2006): 14.

⁴⁴ Chrzanowski, Konopczyński (2004): 36.

the matters of religion with the eyes of an agnostic. With a view to the above, one cannot agree with Roman Wapiński, who wrote about Dmowski that „being a nationalist he was first a Pole and only then a Catholic”.⁴⁵ It should be stated that, like Charles Maurras, he was „an atheist Catholic”, although unlike the Frenchman he did not challenge Church dogmas.⁴⁶

A change of narration of the author of „The Church, Nation and State” about Catholicism was manifested especially in two assumptions. The first is recognition of religion as the most important factor of the emergence of nations: „today’s nations would not exist without what was done by in history Christianity and the Roman Church”.⁴⁷ The other was the discernment of the social function of religion, which is at the same time a source and a guarantor of social ethics: „The deed of the Church was the rearing of an individual human soul supported by one’s own conscience, and hence entertaining the sense of duty and personal responsibility”.⁴⁸ Dmowski directly stated that the growth of anti-national attitudes resulted from a decline of morality, which in turn was a result of the crisis of religion. The change in his perception of Christianity should be read in light of those assumptions, which from the religion generating exclusively the individual type of ethics began to be conceived from the viewpoint of the need of involvement of the Church in social life in order to fill it with the principles of faith. This evolution also embraced his view of the state, which chief function was henceforth reduced to being instrumental for „the progress

⁴⁵ Wapiński (1989): 114.

⁴⁶ Maj (1998): 69.

⁴⁷ Dmowski (2013): 17.

⁴⁸ Ibidem: 17.

of religious life in the country".⁴⁹ Undoubtedly, also Dmowski's attitude towards Freemasonry should be treated as a factor affecting the change of thinking about religion. He saw that organisation as a force striving both at overthrowing the Church as well as destroying nation states.⁵⁰

Conclusion

In light of the analysis carried out in this study, Dmowski's ethical reflection appears as a specific whole in which anthropological issues intertwine with through on international relations or relations between an individual and community. What is particularly important – its *credo* has not changed. The evolution of Dmowski's world outlook did not embrace the assumption manifested throughout the period of his writing – treating national interests as supreme. This is not undermined even by the thoughts presented in „The Church, Nation and State”. The assessment of religion carried out therein was determined by its usefulness for the emergence and existence of the nation.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*: 27.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*: 14.

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