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P. Czarnecki, *Etyka*, Warszawa 2006, 166 s.

The book by Pawel Czarnecki, a young and very creative philosopher, consists of four chapters: *Etyka- definicja, historia* (“Ethics-definition, history”), *Etyka współczesna* (“Contemporary Ethics”), *Współczesne dylematy etyki* (“Dilemmas of Ethics Today”) and *Etyka w Polsce w okresie transformacji ustrojowej* (“Ethics in Poland during the Political Transformations”), together with an excursus entitled *Etyka chrześcijańska w „nowej Europie”* (“Christian Ethics in the ‘New Europe’”). Although the author says in the introduction that the book is only meant to be an aid to philosophical studies, even a cursory reading creates the impression that this is not just an academic textbook for specialists, but also a concise and readable presentation of ethics as the science of morality for the layman. Ethics is sometimes perceived as an academic discipline isolated from the problems of daily life, and of little use to the average person. This can partly be blamed on ethicists themselves, for whom highly abstract issues on the subject of various ethical systems are often more important than genuine ethical problems which, after all, define the sense of these systems. In any case, it is difficult not to agree with the statement whereby the real – if one may say so – reason for ethical pronouncements are the real problems and conflicts which everyone encounters in his actions. Since the beginnings of civilisation, European philosophers have tried to find universal ways of resolving these conflicts, at the same time rejecting all the decisions reached by philosophers previously. Apparently, criticism is a feature of European culture thanks to which European culture dominates other cultures in a certain sense and aspires to become a universal culture. However, certainly components of this culture, including philosophy, cannot boil down to a mere criticism of the things that have been said in the past. For this reason, any book that does not surrender to this fashionable trend towards abstraction and towards a reluctance to express concrete substance merits recognition, and such a book is *Etyka* by Pawel Czarnecki. Whether this book examines the history of ethical systems or modern ethical issues, what it says is always addressed to a specific recipient who is reading it from the angle of a concrete situation. In individual chapters one senses the presence of a philosopher who is conveying a specific message, as well as the presence of a reader whom the author regards as a partner in a kind of dialogue which contains references and symbols that are not expressed outright, but are nevertheless clear and understandable to both participants in the dialogue. Obviously, this book does not cease to be a handbook on ethics. It contains everything that every good handbook on ethics should contain: a chapter devoted to a definition of ethics, a section devoted to the history of ethical systems, and a section dealing with more detailed problems (whereby even here the choice of topic is rather “classical”). However, despite all these absolutely classical or even tailor-made features (“tailor-made” should be interpreted in a positive sense as an expression of recognition for the book’s transparency), the reader cannot avoid the impression that this is a book about ethics which Europe needs very much today. Both the Author and – which seems obvious from his point of view – the potential reader are aware of a profound crisis in Europe today, though it probably does not exist everywhere and in every dimension, especially in the moral dimension. However, this awareness is accompanied by another awareness of fundamental importance for overcoming this crisis: If this morality is indeed meant to be morality, and not just a mere knowledge of what should really be done at a time when things are being done differently, and if ethics is meant to help overcome the present crisis, then it must be a living ethics which grows, to put it in literary terms, out of life itself, and not out of the works of the great philosophers of the past. An understanding of the need to revive ethics or even “start it from scratch” (as we know from the history of philosophy, an awareness that philosophy has to be started from scratch has always brought interesting results) seems to be a benefit that cannot be overestimated and which a reading of *Etyka* provides. When reading any textbook devoted to

philosophical issues, it is justifiable to ask to what extent the author has succeeded in achieving the fundamental objective of any decent textbook, in other words introduce the reader to the canon of a given discipline, and to what extent, when aiming towards this objective, the author has included his own thoughts and ideas with which hardly anyone could agree without reservations. I do not mean the presence of these subjective assessments themselves, but whether they were included in the text in an intelligent manner and whether the reader has been properly informed that they are not views that are shared universally (the question whether such views exist at all is a separate matter). Probably not many philosophers would agree that theories about the lost civilisation of Atlantis are one of the basic canons of philosophical knowledge, and yet thoughts of this kind are to be found in one Polish handbook on philosophy. *Etyka* contains no intellectually risky interpretation, and in view of what I have said above, it would be disturbing to say the least if it did contain them. The book has been written in a concise manner, but this conciseness is the result of a rejection of everything that is not absolutely needed in a handbook on ethics. Considering the fact that the book basically contains everything that the average philosophy student should know about ethics (provided of course he knows its entire contents, otherwise his knowledge will be incomplete), one can even say that the contents could not possibly have been presented in a more concise way, otherwise they would have been distorted.

One might also conclude that this book had to include everything that can be found in any other good handbook on ethics, but such a conclusion seems too hasty. Ultimately, even when one describes the best known and most influential systems of philosophy, one cannot completely avoid expressing one's own convictions and opinions on these systems. Therefore the author does not attempt the impossible, and although the choice of material and the way in which it is presented bears the hallmarks of academic genius, the text clearly displays a purely "philosophical" dimension in which the author ceases to be a philosophy teacher explaining the views of other philosophers to the reader, but himself becomes a philosopher who submits other people's views to his own assessment.

But does the presence of this somewhat subjective dimension from the author reduce the book's value? When one has read it, one has no doubt that the answer is no. But it is much harder to determine why this is so. In this book we encounter several kinds of opinions for which the authors themselves claim responsibility. These opinions mainly concern the tasks, sense and purpose of indulging in ethics as a reflection on morality (in contrast to ethics as a history of deliberations on morality). Last but not least, these are deliberations on the subject of mankind's condition as a whole, whereby it is worth emphasising that the Author discusses man in the most abstract manner, as a certain search for the meaning of man's existence in an attempt to define his identity, just as easily as he discusses man's existence in an infinite series of prosaic, specific situations which create an unending series of problems which may also seem banal and prosaic. A perception of man in these prosaic situations who does not become prosaic at all as a result of this „prosaic existence" is an art in itself, and it is even greater art to convey this fresh perception of man (which should perhaps be regarded as a distinct moral value - this does not seem quite unjustifiable) to the reader. The Author of *Etyka* has mastered this art. Coming back to the question whether the Author's assessments are a fault or an advantage in this book, one may say that the final verdict depends on the expectations of this book expressed by the reader. Someone who is only looking for historical facts will of course find the same things he might find in other philosophical dictionaries and encyclopaedias. In fact, for a person who is looking for dry information, the best solution is to consult a dictionary. *Etyka* is addressed to a reader who, apart from wishing to learn about purely technical matters such as the conceptual apparatus or the history of ethics, also wishes to discover the sense of indulging in ethics. Therefore a handbook on ethics which, apart from providing a knowledge of historical facts and an understanding of basic terminology, also teaches the reader what ethics is and why it makes sense to study it cannot fail to contain this "subjectivist" dimension thanks to which information about facts ceases to be merely an end but becomes a means to an end. In any case, the author's commentary in *Etyka* is clearly separate from the main body of the text describing various views on the subject of ethical problems, and not even the most insensitive reader need fear that he will be led astray. *Etyka* is without a doubt an original work. But this is not the kind of originality we have in mind when we talk about, for instance, original ideas or achievements. Rather, this originality is a certain kind of uniqueness, and it is not due to the way in which the book has been written, but in the

way in which it perceives and discusses ethical issues. Just as there are different styles of writing a novel or playing an instrument, some of which appear more universal and easy to emulate while others are impossible to emulate, so too there are different styles of indulging in ethics. The style which we encounter in *Etyka* is not actually inherent in the book itself because many ethicists can write books in which the contents and form of expression are similar. Instead, the style is inherent in a specific understanding of the essence and importance of ethical problems. This style is just as difficult to describe as literary or artistic styles – in order to acquaint oneself with and properly assess this style, one must see it with one's own eyes, in other words one must simply read the book. The one thing we can say for certain is what this style is not. It is certainly not a manifestation of that frequently encountered brand of mental philosophy in which philosophical problems are viewed through the prism of a text. This mentality is born out of the conviction that philosophy is, just like every science, a certain set of opinions, whereas the opinion themselves are nothing more than the classic canon of philosophical texts. But when reading *Etyka* one obtains a converse impression – it is not technical problems that exist through the prism of the texts devoted to them, but it is the texts themselves that exist through the prism of genuine problems.

Not all handbooks on ethics are worth reading – some of them should certainly never have been printed. Of those that deserve to be read, some deserve this more than others. Finally there are some books that set a certain model and standard for a textbook and become a kind of didactic masterpiece. One can say without exaggeration that *Etyka* is such a model handbook. It not only brings ethical problems home to the reader, but also discloses the sense of indulging in ethics, both in the past and in the present, at a time of profound crisis that Poland is experiencing. After reading *Etyka*, ethics ceases to look like an abstract set of thoughts about problems which would never have materialised in real life if they had not been dreamed up by philosophers. To the author, real problems of the real world turn out to be more important than historical attempts to resolve them, and thanks to this ethical sensitivity these problems and their attendant philosophical difficulties also become important to those who are only just starting out on their adventures with philosophy.