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Responsibility

Summary

DEFINITION OF THE TERM: It is a difficult task to define the term “responsibility”. It can be understood as a moral value or as a legal principle, and both concepts can result in different understandings of the term. The issue of responsibility is topical in relation to contemporary civilizational problems.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TERM: The article discusses the historical and cultural context in which moral responsibility became an ethical concept of primary importance. It is argued that rejecting or not taking moral responsibility has harmful social consequences.

DISCUSSION OF THE TERM: The issue of responsibility is discussed from axiological, legal, and moral perspectives. Various ways of understanding this term are presented that are based on the concepts of Polish and German philosophers who have studied the ethics of responsibility.

SYSTEMATIC REFLECTION WITH CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: The article discusses the links between philosophical reflections on responsibility and Catholic Social Teaching, including the teachings of Benedict XVI and Francis I. These papal teachings address the following contemporary philosophical concepts of responsibility: 1) the sources of moral responsibility; 2) the difference between legal and moral responsibility; 3) the historical and civilizational challenges that have led to changes in understandings of the concept of responsibility. Pope Benedict XVI’s logic of gift and

Francis I's integral ecology are both extensions of the philosophical concept of responsibility.

Keywords: moral responsibility, legal responsibility, the logic of gift, integral ecology, Ingarden, Jonas, Picht, Benedict XVI, Francis I

Definition of the term

Placing moral responsibility at the heart of modern political ethics is evidence of an awareness of the threats to civilisation that currently exist. The optimism that resulted from scientific progress – as was characteristic of the culture of the 19th and early 20th centuries – has all but disappeared. Today, we are trying to balance the benefits of this progress with the threats that result from the technicisation of social life and the possibilities offered by science of interfering with nature, the human body, and the mind. The steadily growing world population (especially in countries with medium or low per capita income), the income disparities between rich and poor countries, the predatory exploitation of natural resources, the indebtedness of poor countries, the overpopulation of certain regions, hunger, economic migration – all these factors make the issue of the responsibility of individuals, companies, banks, institutions, states, and multinational corporations a fundamental one.

It is difficult to define responsibility as a concept. It can be understood as a value or as a principle of behaviour that is built on this value. Based on this value, we determine which behaviours deserve praise and which should be reprimanded, which are socially or legally acceptable, and which are viewed as appropriate or inappropriate behaviours. The value of responsibility determines the extent and nature of the moral obligation attached to it and provides the basis for legal responsibility, but these two aspects are not identical. Moral responsibility has a broader scope and – compared to legal responsibility – takes greater account of the intentions of the acting person. In axiological terms, moral responsibility complements freedom. When we refer to the rule of law, we focus on the legal context; when we talk about recognition or decency, we are referring to social approval of our behaviour or lifestyle.

The German philosopher Karl Jaspers considered that responsibility is linked to the rationality of moral choice because authentic responsibility arises when the subject consciously and voluntarily assumes a moral obligation. In this sense, the freedom of the individual is not so much about overcoming coercion and external constraints but is more about overcoming one's own tendencies to base one's activities on self-will and rebellion against the rules of social life. In fact, freedom that is based on the postulate of rationality is responsibility because the value of responsibility

determines the proper meaning of freedom (Jaspers, 1990, pp. 189–190). This leads one to the concept of freedom “to”, which is understood as voluntarily taking responsibility for the potential and actual consequences of our choices. The principles on which the subject bases his behaviour are based on his inner conviction that these principles are valid. The value of responsibility that is interpreted by reason takes the form of a principle (ethical norm) that should be observed in all aspects of life. At present, there is a systematic increase in the number of matters for which we are responsible, including the natural environment, the proper use of modern technology, and social relationships that are excessively reliant on the use of new media. This increase should be accompanied by a greater and deeper awareness of our responsibility for the effects of our decisions, but this is not always the case.

The most important contributions to the reflection on the issue of responsibility were made by the following German, Austrian, and French philosophers: Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann, Martin Buber, Wilhelm Weischedel, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Jaspers, Georg Picht, Hans Jonas, and Emmanuel Levinas. An important contribution to the discussion on the issue of responsibility was also made by the Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden, who was a phenomenologist and student of Edmund Husserl (Filek, 2004, pp. 9–10). Below, we will focus on analysing selected concepts of responsibility and linking them to papal teachings, especially those of Benedict XVI and Francis I.

Historical analysis of the term

The belief in a person’s value and his right to make decisions freely emanates from the Christian tradition of Tertullian, Boethius, and St. Augustine. Ancient Greek philosophy did not consider this issue central to its interests. Christian philosophy saw man as a free being who was incapable of doing good when left to his own devices. Grace was the recipe that enabled man to lead a moral life. Grace was treated as an undeserved gift which was given to man by God, thanks to which new competences for good behaviour were added to our natural moral skills. The appreciation for the life of each human person that was expressed in medieval philosophy took on a new form in modern philosophy. Whereas human life was previously

considered part of the natural world order that was created by God, in modern thought man was placed at its centre. This is usually seen as the result of changes in the way in which people understood the world and as a breakthrough brought about by Descartes' ideas. Egological orientation led to the rational subject being placed at the centre of the axiological structure of the world. One of the consequences of this shift from medieval philosophy towards *ego cogito* was that greater emphasis was given to the following values: freedom, self-determination, individual fulfilment, autonomy of conscience, and the individual's right to make moral judgements irrespective of the opinion of the authorities. This can be treated as a distant consequence of the evangelical appreciation of individual human life. The tension that exists today between what results from nature and what is a consequence of legal regulations is evident in discussions concerning the difference between civil rights and human rights.

Not every moral decision is good for a person and/or the community in which that person lives. A point of reference is needed in order to realise the demand for self-fulfilment, or for spiritual authenticity. Immanuel Kant linked freedom with reason by introducing the principle of voluntary self-limitation of the will, which requires the ability to make autonomous moral decisions. By recognizing external (biological or social) constraints, the human will would lose its ability to make independent decisions and would become a heteronomous will, i.e. a will that is limited by both sensual desires and the rules of community life. Paradoxically, restrictions that result from "pure practical reason" do not take away the right to self-determination of the will, so they do not destroy human freedom. The autonomous act of an individual must result not from fear of divine or human law, nor from the principle of reciprocity, i.e. the expectation of social reward in the form of others 'giving back' or 'repaying' our acts with acts of a similar nature (for example, honesty for honesty), but from voluntary recognition of the value of an act.

Today, the value of freedom is highly appreciated, which makes it a condition for the realisation of other values. However, freedom is often subject to marketing manipulation, as, for example, when it is interpreted as a justification for the unrestricted consumption of material goods or sensual experiences. Such an understanding of freedom is particularly dangerous when the subject loses his ability to make prudent use of

material goods, becomes dependent on material things, or when his ability to evaluate his capabilities becomes distorted. Then he is governed by *hubris* (excessive pride): he loses the ability to assess a situation adequately and can make irresponsible decisions. Hence, freedom must be linked with responsibility. The conditions for exercising freedom include the subject's conscious action, the real possibility of making choices, knowledge of oneself and of the world, an acknowledgement that we bear the consequences of our choices, and the psychological capacity to take responsibility. Indeed, today's escape from freedom is not an escape from those aspects of freedom that are linked to pleasure; it is an escape from responsibility that is understood as something too heavy for the subject to carry, or an escape from acting in accordance with the rules imposed by institutions. From a psychological perspective, responsibility appears to be oppressive. However, this is not a proper understanding of responsibility.

Discussion of the term

The Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden described four situations in which responsibility is revealed:

1. A person bears responsibility for something, or, in other words, is responsible for something.
2. A person assumes responsibility for something.
3. A person is held to be responsible for something.
4. A person acts responsibly" (Ingarden, 1987, pp. 73–74).

He stressed that although these four situations are different perspectives of the understanding of the four aspects of responsibility, there are certain links between them. They all relate to the subject and show a human being in a relationship of responsibility towards other subjects or towards the good that is entrusted to them. Essentially, responsibility is about actively taking on a commitment that affects people's choices and behaviour. It is a possibility rather than a necessity because the subject may choose not to take on the responsibility, or he may evade it even though (by virtue of his role or job) it is somehow inscribed in his activities. Ingarden listed four assumptions related to personal responsibility:

1. anthropological – a person is a conscious perpetrator of his actions; he is a personal being; he himself has decided what he can accomplish;
2. axiological – objective values exist; a person is able to identify these values; they are a reference point for human choices;
3. temporal-spatial existence of the world – human actions are inscribed in causal relationships; an act for which the perpetrator is responsible is his act, it is performed in the real world, and it has specific consequences;
4. subjective freedom – man is the autonomous perpetrator of his acts; we talk of responsibility when we consider a subject's voluntary act but not when we consider an act enforced by others or an act that is biologically determined (Ingarden, 1987, pp. 86–128).

The postulate of responsibility is a universal requirement, but it is usually interpreted in a particular way, i.e. as a moral task for a subject or a group of subjects. These two perspectives, general and particular, are sometimes difficult to reconcile. The scope of responsibility that a subject recognizes may be different from that which results from historical and culturally defined circumstances.

It is worth considering the premise of responsibility that is understood as a universal task that is to be undertaken. The German philosopher Georg Picht believed that it is necessary to reverse the egological perspective in this understanding of responsibility, i.e. to begin with the object rather than the subject; for example, when a situation is faced courageously, this makes us responsible people. A subject that takes on an obligation is constituted only through the task and the specific responsibility that is contained within it. This task is historical in nature and extends before man to the horizon of a possible future. This is recognised primarily from the perspective of threats to civilisation. Picht believed that the conditions for responsibility could be found in human history because it is in history that responsibility is revealed in the area of collective consciousness (Picht, 1981, pp. 238, 255–258). This, however, entails a certain excess of responsibility related to what an individual subject can take on at a given time. There are situations in which someone should be responsible but no one (either individuals or institutions) is willing to take on the task (e.g. hunger or various forms of violence in the world, issues related to wars and economic exploitation). This is not a matter of individuals avoiding responsibility for fear of possible consequences; it is a matter of not promoting social awareness of responsible behaviour in relation to areas of social

life that go beyond our perception of which matters are important and worthwhile. It refers to institutions, organisations, and businesses to a greater extent than to individuals, but it is individuals who make decisions in organisations.

In this context, we should talk about the lack of an educational or cultural model that would encourage organisations' employees to adopt responsible attitudes and help them to develop specific character traits, such as the virtue of responsibility. At a given historical moment, the lack of people who embody these character traits (especially the owners of large companies and the heads of corporations) is assessed by Picht in terms of collective moral guilt with consequences that effect everyone (Filek, 2003, pp. 209–211). However, it is difficult to consider the issue of not taking responsibility in terms of a new interpretation of the consequences of original sin. First, responsibility requires a change of attitude: from those behaviours in which responsibility is “broken up” into fragments that concern us, to thinking more in terms of the broad horizon of universal responsibility, in which the essence of humanity is combined with responsibility. Second, it is about changing the way in which institutions are perceived: they should consider their decisions not only in economic and legal but also in moral terms.

According to another German philosopher, the theoretician of responsibility, Hans Jonas, a distinction should be made between natural responsibility, i.e. parental or familial (sister-brother) responsibility, and contractual (formal) responsibility. Natural responsibility is narrow in scope, although we sometimes use the rhetoric of natural responsibility to explain an individual's personal and emotional involvement in a given case. Contractual responsibility is “established” when a person is assigned a task that has been imposed on him through a contract which he accepts. This undertaking of responsibility has been achieved by way of authority and has legal consequences. If a person damages something or refuses to act, he is punished with a fine or prison sentence, and sometimes an obligation to compensate the victim. The enforcement of a penalty presupposes the existence of appropriate institutions (courts), although their functioning is not perfect (Jonas, 1996, pp.180–185).

Jonas linked the concept of contractual responsibility with that of “causative power”, i.e. a person's ability to influence a given situation. A subject who is in the orbit of events will not always influence their

course, or his influence may depend on his social or professional role. The formula of causative power is based on the assumption that through our actions we have an influence on our environment and the lives of other people. A lack of conviction in this premise leads to social inactivity. A person's actions are subject to the control of other people and institutions. To some extent, the effects of our actions can also be predicted, or at least we should consider the possible consequences of any action we do take (Jonas, pp. 167–168). The term “causative power” suggests that responsibility depends on the subject's real power and his technical and institutional capabilities. Decision-makers who are responsible for running companies and state and church institutions should be bound by the “the greater the power, the greater the responsibility” principle. This principle often goes unheeded because decision-makers are not aware of this responsibility or ignore it.

The traditional understanding of responsibility is based on the legal premise of the consequences of an act and holding the subject accountable for these consequences. In this legal understanding, we are responsible not for the intentions behind an act but for its results. The intentions of the perpetrator are taken into account insofar as they have influenced the act itself. This includes determining the degree of guilt of the perpetrator of an offence, which is dependent on his intentions when committing the act. Furthermore, you cannot be responsible for something that has not yet happened. In the case of the aforementioned threats to civilisation, a legal understanding of responsibility is inadequate, and according to Jonas and Picht it should be expanded to include the context of moral responsibility. Moral responsibility assumes the responsibility of the subject even when he is not formally forced to assume responsibility. In this context, the voluntary nature of moral obligation is clearly visible. Linking moral responsibility with the conscience (informed consent) brings it closer to the concept of natural responsibility. Amongst other things, we associate this understanding of responsibility with concern for the long-term effects of our actions, as is the case of parents and children, or teachers and pupils, for example.

It has been proposed to extend the scope of responsibility to cover areas that were not previously included in the premise of moral obligation, such as environmental protection and responsibility for future generations, but the predatory exploitation of raw materials could effectively

make this impossible. Jonas proposed replacing the “after deed” model of responsibility with the “before deed” model. Instead of *post factum* responsibility, he proposed preventive responsibility, which takes into account the future consequences of appropriate actions in order to eliminate behaviours that are associated with possible risks (Jonas, 1996, pp. 171–173). Analysis of the consequences of the concept of “causative power” indicates that there are significant limitations in the concept of the responsibility of a particular person for the consequences of his actions. Predicting the long-term effects of behaviour is difficult. Even though employees leave companies or move to new positions, and members of supervisory boards and company presidents are replaced by others, the scope of responsibility held by an organisation should not change. Thus, the concept of the responsible organisation, in which the entity that is to be held responsible is the company or institution, is the focus for emphasis. In this respect, although, for example, a decision-maker might have been replaced, the company still bears responsibility for the consequences of his actions.

Limitations in responsibility (understood as responsibility held by a subject) can result in a narrow or fragmented scope of responsibility, as can be seen in different scopes of responsibility when applied to “relatives” and “strangers, for example. The scope of obligation towards relatives seems to be broader (it falls within the scope of natural responsibility) than that of strangers, which is based more on the concept of contractual responsibility. These approaches to understanding responsibility, however, seem to contradict our understanding of the virtues of solidarity and social justice. The attitude of responsibility presupposes that those who are more financially literate will be interested in the fate of those who, based on their natural and learned skills, are less financially literate and thus unable to function successfully in the free market economy. Solidarity and social justice presuppose an active attitude both to noticing when this situation occurs and to acting when we should. This is especially true when we create principles for a social life in which sharing with others does not result from legal coercion (a structural fiscal system where the richer pay more taxes and the poorer pay less) but from a voluntary commitment of the rich towards the poor.

Responsible behaviour is essential for the effective functioning of an organisation. Avoiding responsibility or narrowing its scope results

in a reduced level of trust towards a particular employee and towards the whole institution. Excessively bureaucratic institutions that operate on the basis of complicated procedures will result in their employees holding narrow moral obligations, thus making them officials of a system in which they professionally but ruthlessly perform tasks that are assigned to them. Education regarding the need for responsible behaviour could contribute to improving the functioning of the organisation as a structure that is aware of its responsibility. Individuals play different roles within an organisation, and sometimes changing a given role changes the perception of the nature of their responsibility within the organisation. Individual responsibility concerns specific individuals, while social responsibility concerns companies and institutions.

In the case of complex decision-making procedures and complex institutional structures, it is important to mention corporate social responsibility. This postulate combines elements of individual responsibility with the requirements of preventive responsibility, and it links three important aspects: ecological (sustainable development), social (combating social exclusion), and ethical (companies that take on moral obligations) responsibility. The principle of responsibility is part of the logic of inclusion, i.e. broadening the scope of responsibility to include more groups of excluded persons and broadening the scope of matters for which they should be responsible. It is this activity of an organisation that goes beyond economic factors and takes into account social (unemployment, social exclusion of the disabled) and environmental (shaping ecological sensitivity) aspects of responsibility.

Placing the principle of responsibility at the centre of ethical thinking should enable a person to cope with difficult situations successfully, for example through understanding the consequences of his actions or developing a sensitive conscience and a sense of responsibility. Responsibility concerns both what we have done and what we have not done. This non-action may result from not fulfilling our duties, or it may be an expression of moral indifference to a situation in which we have the ability to help the needy, but this is not included in our "duty package". One can remain indifferent to various forms of institutional violence that one unwittingly witnesses, and one can choose not to see certain things for the sake of protecting one's narrow responsibilities. Similarly, not taking responsibility includes situations in which we decide

not to react when we see someone who intends to drive under the influence of alcohol, or we are indifferent to the fact that our neighbour burns rubbish and pollutes the air in the neighbourhood. Failure to act in these cases should be seen as an evasion of responsibility. Both moral responsibility and legal responsibility presuppose thinking in terms of the common good. One cannot exempt oneself from the need to react to inappropriate behaviour or to malpractice in institutions. The realization of responsibility requires a civic attitude which consists in taking on commitments that are right but often do not result in social recognition.

Developing a responsible attitude and a sensitive conscience is an important need of our times. The areas for which we are expected to be responsible are constantly increasing. This is why applied ethics, especially social (political) ethics, points to the need to shape character skills and habits that could be described as moral competences related to new areas of activity. These skills, with a particular focus on responsibility, should complement professional skills and sensitivity to the needs of other people. They should also complement social competences such as community building, communicative skills, media skills, and IT skills. Human activities are not axiologically neutral because they are embedded in particular values, e.g., a focus on maximising profit, affirmation of life, professional success, or acting for the common good. Contemporary communities take on different forms: from traditional ones (family, local environment, Church) to internet communities. Now it is necessary to link these values with responsibility for the quality of life of the people who make up these communities.

Systematic reflection with conclusions and recommendations

Responsibility in Catholic Social Teaching and papal teachings

The following terms within Catholic Social Teaching address the value of responsibility in the context of human moral attitudes towards threats to civilisation and concern for culture: person, society, freedom, awareness,

law, justice, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the state. Responsibility is a value that is embedded in each of these. The Austrian researcher Alfred Klose believed that the gradual democratisation of all areas of social life requires considering human actions in relation to their possible consequences. In difficult situations, it is expected that a person will broaden his intellectual and professional competences and will deepen his knowledge regarding decision making and conscious or informed responsibility (Klose 1985, p. 173). These expectations apply to individuals and to institutions that participate in decision-making and implementing tasks that concern social and economic life. The point of reference for our decisions is how a person perceives his possibilities, where he has real influence, how he understands his life tasks, how he perceives his social roles, and how he understands his moral obligations in the context of these roles. Being a member of the Church involves undertaking responsibility for oneself, one's family (bringing up one's children), one's surroundings, and the natural environment, as well as engaging in the life of the local community and the state. When writing about political ethics from the point of view of Catholic Social Teaching, Bernhard Sutor linked responsibility to the virtue of prudence. The virtue of prudence is associated with the ability to predict the consequences and possible side effects of one's behaviour. The acting person should check whether he is able to be responsible for the effects of his work, and he should take on this responsibility courageously (Sutor, 1994, pp. 96–97, 175).

Responsibility and the postulate for responsible behaviour play an important role in papal teaching. In *Caritas in veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI linked responsibility to the logic of gift. He argued that the economic sphere is not morally neutral, inhuman, or anti-social by nature. It is possible and desirable that the rich help the poor and bear the greater fiscal burden. A gift means going beyond merit. The principle behind gift-giving is not to have an excess of things but to share them, which is the relationship of love. Nothing should stand in the way of applying the theological logic of gift to an economic reality. Benedict XVI postulated that values such as friendship, solidarity, reciprocity, selflessness, and responsibility for others are taken into account in all economic activity (Benedict XVI, 2009, pp. 62–68). Christian hope stems from the fact that reason is courageous and from the belief that it is possible to improve

the political and economic reality by introducing morality into it. Without certain forms of solidarity, mutual trust and responsibility, the market cannot fulfil its proper functions. In its social context, the logic of gift translates into the logic of inclusion, i.e. the inclusion of those who are poor in various forms of professional activity, or the responsibility of a company for the inhabitants of the local area in which it operates. Ultimately, the aim is to create a specific and profound form of economic democracy. "Solidarity is first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone" (Benedict XVI, 2009, p. 70).

An attitude of responsibility can be developed in the context of civil society and selfless behaviour, which includes sharing one's wealth without expecting reciprocity. While the formula of civil society is something both understandable and readily assimilated, selfless actions seem rare, especially in a profit-oriented economy. Understanding life and work duties and responsibilities in terms of moral responsibility takes us back to a broader ethical and anthropological context. This also applies to the postulate to care for the environment.

Human beings interpret and shape the natural environment through culture, which in turn is given direction by the responsible use of freedom, in accordance with the dictates of the moral law (Benedict XVI, 2009, p. 96).

Responsibility is global in nature and concerns not only care for natural resources but for all creation. It leads to a postulate to stop the thoughtless process of exploiting natural resources in order to be able to pass them on to future generations. The introduction and popularisation of new lifestyles which promote a move away from consumerism towards savings and sensible investment is the sign of the times.

The issue of responsibility for the natural environment is particularly important for Pope Francis I. In the encyclical *Laudato si'*, he points to civilizational threats such as water pollution, global warming, loss of biodiversity, and, with regard to social life, the systematic deterioration of the quality of life of a huge number of people, and the global injustice that results from these factors. The responsibility that Francis I advocated involves a shift of the civilizational vector and a specific change of the economic and cultural paradigm:

to replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, an asceticism which entails learning to give, and not simply to give up (Francis I, *Laudato si'*, 2015, p. 10).

This may seem easy, but it is actually extremely difficult because the attitude of sharing with others (not out of an excess of goods or out of compassion but out of reason) goes beyond the set of tasks that we are used to and even becomes heroic.

Modern man has the technological ability to influence the world and to thrive in a market economy, but the increase in his abilities has not yet been accompanied by his moral development through a deeper awareness of responsibility and the formation of a sensitive conscience. "Instead, our 'dominion' over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship" (Francis I, *Laudato si'*, 2015, p. 103). This would make us participants in God's responsible creative action in the world. When we talk of the natural environment, we point to a special kind of relationship that takes place between nature, man, technology, and the economy. According to Francis I, responsibility follows from an understanding of the connection between these aspects. From this stems the postulate of integral ecology, which assumes that scientists, businessmen, and ecologists look for integral solutions that take into account the interactions within natural systems themselves and the interactions between natural systems and social and technological systems (Francis I, *Laudato si'*, 2015, p. 123). This leads to the creation of models of development in which care for the environment is associated with care for man and his well-being – especially for those who are "losers" in the civilizational conflict and in market competition for the fair distribution of wealth.

Conclusions and recommendations

In order to broaden our knowledge regarding the issue of responsibility, it is worthwhile familiarising oneself with the relevant concepts in the field of philosophy and the ethics of responsibility (see the References section). The thread concerning responsibility appears in encyclicals and other official papal documents written by John Paul II (e.g., *Laborem*

exercens, Sollicitudo rei socialis, Centesimus annus), Benedict XVI, and Francis I (see the References section). The issues discussed in the encyclicals concern the moral attitude of decision-makers (politicians or managers working in large companies) and their responsible actions with regard to sustainable economic development and environmental protection, which should cover caring for the poorest and the socially and professionally excluded. Governments, associations, and business corporations are expected to propose solutions that will include the poor and those with special needs within the rhythm of social and professional life. In accordance with the intentions of papal teachings, the postulate of sensitivity to the value of human life is associated with a responsibility to protect natural resources for the sake of future generations.

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