Janusz Sidorek

Collegium of Socio-Economics
SGH Warsaw School of Economics
e-mail address: janusz.sidorek@sgh.waw.pl

ON IDENTITY

Abstract

The structure of identity forms the main point of discussion in this essay. The initial question 'Who am I?' is divided into fragmentary questions: 'Who have I become?' and 'Who am I going to be?', which are later contrasted with similar questions: 'Who are we?' and 'Who are we all?'. The analysis of relations between these questions and their sensible answers, reveals a prescriptive factor which is explained by appealing to some particular understanding of the word 'good', manifesting in such feelings as pride, shame and sense of guilt. It leads to a fragmentary definition: our identity consists of everything we are proud or ashamed of. There are some limitations of our freedom in the ruling of identity in that meaning, however, and they are described further in this essay.

Keywords: identity, value, pride, shame

JEL Classification Code: Z1

A philosopher has been asked by sociologists to cooperate with them.[1] Here are his remarks. The philosopher is well aware that not all of his dilemmas can be understood by representatives of the related, though separate, discipline. Yet, on the

---

[1] The text written within the framework of statutory research 'Cultural identities in Europe – continuity and change' no. KES/S/01/14 under the management of Warsaw School of Economics Professor Elżbieta Firlit, PhD.

other hand, the philosopher wants to believe that their very invitation may express their own need to reflect on certain fundamental categories which they make use of in their everyday practice. Not that he would believe them to act without reflection, that he would believe only a philosopher could instruct them in some allegedly deeper sense of their activity. The philosopher would be most reluctant to make such simplifications. Yet, the philosopher also knows that there are certain scientific status standards which they cannot infringe on with impunity. Hence, what the philosopher proposes is a look from a perspective other than their own, namely, from the perspective of consciously adopted naivety. The philosopher can do it and they may also find it helpful even if they may bridle at him.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

A legend has it that in the mid-6th century before Christ when the Greeks were only about to set on the road which was later to take them from myth to logos, seven sages made to Apollo an offering of what they held most valuable: the maxims 'helping people in life'.[2] The maxims cast into the wall of the vestibule of the temple at Delphi made an essential mark on the shape of the Greek culture. Referring to this story in his *Protagoras,* Plato finds two of them worthy of notice: the adage said to have come from Pittacus of Mytilene 'Know thine opportunity' and the call of Chilon of Laconia 'Know thyself'. Plato praises their 'Laconian conciseness' which he calls 'the way of philosophising by the ancients'. Yet, on the other hand, what could have been admired in the ancients was already arousing analytical curiosity in the times of Plato. After all, what does it mean that we come to know 'ourselves', how does gaining this knowledge differ from gaining knowledge of all and any other things and why are we called on to do gain it? One of the most important subjects to be discussed in philosophy was thus initiated, the subject which keeps coming back throughout the philosophical tradition, from its Greek beginnings to the present day. In the essay which follows I will not deal with the plethora of answers given to this question as a venture of this kind, even simplified and cursory, would require an extensive monograph. Instead, I would like to give a bit of attention to the very structure of the question about identity and to consider certain consequences resulting from it.

What seems to be the simplest approach to Chilon's call is to ask oneself a simple question: 'Who am I?'. However, there are at least two different ways to formulate the question, with the understanding of the word 'to be' being crucial. Consequently, to be able to pose the question, one should first, whether consciously or not, make an

---

[2]   Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 10, 24, 1. The author is important as he was most probably the last known writer to have seen the maxims with his own eyes.

essential ontological decision.[3] Without delving into the details, one can adopt here two formulations: 'Who have I become?' and 'Who am I to be?'. The difference between these two formulations can be best seen once one compares the possible answers.

And thus, the answer to the first of the questions is a simple affirmative sentence which can be either true or false. Oedipus is known to have held a false belief as to his own identity which entailed tragic consequences. On the other hand, Konrad Wallenrod, who learns the truth about his origins thanks to the old seer, cannot avoid his tragic fate, either. Conversely, the answer to the second of the questions indicated above, grammatically being an overt or covert imperative, escapes the simple verification criterion. Speaking about somebody who had intended to become a millionaire but finished as a beggar, we would not say that he had made a false choice. At best, we can conclude that he had failed to assess his possibilities in a prudent way. And when we say that life verifies our projects, we use the language in a metaphorical way. The projects can be prudent or imprudent, realistic or detached from reality, but not true or false.

Yet, if we take a closer look at the two questions, we will not fail to note that the difference pointed to – the possibility of qualifying answers as true or false in the first case and its absence in the second – is a consequence of something lying a little deeper, though something which can still be grasped on the purely linguistic plane. Grammatically, both questions are in the present tense, but, logically, the first clearly refers to the past, while the second – to the future. 'Who have I become?' – is first and foremost a question about one's history, about what has already been completed, what I have no longer any, or only limited, influence on. When I ask 'Who am I to be?', I refer to who I will be though I am not yet.[4]

It might seem that this temporal differentiation of the possible question 'Who am I?' leads straight to Karl Popper's contradistinction:[5] who determines his identity by referring to his history, and thus, the past understood in this or that way, lives (or at

---

[3]   Comp. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. J. Macquairrie & E. Robinson, Blackwell, Oxford 2001, pp. 71 and the following.

[4]   At this point it might be worthwhile – contrary to the initial declarations – to draw attention to the fact that awareness of these temporal *modi* first appears in St. Augustine's *Confessions* (compare XI, in particular 27 and the following), when the latter discovers that it is just now, through the way in which I refer to my future, that I simultaneously determine the sense of the past, and thus, the traditional relation between 'Who am I?' and 'Who am I to be?' can be reversed. Later, this awareness becomes fully prominent in Kierkegaard, who describes his 'stages in the road of life' precisely with the way an individual refers to the present, the past and the future as well as the resultant consequences for the individual's identity. Though the stages are totally independent from one another, it is the despair due to the inability to make a self-determination that can motivate the individual to take a 'leap' from one stage to another.

[5]   Compare K.R. Popper, *Open Society and its Enemies,* Routledge, London 1947, vol. I, pp. 151 and the following.

least imagines to live) in a closed society, a society in which everything has already been determined, the rules have been established, and their justification is provided by tradition. On the other hand, who opens to the future, to what is not here yet, but to what is to be, places himself (actually or only aspires to) in an open society. What is important for the former is to persist and hence he treats any changes as a destructive factor, while the latter is a conscious subject of action in which he finds self-determination. The former already is, while the latter is only in the process of becoming.

Yet, this approach would be too far-reaching a simplification. In fact, the two questions are always complementary. Oedipus firmly believes who his father is, while simultaneously he knows (and accidentally he is not wrong in it) that he is a royal offspring who can kill any intruder encountered in a fair fight but who cannot evade an intellectual duel with a monster tyrannising a hospitable city. Similarly, Konrad Wallenrod knows that he is obliged by the principle of family revenge, that he cannot forget about his ancestors. It can thus be said that both of the characters referred to seem to be guided by the formula: 'Because I am such and such, I must act so and so'. Who I have become determines who I am to be. However, there is yet something else that appears between the two elements of the formula, the two ways of understanding the question 'Who am I?'. I am a king's son which means I belong to the group of the king's sons and consequently, I am subject to rules different from those which govern the life of ordinary people. Since I am the king's son, I am to be a hero. I am a Lithuanian, that is, I am one of those for whom the principle of revenge is the highest imperative. Since I am a Lithuanian, I must not be loyal towards my parents' murderers. It can thus be said that in both cases the relation between the answers to the questions 'Who have I become?' and 'Who am I to be?' is mediated through the awareness of who 'we' are, which surpasses individual awareness.

Naturally, we can imagine alternative stories, also in relation to literary characters.[6] We can say that Delphi oracle awe-stricken Oedipus quietly made way to Laius and after his return to Thebes did not want to hear anything about Sphinx, saw Iocasta only from a distance and opened a pottery workshop in which he lived in peace to the end of his days. We can also imagine Konrad who, despite accepting the words of the seer as true, guided by the Christian spirit instilled in him by the Order of Brothers of the Hospital of Saint Mary in Jerusalem, gives up the idea of revenge and becomes an activist working for German-Lithuanian reconciliation. In both cases, the formula 'Since I am this and this, I am to be such and such' would transform itself into 'Despite being this and this, I am to be such and such'.

---

[6]   Unique examples of such an alternative treatment of respectable literary relics can be found in Karel Capek's *Book of apocrypha*.

The reference to 'I' and 'we' still holds, though it now assumes a different form: the affirmation is replaced by negation.

The hitherto considerations lead to a conclusion that I am not able to answer myself the question 'Who am I?', ignoring a similar, though clearly different question, 'Who are we?'. The latter, though grammatically differing from the former only in terms of being plural while the former is singular, has in fact a slightly different structure. This becomes clear when we have a closer look at our alternative stories. Oedipus who had acted differently from the character known from the story of Sophocles would have most probably met with contempt on the part of other kings' sons. Similarly, abandoning the thought of revenge, Konrad could not have counted on his compatriots' respect. And there is no need to imagine that some congress of kings' sons of ancient Greece would have had to take place, at which infamy would have been announced after careful consideration of all the circumstances, a verdict of this kind can (and even must) be passed by anybody who believes himself to be a king's son, that being a judgement made on behalf of 'all of us'. It would, thus, have been also Oedipus himself, provided he had still identified himself with his royal origin. Consequently, it is not the numerical amount of the 'we' that determines the difference. What is more, important is the normative factor involved. 'If I am to be one of these and these, I should become such and such' or the other way round: 'If I have become one of those and those, I should be such and such'.[7] That 'should' actually makes me face certain requirements which I can or cannot cope with, and, if I do succeed, it will be to either a smaller or greater extent. As a consequence, the appearance of the standard opens here a possibility of evaluation: I can be better or worse. While the answer to the first of the questions posed in the singular admitted a possibility of qualification in terms of 'truth – falsehood', then in the case of the answer posed in the plural, the analogon is the distinction between 'good and bad'. While the difference between the truth and falsehood is absolute in character (a half-truth is falsehood), then the difference between good and bad embraces a broad spectrum of intermediate possibilities: the two notions actually specify the ends of the scale on which we make a distinction between what is better and what is worse.

---

[7]   The difference between these two formulations is fairly significant: in the first case, the starting point is the second of the questions presented at the beginning and the 'we' standards shape the answer to the first, in the second case we have to do with a reverse situation: I begin from the first and through 'we' get to the second. it can also be said that while in the first case we have to do with aspirations, or at least something that rests within our freedom, and thus that what dominates is the future perspective, while in the second, conversely, what is at stake is something that happened to us (though it might have been the effect of our less or more conscious choice) and from which we are not able or do not want to escape; anyway, what is essential here is the reference to the past.

However, we should express ourselves here in a slightly more precise way. As a rule, analytical philosophy distinguishes at least three ways of using the word 'good'.[8] And thus, what is more common in the colloquial language is the use in which we speak of something being a 'good thing', or 'something good' and, consequently, that it is good to have (e.g. knowledge, virtue, property) or that it is good to do (e.g. to live a healthy lifestyle). On the other hand, when we say that something is 'a good something' – that it is, for instance, a good work of art, a good tool or that someone is a good walker – what we have in mind is something else.[9] In general, the point is that something (or someone) is a good representative of their class, that they satisfy the class-defining standards. The difference between these two ways of using the word 'good' can be grasped already on the syntactic level: in the first case, the word appears in the position of the predicate, while in the second of an adjunct. That is why we can speak about the 'predicative good', on the one hand, and the 'attributive good', on the other. Obviously, in the colloquial, not very precise speech, we often happen to bend the grammar rules and we say one meaning the other. Yet, the logical difference between these two meanings of the word 'good' is easy to grasp and as a rule the context of the utterance does not leave any doubts in this respect. What should be clearly differentiated from these two meanings of the word 'good' is its moral sense which plays a first-plan role in ethics. The 'good' of this kind refers primarily to people and only secondarily to acts, attitudes, intents, etc., and is not applied outside this area. Philosophers can argue whether this moral meaning of the word is autonomic in character or whether it can be brought down, with the use of more or less refined procedures, to any of the above indicated meanings. What is important is that we have no doubts as to its distinctive character when we use it.

Let us now return to our argument. It is obvious that the 'good' at stake in the case under discussion is the 'good' in the attributive sense, though both meanings can also be heard here. What is the characteristic feature of the thus understood 'good' is its double relativisation: firstly, what is the 'good X' need not necessarily be a 'good Y' (a good pianist need not be a good cook) and, secondly, evaluations are always comparative in character, with a certain average – which can change (a computer assessed as very good today can prove poor tomorrow) – being adopted as a point of reference, It is the first of these relativisations that is important at this point as we must keep in mind that the evaluation that we now have in mind concerns me myself, the individual who, following Chilon's call, asks himself the question 'Who am I?'

---

[8]   A synthetic survey can be found in: W. Galewicz, *Analiza dobra,* Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 1988, pp. 6 and the following. I partly use this work in this essay.

[9]   It may be worthwhile to note that it is this way of using the word 'good' that dominates in Plato's dialogues.

and is immediately made to face the essential question 'What am I worth?'. What can easily be noticed is that the answer to that last question is to a significant extent dependent on the contents of the answer to the question 'Who are we?', When I qualify myself as 'one of such and such', I simultaneously determine the plane on which I am evaluated (or on which I evaluate myself) as better or worse. In other words, the content of the answer to the question 'Who are we?' determines the meaning of the question 'What am I like?'

Again, certain clarifications are necessary. What am I really interested in when I ask the question 'Who are we?', what 'we' are at stake? In everyday life we appear in a countless number of different roles, perform a variety of functions, enter into different interactions with people we know and people we do not know. What we need to have in all these situations are certain skills which we have mastered better or worse, sometimes to perfection and sometimes not at all. Some of them may seem to us to be of importance, others lacking importance, and there are also some the existence of which we are not even aware of. Yet, from the formal point of view, in any situation of this kind we become, whether we want it or not, an element of a certain category, a certain set against which the evaluation measure can be applied. When I cook dinner, I am a cook, when I sit at the wheel, I am a driver, when I meet with my children, I am their father, when I am in front of students, I am a lecturer. Accordingly, I can say: we, – cooks, we – drivers, we – fathers, we – lecturers. This 'we' does not imply any link which could joint me with other cooks, drivers, fathers or lecturers. What is important is only that I have found myself in a group of people (or rather that I have been classified as belonging to such a group) who can be clearly placed on the 'better-worse' scale and that I have been assigned a certain place on this scale. 'We' thus means as much as 'we who are comparable in some respect', 'we who are better or worse in some respect'.

To be better or worse is sometimes important for us – we can then feel pride, when we are 'good', and shame, when we fail. Sometimes, we tend to treat them with a certain degree of disregard. Yet, we feel flattered when we occasionally prove not worse really, and we feel embarrassed when we fail. Sometimes, however, the very attempt at placing us in such a line can seem absurd. Someone who has acquired the habit of always telling the truth can proudly say: 'I cannot lie'. Placed in a line of liars, he will certainly not be 'good' but will take a position among the 'worse'. Yet, he cannot say about himself 'I am a bad liar', neither will this negative assessment make him feel shame. Rather, he will state that he is not a liar at all and does not want to have anything to do with liars. Consequently, he will protest against saying 'we' together with them.

It can hence be said that the question about identity is a question about who we want to be (or are to be) good as. He who is very good at playing the violin can

derive from it the feeling of his own value. He is ready to admit laughingly that he is a poor cook, a very bad walker and cannot swim at all. It does not bother him at all and in his own (and most probably also other people's eyes) it does not lower his self-esteem, precisely because he perceives himself as a violinist, not as a cook, a walker or a swimmer. He is a violin player and he wants to be perceived as such. It is in this field that he experiences his successes and his failures. About a man like him we can say that he lives and breathes his art and can see no world beyond it. We may complain about a variety of practical inconveniences born from this attitude but then we will not hold it against him, we may even admire a choice of this kind.[10]

The above reasoning could make us tend to conclude that when we ask the question 'Who are we?', we have in mind all these 'we' who are important for us for whatever reason or reasons, with whom we are ready to identify ourselves to a greater or lesser extent. This desire to be better rather than worse is often, though not always correctly, called reference to values. Should we accept this position, we can conclude that asking about 'us', we simultaneously ask about the values which we want to share with others. Or – all those completely different others already excluded – the question 'Who are we?' is *de facto* reduced to the question 'What values are important for me and what values am I ready to disregard?'.

The above formulation shows clearly that the 'we' category discussed here, though it can be deemed constitutive for the answer to the question 'Who am I?' does not fully overlap with what we have in mind when we ask 'Who are we?'. It marks a certain assessment plane but cannot itself be a source of any evaluations. In other words, when I use the word 'we' in this way, I can somehow describe my identity ('I am one of these and one of those, etc., in part also one of others, etc., and I don't want to have anything to do with yet others') but I cannot explain to myself why I am to be like this, why this particular and not another affiliation is to be important for me. This remains a completely open question.

And it is no wonder. The 'we' referred to above was conceived as a purely abstract set, an intellectual construct which allows us to rationally use the words 'good' and 'bad' or 'better' and 'worse'. Yet, in our real life we are not surrounded by abstract constructs but by real, alive people with whom we share a variety of relations and links, people with a variety of different beliefs and convictions, people who express judgments and make assessments, who show emotions, etc. For instance, the violinist from the example given above does not play his concert for an abstract set of violinists but for a specific audience who will either applaud his mastery or criticise his

---

[10] Obviously, within certain limits to be discussed below. What happens when they are exceeded is a subject to be considered separately.

imperfections with distaste. The latter can also take place when our artist – instead of the imperfections – is a much better musician than the people listening to him. Anybody can come and listen to a concert but from the player on the stage we expect virtuosity. We expect our violinist to prove to be a good player.

The formulation 'we expect' refers us to a completely different understanding of the word 'we'. In our example it will mean 'we – the audience gathered in the concert hall'. Everyone of us can define our identity in a slightly different way, it can even happen that apart from the desire to listen to good music in good performance there is nothing else that joins us and there is no plane on which we could be better or worse among us. And even if there was or were such planes, we need not know about them, it is of no importance for us. We can, however, use the first person plural because we expect something together. Apart from the accidental circumstance of having gathered in one place and at one time, what joins us is, therefore, recognition of a certain standard which, however, – in this case – we do not want to apply to us at all. We are not compared – we compare. We are not assessed – we assess. It can, therefore, be said that the 'we' now in question differs from the previous one by a different reference to the scale of values: it is not located on the scale but manages the scale.

If we leave the concert hall and we still insist on using the word 'we' in the sense discussed above, we can again adopt as the point of reference an accidental circumstance that we happen to live in the same place and time,[11] that we happen to live together. While the 'we' in the discussed meaning has always required in the first place some kind of additional specification (we – musicians, we – walkers, we – cooks, etc.) and has been built on contrasting 'us' (who are subject to some assessment) and 'them' (who are not subject to it), and has thus been exclusive in character. What is at stake now is something completely different. We do not want to exclude anybody, we do not create any oppositions and contrasts. What we are concerned with are 'all', understood in this or that way. That is why it seems more convenient to make use of the formula 'we all', no matter what the 'all' were to mean.

Let us now revert to our questions. Is the question 'Who are we?' in the meaning 'Who are we all?' of any importance for the way in which I answer myself the question 'Who am I?', does the answer to the first of these questions determine in any way the content of the answer to the second question? For sure, I am one of 'us all' but how does it affect the questions 'Who have I become?' and 'Who am I to be?', can any relations be found here? What is at stake are not dependencies of purely empirical character to be seen in phenomena such as fashion, actual social stratification

---

[11]   On the adopted level of consideration it is not essential whether what we want to understand under the word 'place' is a village, a country, a continent or the whole globe; similarly, the unity of time can be treated in a narrower or broader sense.

or universally declared values but deeper structural dependencies. In other words, Am I at all able to answer myself the question 'Who am I?', putting aside the question 'Who are we all?', and if not, why?

This is important because it seems that in contemporary societies we have a fairly broad scope of freedom in determining our identities. We are free to choose our profession, to determine fields in which we are active one way or another, we establish families or live alone, we make money or remain poor, we pursue our dreams or let them remain but dreams and all this can be less or more important to us. Nobody forces us to anything, we can be what we want to be like. Whether we derive satisfaction from it or not is the question of our prudence and the extent to which we have mastered the art of life though sometimes a piece of luck is also necessary. What is more, it is not only we ourselves that answer ourselves the question who we want to be and what is to be important for us. We can also treat this answer in a flexible way. A football player who has long been the idol of the crowds is playing worse and worse. In this situation, he can either put up with his failure, recognise its existential determinants and live and breathe the memories of his past glory. He is still the same who he was, but the question 'who he is to be' has lost its importance for him. He can, however, tell himself: 'Yesterday I was a player, today I am becoming a coach, a sports commentator or a president of a large firm. Yesterday it was important for me to win a match, today it is no longer of importance, I have found other fields in which I can be good or even better'. In this way he becomes somebody else than he was, he transforms his identity and thus he regains the future.[12] Therefore, identity is something that we can dispose of freely, one of the things that we 'have' and of which we can make better or worse use. Here the question "Who am I to be?' means as much as 'Who do I want to be?'.

And yet, our freedom in managing identity is not limitless. We all demand something from each one of us. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the limitation appears in the moral sphere. Discussing the three basic meanings of the word 'good', I mentioned above that some philosophers attempt to derive moral significance from one of the remaining two meanings. What is important here is the attempt to treat moral significance as a certain distinctive variety of attributive meaning. It is now worthwhile having a closer look at the argumentation provided by adherents of this approach.[13] Not to discuss its rationale and even more so to deem it our own but rather because it shows in a particularly clear way the relation which is at stake.

---

[12]   If the phrase 'to regain the future' can seem to somebody too metaphorical and consequently vague, then instead he can say that the question 'Who am I to be?' again becomes an important question.

[13]   Compare for instance E. Tugendhat, *Vorlesungen über Ethik*, Suhkamp, Frankfurt am Main. 1995, in particular *Dritte Vorlesung*.

It is most convenient to begin from our violinist who 'does not see the world' beyond his art. When he stated that he could not cook or swim and that he was not keen on gaining these skills because all he wanted was to be a violinist, not a cook or a swimmer, we were ready to give him the right to such an attitude. Yet, if using the same tone he would say that he were not able to keep his word or refrain from throwing false accusations of his friends as well as that he was not interested whether he was good or bad in this respect because he did not want to identify himself with either those or these skills, he would most probably conclude that a certain border had been crossed, the border nobody is allowed to cross.[14] The ability to cook or to swim – like violin virtuosity – is not required from anybody but we demand that each of us keep our word and refrain from slandering. What is more, we demand that each of us consider this particular ability – the ability to act in compliance with moral standards – important for themselves, and thus, make it part of their identity. This happens because what is at stake are the standards which make the functioning of any community and sensible cooperation between its members possible. And since we all must coexist, each of us is interested in everyone else treating these standards as something important for them. We are not interested whether somebody wants it or not; if he is one of us, he must see himself in this way and we treat him in this way without asking his consent. "This would mean: when somebody fails as to this central ability consisting in being a member of the community, then he is not only bad at it, a bad chess player or a bad cook, but he is simply bad. Being bad should also be understood in an attributive way, only this time what one is bad at is not a function among others but one is bad precisely in this function, the function consisting in being a member of the community essential for all members of the community".[15] And that is why, in the moral sense, good and bad are of 'grammatically absolute' character; they are still relativised for 'us' but now it is no longer 'some we' but 'we all'. It can also be said that we have here to do with a particular case when the two meanings of the word 'we' contrasted above – 'we – who are better or worse' and 'we all' overlap: those who manage the scale of values are simultaneously the same who position themselves on this scale.[16] To use a slightly more traditional language: we

---

[14] This example follows the one given by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Lecture on Ethics*, p. 1, to illustrate what he calls there 'absolute values'. According to Wittgenstein, they cannot be spoken about in a rational way because what we want to do with them is 'to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language' (ibidem, p. 6). The approach presented here to the good in a moral sense as a certain distinctive variety of the attributive good is an attempt to embed what is absolute 'within the borders of the world'.

[15] E. Tugenhat, *Zum Begriff und zum Begrundung von Moral,* in idem, *Philosophische Aufsatze,* Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am main 1992, p. 319.

[16] That is why the argumentation presented here can be deemed a fairly free paraphrase of the way in which Kant substantiates his categorical imperative, with the 'pure reason' of Kant being replaced here with rational (i.e. substantiated) social pressure.

all demand from every one of us that he have conscience because it is important for all of us how everyone of us treats the way in which he treats anyone of us.

Irrespective of whether the attempt at the reduction of 'good' in the moral sense to the attributive 'good' presented here – out of necessity in a very brief way[17] – is convincing or not, it seems to correctly grasp one of the limits that 'we all' set to the free management of identity by everyone of us. Yet, it would be too early to draw from it a conclusion that the 'good' in the moral sense is any attributive 'good' imposed by us all on everyone of us. We might possibly all have the right to demand from anyone of us that it be important for him to respect the standards which make the functioning of the community possible, but de facto the demands extend much further. After all, we do not live in any abstract communities but in quite well-specified communities: communities having their history, localised somewhere, cultivating such and not other customs. And that is why we all – we all here and now – demand from everyone of us that apart from moral standards, we come to consider also social and cultural norms of importance for us. This is happening for two reasons. Although on the argumentation plane it is easy to distinguish between moral standards and social-cultural standards – the former always pretend to be right, while the latter are conventional in character and what speaks in their favour is the established tradition, well-embedded customs. Consequently, while the former are as a rule perceived as universal, the latter do not hide their being local in character. In everyday practice, they often become mixed up and the border between them remains fluid. This is due not only to our intellectual laziness and thoughtlessness. What plays an important role is also material considerations, namely, the function the latter play in relation to the former. I am under the moral injunction to show respect towards those who are worthy of my respect. An adherent of the ethics of universal respect can even deem this injunction to be the fundamental standard from which all others are derived. But, if I am to show this respect here and now, I can do it with the help of conventional forms and gestures accepted here and now. He who contends customs simultaneously deprives himself of means, enabling him to comply with the moral imperative. And that is why we all (living here and now) demand from anyone of us that they consider it important for them to cultivate 'our' customs, that they attempt to be 'good' at it. We are ready to tolerate lapses in this respect in 'strangers' but we are ruthless towards 'ours'. This can be compared to our language awareness: we know that different people speak different languages (in which they can express

---

[17] I wrote about it in a more extensive way in the essay *O uzasadnianiu norm moralnych według Ernsta Tugendhata,* [in:] *Etyka u schyłku drugiego tysiąclecia,* J. Ziobrowski (Ed.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2013, pp. 182 and the following.

themselves wisely or say nonsense, can bear witness to the truth or lie barefacedly), but if 'we' are to communicate, we must use 'our' language and that is why we require from everyone of us that we master it 'well', that we be 'good' at it and thus so that the way we use it be important for us, be included by us into our identity.

We require all of this from anyone of us. Yet, there is something else that comes into play. From some of us we demand something more. We can speak here about conditional requirements, linked to the roles we play in relation to others. This is what happens in the case of certain professional roles. If our violinist changed his attitude and said to us: "Of course, I can play a concert for you but it is of no importance to me whether I play it well or poorly. What matters to me is only to collect funds for a charity action I am keen on', we might recognise his right to adopt such an attitude, in the worst case we would applaud him less warmly and the funds collected by him would be more moderate. If, on the other hand, we heard from a doctor: 'I don't care whether I treat you well or badly, it is of no importance to me, I derive my self-esteem from the successes I have in the field of philately', we would reply with indignation. Nobody has to be a doctor, a judge or mountain rescuer but from these who practise these professions we demand that they identify with their profession, that the way they perform it be something important for them. Not accidentally, some professional groups have developed their own ethical codes, impose on their members certain duties, additional to general ethics, specific to a given profession. In order to be subject to these duties, the persons concerned must recognise them as theirs, include them into their identity.

This conditional requirement related to a role does not concern solely and exclusively professional roles. And thus, for instance, nobody has to have children but if they do have them, they should be a good mother or a good father and the way they fulfil their parental duties should be important to them, so again: they should identify with the role, include it into their identity. Generalising, it can be said that we all demand from everyone of us that if he/she performs a role which we all consider important, they should recognise it as important also for them. At first sight, this observation might seem an empty tautology but it is not so because the expression 'deem a role important' in both of its elements appears in different meanings. We all deem certain roles more important than others because it is on the way in which they are performed that the wellbeing of all of us depends, we have a vital interest in them being performed as best as possible. One deems a certain role important for him, that is he wants (or at least agrees) his value to be assessed in light of how he performs the role and thus in light of whether he plays it 'well' or 'badly', whether he himself is 'good' or 'bad'. In other words: the significance of certain roles causes themto be unable to be performed without due care and involvement; we can either

not perform them at all or – if we really want to perform them – we must identify with them. Once we take them up, we simultaneously limit our freedom in managing our own identity.

According to the hitherto made conclusions, the question 'Who am I?' can largely be reduced to the question 'What do I want to be proud of and what am I ready to be ashamed of in the case of failure?' Yet, it also happens that we do not refer the feeling of pride or shame to one's own successes and failures but to what 'we' are like. What kind of 'we' do we have in mind here?

Again, it will be more convenient to begin with an examples. One can be proud that his ancestors contributed in a meaningful way to the prosperity of the Republic of Poland. If one recognised the principle of *noblesse oblige,* it will mean solely and exclusively that he wants himself to be measured with the same yardstick and thus, he places before himself requirements higher than those he is ready to pose to other people, people of less illustrious origin. The content of the answer to the question 'Who have I become?' serves him as an assumption when he asks 'Who am I to be?". It may also happen that he does not take the principle to his heart, does not treat the merits of his ancestors as a message addressed to him personally, and to the question 'Who am I to be?' he gives a completely autonomic answer and yet he feels proud that 'we' have proved better than others. Another person – an ardent supporter of a football team – proud of a match won by them, would not say that 'they' won but would rather celebrate 'our' victory. Simultaneously, he can firmly believe that his shouts and cheers from the tribune mobilised the football players and increased their will to fight, and consequently, that he himself has also had a share in their success. On the other hand, he might also have watched the match on television and nevertheless, he feels proud that 'we' proved better than others.

Both of the above examples can be placed within the formula: I am proud (or I feel shame) because some among us are better (or worse) than comparable someamong others. The words 'better' and 'worse' are here clearly attributive in sense: we are better citizens, better football players. Yet, it is not 'we' that are them, but only some from among us. When I say 'we', I do not adopt as the base that abstract set which allows for a sensible use of the words 'better' and 'worse'. Naturally, I feel proud of the victory of 'our' football players but it does not mean that I myself also want to be assessed as a football player. On the other hand, this 'we' does not mean 'we all', either, but has a definitely exclusive character and always implies some contrast: 'we' do not want to compete with 'you' or 'them'. It might seem that – like it was in the case of the 'we all' category – the 'we" now at stake is defined in terms of actually random factors: what links me to ancestors is biology, with a football team – the place of residence. But, while 'we all' somewhat force everyone of us to be 'one of us', and

thus, we place clear borders to the freedom of determining our own identity, this is not present here; after all, not everybody has to consider the history of their family a cause of pride or shame, just like not everybody gets emotional about the successes or failures of a local football club. To make it happen, things must become important to the person concerned – in the same sense as for the violinist it was important how he played. The difference is that, while speaking about himself 'Yes, I am a violinist and only a violinist', the violinist marked a field in which – depending on what he was like – he could build his self-esteem, here the source of value rests in the very affiliation and what I am like loses importance.

It can also be said that making access to the 'we' specified in this or that way, I simultaneously declare that I am ready to measure my own value not with what I am like but rather with what others – some others – are like. In the case of a football fan, those 'some others' are simply the employed experts, professionals who – as in other domains of life – replace us in what we might perhaps even do ourselves but in a less effective way. And that is why we could speak here about a consumer identity of sorts and treat self-esteem as one of the many goods that can be bought on the market at a reasonable price. However, it would be an exaggeration to extend this qualification onto all forms of the thus understood 'we' as we must not forget about those 'random circumstances' which might obviously either be or not be important for us, which we can occasionally entirely deprive of any significance, but which we are never able to change in any way. Family history, place of birth, first language, landscape seen in childhood, people we were lucky or unlucky to encounter – all of this can be of no importance for us, we can attempt to free ourselves from this but we cannot create it anew. And once a person allows at least some of these things to become important for him in spite of all, when he allows his value to be measured with something different from what he is like, he answers himself the question 'Who am I?', though now he understands the question in a way different from what I tried to explain above.

How? In all the considerations above I have attempted not to go beyond the domain of the broadly understood language philosophy. It seems, however, that we have reached a point in which any attempt to understand the structure of the question must refer to an at least modest phenomenological, if not metaphysical, analysis. The analysis of the meaning must be preceded by at least a cursory look at the 'thing itself'. That is why it is worthwhile postponing it to a separate study.

Bibliography

1. Augustine St., *Confessiones*, Oxonii 1838.

2. Frank M., *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbsterkenntnis. Essays zu analytischen Philosophie der Subjektivität,* Reclam, Stuttgart 1991.

3. Galewicz W., *Analiza dobra*, Wydawnictwo UJ, Kraków 1988.

4. Heidegger M., *Being and Time,* trans. J. Macquairrie & E. Robinson, Blackwell, Oxford 2001.

5. Kierkegaard S., *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life,* trans. A. Hannay, Penguin 1992.

6. Kubiak Z., *Mitologia Greków i Rzymian*, Świat Książki, Warszawa 1998.

7. Popper K.R., *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. I, London 1962.

8. Sidorek J., *O dobru, złu i kilku innych związanych z tym sprawach*, [in:] *Szkice z filozofii*, S. Piwko (Ed.), Oficyna Wydawnicza SGH, Warszawa 2006.

9. Sommer M., *Identität im Übergang*: *Kant*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1988.

10. Strawson P.F., *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays,* Methuen, London 1974.

11. Taylor G., *Pride, Shame, and Guilt*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985.

12. Tugendhat E., *Philosophische Aufsätze*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1992.

13. Tugendhat E., *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbstbestimmung. Sprachanalytische Interpretation*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1979.

14. Tugendhat E., *Vorlesungen über Ethik*, Suhkamp, Frankfurt am Main. 1995.

15. Wittgenstein L., *Lecture on Ethics*.