

LONGTERMISM AND ETHICS

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Purpose: Longtermism, though merely a few years ago was developed, has become a subject of numerous academic and journalistic discussions. There is no doubt that it raises important and interesting issues, if in a very controversial way. Longtermism is a conception that weaves ideas from many various fields: from cosmology to ethics. The purpose of the paper is to indicate and analyze the ethical ideas that are an essential part of this conception.

Design/methodology/approach: This text contains considerations that belong to broadly understood ethics. The presented analyses are based on (rather elementary) logic, moral intuition as well as on sociological and historical observations.

Findings: The complexity of ethical issues fundamental for longtermism has been indicated. It has been suggested that some general ethical conceptions – in particular: that of responsibility – should be supplemented and modified if the ethical basis of longtermism is to be developed. And conversely: the tries to develop ethical fundamentals of longtermism can inspire some new ideas in (general) ethics.

Research limitations/implications: The text contains some results of ethical analyses of rather introductory character. These analyses should be continued – both “in depth” and “in breadth”.

Practical implications: Precising, clarifying (formulating in possibly simple way) and systematizing ethical ideas is a necessary (though – not sufficient) condition for ethics to influence politics, governance and management.

Social implications: Better politics, governance and management – these are (some) preconditions of better (environmentally safe, socially just etc.) society.

Originality/value: The paper does not attempt to publicize or to criticize longtermism. It tries to demonstrate that analytical approach to this conception, whatever the results of the analyses would be, may contribute to developing ideas important for better development of humanity.

Keywords: longtermism, globalization, responsibility, collective decisions.

Category of the paper: Conceptual paper, viewpoint.

1. Introduction

The story of which a small part is to be told and discussed here started about three centuries ago – in the Age of Enlightenment: Just at that time (modern) ideologies begun to develop, among them the still important: liberalism(s), conservatism(s) and socialism(s) (The letter “s” is added to underscore that these three names denote rather “families” of ideologies than “individual” ones). At this text will be presented a discussion of (some aspects of) a very recent ideology that took the name – longtermism.

Before formulating some introductory remarks on this very ideology, some general comments about the notion of ideology should be, I think, made. I will commence them with two short notes concerning the meaning of this concept:

Firstly, it should be noted that this notion has a certain number of meanings – different but overlapping.

Secondly, this concept happens to be used in neutral, positive and pejorative ways (Czajkowski, 2013).

It is, therefore, impossible to offer here even brief discussion of the variety of the conceptions of ideology. For this reason, I have to limit myself to a presentation of some elements of the interpretation of the term “ideology” I accept and am going to avail of in the present text.

It may be convenient to start this presentation from a few words about a concept that can be regarded as one of central (if not just the central) concept of the Enlightenment thought: about the notion of progress. This notion has been a subject of many debates (Krasnodębski, 1991) that cannot be even summarized here. The interpretation of this notion I assume at this place can be reduced to the following basic theses: (1) The social world of tomorrow can be better than this of today and that of yesterday. (2) This transformation (“betterment”) of our world depends on human activity (formulating this point one could note that the idea of progress has some connections with the Renaissance humanism).

So understood idea of progress entails two questions. First – axiological: what are the criteria of “betterment”? And second – praxiological (sociological...): in which ways the “betterment” (of the given – relative to the assumed criteria – sort) can and should be achieved? At the first sight at least: simple questions. But not: simple answers. Just these answers (in fact: complex sets of them) can just be regarded as – (“progressive”) ideologies.

Liberalism(s), conservatism(s) and socialism(s) have been ideologies that have influenced the rise and development of political parties and have also evolved under the impacts of necessities and challenges of political *praxis* (Note that there have existed for decades such international organizations as Socialist International, Liberal International or International Democrat Union – the last one groups some conservative parties).

The relations between ideologies and politics, as they have been evolving for the last ca. two hundred years, would deserve a systematic and detailed analysis. At this moment, I will confine my attention to the post-1945 period.

First. The political and ideological climate after the 2nd World War was determined by the tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (it is obvious that also other factors exerted significant impact). Probably for the first time in human history, the possibility of mankind's self-destruction was regarded as real (Jaspers, 1961). Various political, diplomatic, social activities resulted in a reduction of international tensions and dangers. But even today, after decades that have passed since the Test Ban Treaty was signed (5.08.1963) experts speak about the real threat of nuclear war (Cirincione, 2008).

The post-war military rivalry, though due to the development of nuclear weapon has had some new (in comparison to the earlier epochs) aspects, is in fact a continuation of the millenia-long sad tradition of mankind. But just in the 1960's appeared new very serious problems with which mankind has to cope: the problems of natural environment (McNeill, 2000).

Second. The profound changes in the "nature" of politics have taken place; in particular – the dramatic enlargement of the domain of political activities: from R&D to sport policies, from health to environmental... – In short: virtually all domains (much more numerous than in the previous centuries) of social life have become "politicized".

Third. At least twice "the end of ideology" (Czajkowski, 2013) was announced. For the first time (in the 1950s) – by the French philosopher Raymond Aron (1905-1983) and by the American sociologist Daniel Bell (1919-2011). For the second time – by the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama (1952-); his phrase "the end of history" should be, in my opinion: more correctly than often is, read as "the end of the history of ideology". Incidentally, Fukuyama's conception can be regarded as a theoretical/philosophical elaboration of the slogan formulated in 1979 (ten years before Fukuyama's paper was published) by Margaret Thatcher (then the Prime Minister of the UK). This slogan, best known in its abbreviated form TINA (There Is No Alternative – to free market and democracy; in other words: to liberal capitalism), has been popular for decades and even today (perhaps in somewhat modified version) is a part of the mainstream social and political thought. – Should we be happy about the alleged end of ideology? Some arguments supporting a negative answer were formulated for instance not by a philosopher or sociologist but by an economist (Thurow, 1996); interestingly, the author of the invoked book claims that there are no alternatives to capitalism.

Fourth. A separate discussion should be devoted to postmodernism (Lyotard 1979) and its relations with the conception of the end of ideology. If the Lyotardian concept of "great narratives" regard as close to that of ideology (in one of the various meanings of the term), and remember that Lyotard prophesied the end of great narratives, one could rather easily note the analogies between his thesis and these of Aron and Bell. On the other hand, one can also maintain that postmodern criticism of positivism, scientism etc. (criticism most extremely expressed by Paul Feyerabend in his slogan – and the title of one of his books – "anything

goes”) re-opened the road to “production” of ideologies – to be “sold” on the “free market” of ideas in general, and of ideologies – in particular.

Fifth. The years 1989-1991 seemed to be the years of (almost absolute?) victory of Thatcher-Fukuyama’s ideology. But the in next years the situation started to change again. Let’s mention the ideology (or rather ideologies) of anti- and alter-globalist movements, the great variety of “green” ideologies, the new waves of feminism, the ideology of “political correctness”, or, very recently – in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic – the “anti-vaccinationism”. Mentioning the last ideology, we should stress that the post-1945 period has been characterized by growing number and differentiation of social and political movements.

Ending these remarks on ideologies and politics, I would like to emphasize the role played by the conviction that extinction of humanity is basically possible – however small would be its probability (Ayres, 2021; Hanson, 2008; Hughes, 2008).

And even if extinction is of very small probability then other numerous dangers are very real: starting from ecological threats (Bińczyk, 2018), through those resulting from development of various technologies (Bostrom, 2014; Zittrain, 2008) – even nanotechnology including (Phoenix, Treder, 2008), to the plagues and pandemic well known from the past (Kilbourne, 2008) and still many others (Bostrom, Cirkovic, 2008).

Still, before I will go to the chapters on longtermism, I’d like to say also a few words on some aspects of its scientific context. These aspects can be grouped and indicated with one (but very fundamental, both philosophically and scientifically) word: time.

For centuries had dominated the religious view that the Universe and the Earth were created a few thousand years before the birth of Jesus Christ. The view started to change in the 18th century. Cosmological, geological and biological empirical and theoretical studies have resulted in the generally accepted today view on the age of the Universe (ca.14 000 000 000 years) and the Earth (ca 5 000 000 000 years). – These scientific ideas have undoubtedly changed the perspective (of course of those who know and accept this view) in which the history of humanity (ca 250 000 years – so little even in the perspective of the history of mammals – ca. 300 000 000 years, and so much in the perspective of the history of philosophy or mathematics – ca 2500 years, not even mentioning the ca.100 years of individual) is perceived today.

With this scientific view on the past we should connect a new scientific perspective on the future. As regards some issues, physicists are convinced that our knowledge is very well confirmed. For instance, it is rather certain that in about 5 000 000 000 years the Sun will destroy our planet. It has not to mean the end of human civilization (if it “on time” overcomes difficulties and avoids serious catastrophes): moving to another part of the Universe (after millions years of scientific and technological development) seems rather likely. But what about the whole Universe? – There are some (based on physics/cosmology!) reasons to suppose that it will transform in such a way that no form of (even very simple) life will be able to exist (Mack, 2020).

In the perspective of 5 000 000 000, 500 or even 5000 years appear to be very short periods. Of course, only a small minority of humans look at the future in this perspective. And even these people assume this perspective rather seldom. But just they create new ideologies, such as longtermism.

One might say that we live in the age of paradoxes (at the first sight, at least): The long future, the very optimistic visions of “Society 5.” (Hitachi-UTokyo, 2020), science making daily life much better (Kaku 2012) – on one hand, and the extinction of humanity – on the other. Perhaps it is a seeming paradox – reflecting the situation of mankind at the turn of millenia: on the historical crossroads. Longtermism may be a reaction and an answer to this situation.

2. Longtermism

As noted at the outset of this text, longtermism is a very young ideology. To be more precise, this word was for the first time used (in a written text) around 2017. Scottish philosopher (associate professor at the Oxford University) William MacAskill (1987-) is credited with coining this term. A systematic presentation of the ideas grouped under this label is given in his book “What We Owe the Future” (MacAskill, 2022). Another main figure in this movement is Australian-British philosopher (senior researcher at the Oxford University) Ted Ord (1979-), the author of another – important for longtermism – book “The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity” (Ord, 2022).

A significant role in developing these ideas play two institutions (both connected with the Oxford University): First – Future of Humanity Institute, established in 2005, headed by Nick Bostrom (Ord works in it); except for some foundations supporting scientific researches, it receives also financial support from Elon Musk and MS Amlin Ltd – an insurer company. And second – Global Priorities Institute, established in 2018; its Board of Advisors is chaired by MacAskill, and the ethicist Peter Singer is perhaps its most widely-known member.

Except for these two academic institutions some organizations should be mentioned. Among them – Giving What We Can (established in 2009, ca 8000 members at the end of 2022); the members of this organization declare to give at least 10% of their income to charities. Still more intriguing name has an organization established in 2011: 80,000 Hours. MacAskill is one of its founders. The goal of the organization is to advice those people who would like to realize the ideals of effective altruism to choose such a professional career (80,000 – average number of hours at which we are performing professional work) that will be optimal for achieving so defined aim. – This organization is also connected with the Oxford University.

To the information given above, I would like to add a few words on Nick Bostrom (1973-), a Swedish-British philosopher. He works, among other issues, on the questions of global existential risks. In particular, he regards the development of Artificial Intelligence as a potential danger for humans (Bostrom, 2014). On the other hand, he can by no means be regarded as technophobe: he created in 1998 (together with David Pearce [1959-]) World Transhumanist Association, in 2008 renamed as Humanity+.

Ending the introductory information, I would like to note that an analogous (in construction though opposite in meaning) word was used (introduced?) by authors of one of the reports to the Club of Rome: “Come On! Capitalism, Short-termism, Population and the Destruction of the Planet” (Weizsacker, Wijkman, 2018). Some similar ideas are presented also in (Krznaric, 2020). Having mentioned the concept of short-termism, I would like to say about some ideas contained in (Brand 1999). The book is titled, a bit enigmatically, “The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility”. The book talks about an authentic (though still not realized) project of construction of a clock that is to run for 10 000 years without delays.

Now let us move on to the presentation of the main ideas of longtermism (Let me stress that this presentation is a result of my analysis of these ideas. I think that they can be summarized as below. But, of course, the responsibility for the presentation is mine). These ideas can be divided into two groups: this of descriptive theses and that of normative opinions.

The following theorems can be included into the first (descriptive) group:

1. *The Homo sapiens* species has existed for about 200 000 years;
2. The average species of mammals exists about 1 000 000 years. Therefore:
3. The future history of mankind can be much longer (about 800 000 years) than the past one;
4. The development of science and technology can result in making still better the temporal perspectives for mankind. But, on the other hand;
5. The development of science and technology may have some very negative consequences for mankind, self-annihilation including;
6. We may live in the epoch (how defined?: the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries?, the 21st century? ...) in which our actions will decide which direction – optimistic or pessimistic – will take the history of our species.

To the second (normative) groups can be included the following opinions:

- e1. The life of any human that will live in a more-or-less distant future is morally so important as the life of any currently living human.
- e2. The very existence of humanity has a (positive) moral value. Therefore:
- e3. We should undertake (“today”) actions that minimize (?, reduce to zero?) the risk of worsening the quality of life of future generations, and of the extinction of our species.

3. Longtermism – some ethical issues

Longtermism seems to be a rather controversial ideology. But, on the other hand, it does not seem to be a “dangerous” one (as other ideologies have been): it is very unlikely that it will find a mass support, not to say – a support that would result in some violent activities. What is then the value of this ideology?

I think that a few complementary answers can be given.

The first one connects longtermism with the fundamental problems of historiography (philosophy of History). The proponents of this ideology seem to disregard these issues. Notwithstanding, in my opinion, whatever they think about historiography, they have to assume some historiographical theses that justify their theses about the future of humanity and about our possibilities of influencing the course of our history. Let us add that longtermism needs a historiography that would be based on (connected with) the biological theory of evolution (Lem, 2021; Wills, 2008) – historiography of a sort that has for decades been rejected by numerous anti-naturalist (anti-positivist) philosophers, methodologists and historians. – I can but signalize here these issues. A more systematic discussion would demand a separate text.

The second answer could be regarded as a reformulation of the previous one: Longtermism can be viewed as an attempt to counteract the tendency (its origins are interesting topic for sociology and history) that has dominated at least for the last few decades: the tendency to shorten the temporal perspectives: in politics, in economy, in science...

The third answer can be formulated as follows: Longtermism (just due to its radical, one might even say – very radical, character) invites us to discuss, analyze, and consider some fundamental ethical issues.

Viewed from the perspective of ethics longtermism can be interpreted *inter alia* as a (very radical) position concerning collective responsibility for the future. At this moment one should at least mention the “The Imperative of Responsibility” (Jonas, 1984) – a book that undertook issues discussed today in the longtermist framework (to a detailed analysis of similarities and differences between Jonas’ ideas and those of longtermism also a separate text should be dedicated).

Below, I am going to discuss some questions that are, at least in my opinion, of fundamental importance for analyzing the ethical issues raised by longtermism.

Let me commence from the notion of responsibility. The work of Roman Ingarden “On Responsibility and its Ontic Foundations” (Ingarden 1972) remains still – after a few decades – the best analysis of this concept in the Polish ethical literature. And, perhaps, not only in Polish (Smiley, 2023; Vardy, Grosch, 1997).

According to Ingarden, we can speak about bearing (being) and taking (assuming) – responsibility, and about being held – responsible. Additionally, we can speak that someone is acting in a responsible manner. These analyses can be, I think, generally accepted.

But, on the other hand, I am not quite satisfied with them. Thus, to put it in a somewhat different way, his analysis should not be corrected but rather – supplemented.

In my opinion, his (and not only his) analysis passes by one important fact: morality concerns various relations – between man and his action, between action and its consequences etc. But morality concerns also (some) relations between men. Notably, the term “responsibility” can be interpreted as referred also to some interpersonal relations: Paul is responsible to Peter (e.g. for his health, for support him, being to him loyal, etc.). These two formulations “responsible to” (a person) and “responsible for” (his/her health etc.) seem to be “two sides of one coin” (though are not identical). But if we accept that a guardian is responsible for a child’s safety (also) to its parents, we note that these two phrases have somewhat different meaning.

I am not going to continue these considerations, but simply assume that it makes sense to accept the phrase “responsibility to” as denoting a social relation.

Let me stress that the “actor” (who is responsible to the “recipient”) as well as the “recipient” (to whom “actor” is responsible) can be both an individual and a group (be small, be very large) of individuals. Also this issue would deserve an elaborate analysis that cannot be undertake here; I will limit myself to four examples: husband (wife) responsible to his (her) wife (husband); the owner of a factory responsible to his/her workers; parents responsible to their only child; a nation responsible to another nation. As regards the last example we should note that the well-known idea (and practice?) of Corporate Social Responsibility characterizes this type of responsibility.

The problem of collective “recipients” though important will not be discussed in this paper whereas that of collective “actors” will be further shortly mentioned.

And now a few remarks on the relationship between “responsibility to” and the other types of relations between “actor” and “recipient”. Some relevant moral intuitions seem to be clear and evident: the responsibility of parent to his/her child seems to be “greater” (what does it mean? – this question needs a separate analysis but by no means can be ignored) than to an unknown person, the responsibility of a person to his neighbor (whose house is burning) – “greater” than to another person in a similar situation (let us stress that the situation should be “sufficiently similar”).

Having assumed that this thesis is accepted, a step further can be made. The responsibility (“greater” or “smaller”) to living humans is evident. But what about the already dead and those not-yet-born? Appealing again to some relevant moral intuitions, we can say that certainly we happen to be responsible to (some) our ancestors and to (some) our descendants. For instance, we care for “good name” of our forefathers. Or, we try to secure financially our expected though still not born grandchildren (We feel responsible for undertaking these activities).

Between these two groups of humans (these already-dead those yet-not-borne a there are both similarities and differences. As regards similarities, the “actual (empirical) non-existence” (as different from other types of existence; what types? – this is a difficult metaphysical issue

that need not be discussed here; it is here sufficient to assume that these who passed away and those who are to come “somehow exist”) of the members of these two groups is common to them. This fundamental (ontological, metaphysical) fact has various consequences: we cannot communicate with them, ask questions, demand approval or forgiveness etc. But the differences are no less, and probably – even more, profound: On one hand, there is certainly a difference between the group of the dead and the living, and – the group of those yet-not-born. The first group consists of “specific” people – people who (have) had lives composed of well-defined, specific events, people who (have) had specific traits of personality and character... The second group, on the contrary, consists of potential (in a sense: “abstract” – lacking specificity) humans – humans whose actual existence is only probable (Maybe I will have a great-great-grandson, maybe – not...). It seems rather obvious that our (emotional, moral...) attitudes toward the “abstract” humans are different than those to the “specific” ones. On the other hand, the living humans and those to-be-born have one important common trait that distinguishes them from the dead: the “actors” can influence many (virtually all) aspects of the living “now” and the living “in the future”; the influence on the “posthumous life” is very limited.

These issues seem to be of great importance for longtermism: It seems that there are two fundamental arguments concerning our responsibility to future generations (Birnbacher, 1999). The first is based on the convictions that “possible” men are – in some fundamental sense – men. But are we responsible to all “possible” men? Also, to those who will live (let’s assume, leaving aside all cosmological problems, they will) in a million years? In a billion? – Logically, such an ethical stance cannot be excluded (Hartmann, 2004). Practically, it is too abstract. But, on the other part, we can start from “now”: we are, for sure, responsible to our children. To our grandchildren, and – almost for sure – to their grandchildren. Where to stop? – It seems to me that no “purely” moral/ethical non-arbitrary answer can be formulated. Perhaps, taking into considerations the moral/ethical rule prohibiting waste of valuable resources – among them: of time, effort etc. – we could say that that the limit to our responsibility to the future generations is defined – among others – by the limits to our predictive possibilities (In other words: we are responsible to those generations on which we influence in a – at least minimally – predictable way).

Speaking about the future generations we are inevitably approaching the problem of human nature (in other words: the scope of denotation of the term “man”). If we accept that some our biological ancestors, sufficiently distant in time from us (say, one million years), were not men, then we are not responsible to them though we are responsible to these our ancestors who lived, say, one thousand years ago.

As some claim, a biotechnological revolution is coming or even is already ongoing (Fukuyama, 2002). Some suggest that we will (and even in the coming decades) transcend biology (Kurzweil, 2005; Tegmark, 2017). Let us assume that the changes will be continued and turn out to be very profound. Perhaps some our descendants living thousands of years after us will be so different from us that they will not be humans – in the sense in which we use this

term today. Should we regard this as justification of waiving responsibility to them? To a degree – perhaps yes. But, on the other hand, taking into account, that we are not narrowing but rather expanding the scope of our responsibility: to (all? some?) animals and to self-conscious Artificial Intelligence, we should avoid – (at least definite) “no” to this question.

Ending these considerations on responsibility, a short remark on the connections between our responsibility to our ancestors and to our descendants: It can be said that we are responsible to our ancestors for accepting and bearing the responsibility to our (but also – to their) descendants. This thesis is based on (rather strong) moral intuition drawn from familial relations. – Whether and how generalize this intuition it has to be discussed in another place.

Having ended discussion of the problem of responsibility, I want to move on to the question that is important for discussing ethical aspects of longtermism but can also be regarded as one of the central issues of the contemporary philosophy: to the problem of risk (Michalski, 2006; Czajkowski, 2011). I would like in passing to add here that one of the most popular characteristics of the contemporary society is the concept of “risk society”, introduced by (Beck, 1986). But, on the other hand, as demonstrated in detail in (Bernstein, 1996), the necessity to cope with risk has been a constant element of the mankind’s history.

Before starting the discussion of the ethics of risk (Hansson, 2012), a few words on the types of risk. Probably, quite a few typologies of risk might be presented. At this moment I want to mention only one typology – simple but, I think, important. According to this typology, we can speak two kinds of risk: ontic and epistemic.

The ontic risk is a consequence of objective stochastic (indeterministic, chaotic...) character of virtually all processes ongoing in the material world – the world of which humanity and its civilization is a part. Thus, in vast majority of cases, human action can have various (differentiated to a greater or smaller degree) results; some of them can be, from the human point of view, desirable and some others – undesirable.

The epistemic risk is a consequence of the fundamentally limited human cognitive possibilities: Human knowledge (perhaps with some rare exceptions) is probable – more or less, both in its universal part (e.g. scientific laws) and in the detailed (e.g. individual observations).

It should be stressed that both types of risk are interconnected: On one hand, the more complex the eco-techno-socio-system, the more chaotic is the system and thus – the more it is (ontically) risky. On the other hand, the more complex is this system, the greater epistemic risk of incorrect (if not just false) diagnoses of its current state and of its dynamics, and – in result – the greater risk of incorrect practical decisions.

The basic question concerning risk – a question of fundamental importance for ethics – is the following: can be the existential risks eliminated? Some believe that any risk is not completely eliminable. But alternative opinions have been formulated, though rather in reference to very specific areas such as road safety (Hansson, 2023). Let us assume a moderate stance: “local” risks (connected with traffic, construction etc.) are eliminable but not “global” ones – those of existential nature.

Having accepted this point of view, we could say that constant minimalization of the “global” (existential) risk should be one of the most important (if not just the most important) goals to be achieved by human civilization. To avoid ideological (in the pejorative sense of the word) unproductive quarrels, better and better indices of the existential risk should be constructed (As far as I know, at the current moment, we do not have any index of this sort).

With the last remark, we have come close to the ethics of science (it is one of the tasks of science to construct indices I have just mentioned.) But before some words on this subject will be said, I would like to formulate some notes on the division of practical (or applied) ethics into sub-disciplines – not for the sake of academic pedantry but to suggest a sociological interpretation of this division.

The characteristic for modern times (though to be found also in the earlier epochs) is the phenomenon of multitude of social roles played by individuals. This phenomenon is, from the assumed here (sociological) point of view, one of the important sources of the variety of the sub-disciplines of ethics.

In modern societies, we spend a lot of time performing our professional duties; thus, professional ethics have been developing and seem to play more and more important role, at least in some professions such as that of physicians (the oldest professional ethics but today much more sophisticated than in the time of Hippocrates), of lawyers, of engineers, of scientists... (Galewicz, 2010). – Two complementary remarks can be made here. Firstly, the differentiation of certain types of human activities results also in moral complexities; e.g. the moral problems faced by historians (especially those studying contemporary times) and geneticists are mostly different. But, secondly, rather minority (but: how small?) of professions needs specialized ethics, for majority (but: how large?) – the general ethics seems to suffice.

One should add that professional ethics cannot be regarded as simple applications of the general ethics to specific problems of various professions. For instance, it is rather obvious that the ethics of prosecutor is – in many respects – different from this of advocate; the ethics of priest – from that of policeman, etc. And the respective differences are not these of different ethical questions, but of different answers to similar (or even identical) questions.

Among professional ethics, of special (and increasing) significance is today ethics of science and of technology (of scientists and of engineers). Perhaps the most important factor determining the special part played by this sub-branch of ethics is the transformation (ongoing in various domains of science with variegated velocity) of (traditional) sciences into technoscience (Bińczyk, 2012; Abney, 2022). In consequence, science contributes more and more to the increasing complexity of the eco-techno-socio-system, and thus (as already mentioned above) to the increase of risks connected with its functioning. – Looking from this perspective at the ethics of science and of technology (of techno-science), one could say that today not “internal” issues (however important) of science and technology but the “external” ones – connected with the impact of technoscience on eco-techno-socio-system – are of central importance. It is rather obvious that the way in which this impact is analyzed and evaluated

depends, among other things, on the temporal perspective. Noting this simple observation, we can draw attention to the relevance of the longtermist ideas for the ethics of science/technology.

To support this opinion, let me refer to an otherwise very interesting book on innovations. You cannot find there any analysis of possible negative side-effects of innovations (Fagerberg, 2011). At this moment, I am not able to present any other instances of such attitude; nonetheless I risk the hypothesis that these instances might be found – and even quite numerous.

And the final remark: creating institutional, cultural/customary, and organizational mechanism conducive to the development of “externally” oriented ethics of science and technology should be today regarded as one of the most fundamental elements of the “internal” ethics of these domains (this domain).

However significant is our professional activity, other social roles and activities are no less important. Among them – the roles of members of various – smaller and larger – polities; in particular, we are citizens of (nation-)states. It would be rather impossible to find systematic presentations of citizens ethics, but studying so different texts as some legal acts, literary works, books on history etc., etc. – one could reconstruct ethics of this kind: civic ethics. – This part of ethics which is strongly connected with (or even can be regarded as a part of) political philosophy.

I would like to begin this part of my considerations with a few remarks on politics. First of all I am going to say that, in my opinion, politics has been, is and – what is here the most important – will continue to be one the most important sub-systems of the eco-techno-socio-system. It might be even said that the more complex the whole system is the more important role of politics – its regulatory subsystem. (Lem, 1996) Its effectiveness, the side-effects (unintended consequences) of its functioning, its relations to moral values in general, and – particularly – to human rights, etc. etc. – the quality of this system can be very different (as of any other system). – It entails by no means meaningfulness of any idea of “de-politization” of social life. But, of course, we can and should ask questions about better (both morally and praxiologically) politics. – For a serious discussion of the problem of “better politics” (desired virtually in all countries) not a paper but a book would be necessary. Here, only a comment on one element of such vision: free and “smart” discussion. Free: based on the rejection of various forms of “political correctness” (and of other instruments of limiting the area of “admissible” views). “Smart”: observing the formal (logical and methodological) rules of formulating theses and of their justification (Note that drawing clear and acceptable line between content and form of claims is a difficult but a necessary task of philosophers, logicians, linguists...). In short: some intellectual virtues are one of the important preconditions of collective responsibility (Smiley, 2023).

These remarks seem to be of fundamental importance just while debating (ethical aspects of) longtermism: If its ideas are to be realized – even not completely (almost never possible) but to a considerable degree – significant changes (on the global scale) in the structure of

investments would be necessary. Such changes would imply some far-reaching transformations of the economic system (Hughes, 2021; Jackson, 2009; Klein, 2007; Moore, 2015; Raworth, 2017; Zsolnai, 2013). Transformations – let us repeat – on global scale. Here, we touch upon the problem of national sovereignty on side, and of world governance (though rather not in the form of a “world government”) on the other (Singer, 2002). Put aside the problem of acceptance for such changes (otherwise of fundamental importance, but too difficult to be discussed here) and limit ourselves to the ethical aspects.

The situation can be described as a special case of hard choices (Levi, 1986): choices between decisions oriented at realization of alternative yet equally important values. To put it briefly: on one hand, we can assume (at least hypothetically) that longtermism expresses some important ethical values. But on the other hand, we can also assume that avoiding a global social catastrophe (resulting from very far-reaching structural, economic and political, changes) is also a very important value.

Ethics would suggest deferring this hard choice and, in the meantime, trying to make it “less hard”. This strategy seems reasonable. Some hints might be drawn from texts suggesting compromise (“balanced”) strategies of coping with climatic crisis (Lomborg, 2010; Nordhaus, 2023, 2008).

As the third type of ethics, I would like to mention universal ethics – ethics addressed to men as members of the mankind (human community). Some religions (e.g. Christianity) contain ethics of this sort. And since the 1970s some non-religious attempts to develop universal ethics have been undertaken (Singer, 2004).

It seems that in our times intellectual virtues, though always of some moral significance, are becoming more and more important as a part of general ethics (Rudy-Hiller, 2023). And thus, a rather special sub-field of ethics – ethics of belief – is gaining on importance. Without discussing this ethical conception in depth, let us define its perhaps most fundamental ideas: humans are responsible for their beliefs (convictions etc.), and in particular – for the quality of their justification (Chignell, 2023).

As intellectual virtue we could also count (somewhat similarly to the solving hard choices problem – mentioned above) willingness, while deciding whether accept or reject a thesis, to consider as many “pros” and “cons” as possible (Yudkovsky, 2008). Note that the last phrase (“as possible”) does also matter.

Of great significance (especially in the recent times) is the readiness and ability to reduce the influence of (some) emotions – particularly these of optimism and pessimism – on one’s beliefs (Napiórkowski, 2022).

And, last but not least, note: a philosophical attitude defined by the great biologist as the striving for consilience (Willson, 1998) can also be regarded as one of the intellectual virtues constitutive for universal ethics.

Ending this part of my considerations I would like to risk a hypothesis: Ethics of collective actions determines today, much more strongly than ever, ethics of individual behavior.

I'd like to start the last part of this chapter from quoting a proverb present in a certain number of European languages: The road to hell is paved with good intentions. It expresses an important moral intuition on which I am going to make some comments now. But first a remark on the history of morality and ethics: The ancient morality was consequentialist: it did not distinguish actions with intended negative consequences from those with unintended ones; for this reason, the discovery (ascribed to stoics) of the moral significance of intention was of great importance. But today it is rather obvious that intentions (also motives), however important, are but one factor determining the moral evaluation of an act (Tatarkiewicz, 1971).

A systematic discussion of this problem would demand references to a theory of action what is impossible here. But at least a remark on this issue is rather necessary: I think that the concept of prudence (one of the so-called cardinal virtues, defined already in the Antiquity and discussed further in the Medieval Ages) can be very convenient for formulating these remarks. Prudence is a virtue of mind. It can be characterized as readiness to analyze, while going to undertake an action, the possible consequences of this action – unintended, and especially those of negative character. The ability to objective self-analysis (in particular: self-evaluation of one's abilities and skills – necessary to achieve the intended goal) should be regarded as an important aspect of prudence.

You could say that the more complex is a goal the more prudence should be recommended or even demanded when one is going to undertake actions oriented on achieving such a goal.

As we have for the last decades experienced, it is not an easy task to convince people to support “pro-climatic” policies. And these policies are oriented at avoiding serious catastrophes not at a very (almost unimaginably) distant future, but in the coming decades – during our lives, or the lives of our children and grandchildren. – If so, if you accept the (fundamental) ideas of longtermism, you should consider very carefully in which ways (if at all – the hypothesis that “now” is too early cannot be excluded) longtermist ideas could influence a considerable number of people.

Let us add that history has been teaching us that virtually all ideas, including most morally noble, can be used as instruments for achieving various goals, including the most morally not noble. – There is no reason to be sure that longtermism will with full success avoid the fate of other ideologies. Hope that it will be the case is not, on the other side, excluded. It might come true if lessons from history will be learned...

4. Final remarks

I would like to close my considerations with the following three opinions and one remark. First: we have lived for decades (at least; perhaps even for centuries – it is a sociological/historical issue very important for social theory but of little importance at the present context)

in the epoch of globalization – the epoch of the emergence of the global/world society/community. For various reasons, according to the view I do share, it is desirable that the process of globalization (having an objective – technological, ecological, economic etc. – character) will also be reflected on the level of social consciousness. In other words, we should welcome and support the rise and development of global consciousness. Let us add and underline that ethics should be one of its central parts (Ciążela, 2008; Kuzior, 2014).

Second: One could also suppose that the issues of the (distant) future of mankind can be one of the key elements of the global consciousness. If so, both longtermism itself and the discussions and polemics it has already sparked and will still spark – they will contribute to the making of the social consciousness of the global community.

Third: The rise and development of global governance is another important part of the process of globalization. If we assume additionally that it should/will have democratic character, we can also assume that the development of global governance presupposes the development of global consciousness. Thus, longtermism seems to be important from this point of view also. Especially, if we think about global governance of technology development. – At this moment, longtermism comes close to the problems analyzed by the Technology Assessment. But it is a subject for a next paper.

And, last but not least, the final remark: the discussion of ethical aspects of longtermism has been based on some moral intuitions and philosophical/ethical considerations as accepted by some of us – living in the first decades of the 21st century, or by some of our ancestors. No changes of ethical paradigms (or even complete disappearance of morality/ethics) in next centuries (not to say about next millennia, still more – tens of millennia or the next 800,000 years mentioned by some longtermists) can be excluded. But longtermism is an ethical proposal for us, for the people of this – perhaps (who knows?) the decisive – century in the history of *Homo sapiens*.

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