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## THE POWER OF A PARABLE THE RELIGIOUS “ORIGINS” OF BUSINESS ETHICS

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Business ethics deals with ethical aspects of management and entrepreneurship, activities closely linked to “this world’s” problems. Surprisingly enough religious traditions have their impact on the argumentation in this field. The paper focuses on two biblical parables: on the talents and on the good Samaritan. Both are not only present in business and management literature but also widely discussed in the context of today’s economy and society. The first one seems to be a basis of the doctrine of corporate social responsibility in its original form presented within the “gospel of wealth” movement. The second one however offers even more opportunities to discuss the responsibilities of business in today’s world. So the religious narratives cannot be ignored within business ethics. This conclusion applies, of course, to all religions, esp. the Asian ones in view of the fact of the rapid development of Chinese or Indian economies.

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It would seem that when talking about the economy, or even about the moral aspects of management, we are moving away in essence from religious issues related rather to that “other” world. Yet the reasoning applied here very often relates to religious concepts, and in particular to biblical parables. The observations below will apply to two of them, the Parable of the Talents and the Parable of the Good Samaritan, as well as how they are used within ethical reflections regarding the economy.

## Business ethics as applied ethics

Business ethics is reflection over the moral aspects of the activities of an entrepreneur, a manager, or a rank-and-file employee in a company – in other words in profit-oriented organisation. It is “business” that defines this particular character of these activities aimed at bringing in a profit, while business ethics is the consideration of regulations that should – but are not always – followed in this area. The question about why this is so is also ethical in character, just as are numerous practical measures tasked with institution-alising ethics, among them the creation of codes of ethics or special collegiate bodies tackling issues which, from a moral point of view, are difficult.

In order to avoid misunderstandings it is also worth pointing out that “business ethics” (or “economic ethics”) here is understood differently to the Weberian term *Wirtschaftsethik*. What Weber had in mind were those elements of various religions that formed specific attitudes among their followers of importance for business activities. He was interested in “the influence of certain religious ideas on the development of an economic spirit, or the *ethos* of an economic system. In this case we are dealing with the connection of the spirit of modern economic life with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism.”<sup>1</sup> Business ethics is therefore not so much ethical or theological theory – as explained years later by Marianne Weber – as impulses for acting that derive from specific religions.<sup>2</sup>

Weber was thus thinking not about ethical reflection over the economy and management, but about the practical impulses or incentives offered by a particular religion. Obviously the same religion also contains defined ethical views, including those referring to management that may have an undoubted influence on the deliberations of ethicists and all interested parties conducted within business ethics as one of many types of applied ethics – yet one should nevertheless remember that it was not the ethics that concerned Weber, but those practical impulses generating attitudes and motivations within groups of people.

And so what I am speaking of here is the influence of religious concepts on business ethics understood as one of the applied ethics. Applied ethics mean reflection invoked by practical problems appearing in real situations.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, transl. T. Parsons, Routledge Classics, London and New York 2005, p. XXXIX.

<sup>2</sup> See R. Swedberg, *Max Weber and the Idea of Economic Sociology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1998, p. 134.

Tom L. Beauchamp lists, among other things, abortion, euthanasia, the protection of people and animals in the role of scientific research subjects, racism, sexism, affirmative action, acceptable risk at work, the problem of legal enforcement of ethical norms, civil disobedience, unjust wars and the protection of private data.<sup>3</sup> Although philosophers have indeed been deliberating over many of these issues for centuries (e.g. the problem of the just war), the majority of them emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century while the term itself, “applied ethics,” was coined in the nineteen-seventies.

One could even cast doubt over whether the emergence of applied ethics was a consequence of purely philosophical discussions conducted by philosophers in past centuries or even decades. One could just as well assert that its birth was contributed to by debates among the representatives of professions, activists in non-governmental organisations, journalists and finally among – as Alfred Schütz called them – well-informed citizens, who spoke out together against practices they found worrying, for example related to women’s rights, consumer safety, environmental protection, treatment of prisoners or the usage of animals in research conducted by cosmetics companies. Therefore the movement of applied ethics was initiated both by philosophers and non-philosophers, although it seems to me that the latter prevailed in terms of numbers. By no means does this mean that purely philosophical (ethical) competences are not necessary here; on the contrary – they are indispensable. But it is in the dialogue with representatives of diverse professions and diverse fields of knowledge that their usefulness becomes evident.

## Religion and ethics

As I have said, I am interested in the influence that religious concepts (which of course cannot be detached from the practising of a specific religion) have on business ethics as an applied ethics. Nevertheless, the fact that we are dealing with an applied ethics does not alter the fact that the fundamental question applies to the relations between religion and ethics. What kind of “influence” could this mean? The “origins” in the title are given in quotation marks, suggesting that the issue is somewhat complicated, although well described in philosophical literature.

Ethical reflection – if one were to word it in such a rather dangerously brief manner – wants to determine in what way good is distinguished from

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<sup>3</sup> T.L. Beauchamp, *The Nature of Applied Ethics*, in W.R. Frey, C.H. Wellman (eds), *A Companion to Applied Ethics*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA 2005, p. 1.

evil, just procedure from unjust, and respect for another person's dignity from its denial. Yet it is easy to notice that religion also offers such solutions. In Judaism and Christianity, it is God who decides what is just, what is good, and what is dignified. It might therefore seem that ethics – in regard to its solutions – is dependent on religion, which has already proposed defined moral norms. But such a view is not particularly sophisticated philosophically, and as such is hard to uphold.<sup>4</sup> This is because the concept of the divine command assumes that God determines what is good and what is bad, and that the duty of the believer is to abide by this dictate. The solution is reached beyond the person, while the person's duty is to follow the voice of God. Indeed, one might say that regardless of whether or not one believes, many of ethical dictates are implemented without reflection. We simply do what “one does” in “our” environment, in our cultural circle or even our occupational group.

If, though, we were to distinguish morality from ethics, the application of principles (within life practice regulated by social norms) from the sphere of questions regarding the justification of these norms – fundamental questions leading to the impersonal project of human duties, if we were to differentiate specific principles in specific groups from the ideal model, from normative ethics in the philosophical sense, then the ethical value of the divine command becomes highly doubtful. After all, how could we justify that command? A believer with some theological preparation might, for example, maintain that for a Christian, God is the embodiment of good, is the highest goodness itself, requiring no justification. Yet by arguing in this manner, they would fall into a kind of logical trap, since they would be starting to justify the commands of their God referring to some moral criteria which are logically independent of the belief in God's highest moral authority.<sup>5</sup>

This problem seems to be closely related to what has been known in philosophy as the Euthyphro dilemma. “Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?” asks Socrates in *Euthyphro*.<sup>6</sup> It so happens that the gods love what is holy because “it is holy and it is not holy because it is loved.”<sup>7</sup> It is not caprice that motivates

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<sup>4</sup> Probably popular, though, among organisers of debates on ethical topics who invite the clergy regardless of their additional non-theological education and specialisation – as equipped automatically with knowledge regarding morality.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. K. Nielsen, *Ethics without God. Revised Edition*, Prometheus, Buffalo 1990, p. 19 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, transl. H.N. Fowler, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39.

the gods, but awareness of the legitimacy of their commands. Therefore this legitimacy is logically earlier than the “decision” – ethics precedes religion. Ethics is based on rationales independent of religion; ethics in general and the ethics applied in a specific field, e.g. in the economy.<sup>8</sup>

The independence of ethics from religion – and here we come to a particularly important issue – does not mean at all a factual separateness of the two discourses. An ethicist may continuously employ the words of her god, cite the arguments of theologians, reason on the basis of a religious message. Moreover, no moral message could, historically speaking, penetrate public awareness without donning religious attire. As Simon Blackburn emphasises, it is religion which provides sort of mythical authority to morality and offers narratives one cannot ignore.<sup>9</sup> And this is precisely why the “origins” in the title is given in inverted commas.

## The Parable of the Talents

It just so happens that business ethics, especially in Anglo-Saxon circles, sprouts from religion, or in any case from the religiosity of the entrepreneurs themselves. If a Catholic manager today, having worked for many years in the USA, were to claim that religious faith and values do not rule out taking the risks that always accompany business activities, then he or she would essentially be reiterating the understanding of the great American industrialists from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Faith for them was not an escape from their lives, but an enticement to live an active life. The manager today, just like them, refers also to the Parable of the Talents. “Business without risk does not exist. It is written in the Bible that if you do not risk what you have received, then you will be in trouble. [...] The Parable of the Talents shows a totally different perspective, and at the same time it constitutes a business credo, because the entrepreneur is the one who multiplies.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See G.D. Chryssides, J.H. Kaler, *Introduction to Business Ethics*, Thomson, London 1993, pp. 87-88.

<sup>9</sup> S. Blackburn, *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, pp. 17-18; see also R. Audi, *The place of ethical theory in business ethics*, in G.G. Brenkert, T.L. Beauchamp (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Business Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, pp. 55-56.

<sup>10</sup> *Oplaca się postępować etycznie. Z Jerzym Kołodziejem rozmawia Michał Płociński* [It pays to act ethically. An interview with Jerzy Kołodziej by Michał Płociński], “Rzeczpospolita” (supplement: *Rzecz na Święta*) 24-26 December 2011, p. P5.

The Parable of the Talents is deemed of key importance to the Christian because of what is acknowledged as its practical dimension. It encourages one to act, to take a justified risk, to be entrepreneurial. Its purport placates the doubts of those who might think that one cannot reconcile one's own being a Christian with financial success.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the bad servant who buried his talent would manage to justify his decision. In keeping with rabbinical law, burying an object that has been left for safe-keeping is tantamount to proper care of the entrusted property. This means that one's duty has been properly fulfilled, and that if that object were to have been stolen – then one would not bear responsibility.<sup>12</sup> Yet in the parable in question this particular servant is punished for his lack of courage. Having the support of God, he should have thought less of the misfortunes that might befall him, and more of the good and useful things that he might do. After all God, and faith in God, releases him of destructive worries and fears, and allows him to focus on positive action.<sup>13</sup>

It was precisely such interpretation of the Parable of the Talents that played a significant role in American economic history. Thanks to it, the Christian (and as a rule Protestant) entrepreneur of the 19<sup>th</sup> century considered himself a servant in the general meaning of this word, in other words a manager, a steward of property entrusted in him by the Lord. He took risk for the good of society, multiplying the property that would ultimately pass on to all those in need. The years 1870-1920 saw the so-called second industrial revolution, the era of electricity and all of its beneficial consequences. This was when those great economic organisations that were to determine the leading role of the American economy for many decades to come were established. Great legends then also emerged of the merciless pursuit for profit, of the extreme exploitation of labour, and about the first million that allegedly had to be stolen. In reality, though, the captains of industry were not only extremely talented people, but also pioneers, discoverers of new forms of management. Rockefeller never stole his first million, while his main motivation was not greed but a biblical message. Interviewed by William Hoster in 1920s he said to him: "Perhaps I might have succeeded as a preacher, if I had been good enough. I have the most radical, old-fashioned

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<sup>11</sup> R.A. Sirico, *The Parable of the Talents. The Bible and Entrepreneurs*, in M.W. Hendrickson (ed.), *The Morality of Capitalism. The Foundation for Economic Education, Inc.*, Irvington-on-Hudson, NY 1996, p. 81.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> A. Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, pp. 404-413.

ideas about the duty of every man to contribute to the betterment of his race. I believe the power to make money is a gift from God – just as are the instincts for art, music, literature, the doctor’s talent, the nurse’s, yours – to be developed and used to the best of our ability for the good of mankind. Having been endowed with the gift I possess, I believe it is my duty to make money and still more money, to use the money I make for the good of my fellow man according to the dictates of my conscience.”<sup>14</sup>

When writing about the biblical message of the captains of industry, nobody intends to idealise them. It is only a matter of the historical truth, and giving the lie to the negative legend of Standard Oil spread by Ida Tarbell and her book.<sup>15</sup> Rockefeller himself was no saint; he bribed local officials, for example. Yet one cannot forget either about the methods applied by his enemies and rivals, or about nineteenth-century America being very similar to today’s Middle East in regard to the principles behind running a business.<sup>16</sup>

Andrew Carnegie’s *The Gospel of Wealth* is most certainly a classic example of tackling biblical themes. This entrepreneur, king of steel, and simultaneously a well-known speaker and writer, dedicated the second half of his life to proclaiming and practising principles that one could relate directly to the Parable of the Talents. Success in business and acquired fortunes are linked to entrepreneurial individuals who, thanks to their skills, achieve economic success. At the same time the creator of the wealth thus generated is society, which creates the demand for all goods and services. In fact it is not individuals but communities that create wealth.<sup>17</sup> Hence too the obligation, which is shouldered by those who – as if on behalf of this society – manage the productive property and create their own fortunes, involves giving back to society what has been acquired thanks to it. The stewards of this “community” wealth, as a result of well-considered and well-organised charitable activity, should in principle give back to society everything they acquired. Carnegie believed that one who dies a rich man dies in disgrace.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This comment is cited by J.T. Flynn, *God’s Gold. The Story of Rockefeller and His Times*, Ludwig von Mises Institute, Auburn, Alabama 2007, p. 401 (first published in 1932).

<sup>15</sup> I.M. Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, Vol. 1 and 2, McClure, Phillips and Co., New York 1904.

<sup>16</sup> C.R. Morris, *The Tycoons. How Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Jay Gould, and J.P. Morgan Invented the American Supereconomy*, Times Books, New York 2005, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> A. Carnegie, *The “Gospel of Wealth.” Essays and Other Writings*, Penguin Books, London 2006, p. 59 ff.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12; see also D. Nasaw, *Andrew Carnegie*, The Penguin Press, New York 2006, pp. 343-360.

The authors of a well-known management textbook even believe that Carnegie proposed the original version of what today we call corporate social responsibility.<sup>19</sup> Of course the principle of stewardship lies at the basis of today's thinking about companies' obligations towards the community in which they function. But Carnegie himself was very strict in his treatment of his own staff. Going by the assumption that everything returned to society anyway, he considered it the employer's duty to make effective use of the labour, because maximising the profit at a particular moment was justified by the future benevolence making the entire community richer. Carnegie, as a follower of Herbert Spencer, saw in the division into poor and rich, employer and employee, and in the fact of but a few people getting rich, the essential mechanism leading to material and moral progress.<sup>20</sup>

Regardless of the antidemocratic and paternalistic themes in *The Gospel of Wealth*, the Parable of the Talents lies at the foundations of very many contemporary concepts of ethical management, while its message can be found in the remarks of many a businessperson and manager, not to mention the typically American activity of charities financed by Carnegie's and Rockefeller's successors.

### Who is my neighbour?

This question from the Parable of the Good Samaritan is asked rather rarely during business activities. We tend more often to ask about who our customer is, and what he or she would like. But there are situations in which the problem of the duty that business has towards society, meaning towards other people regardless of their connection with a particular sector or individual enterprise, moves into the forefront. I have in mind not only crisis situations such as a natural disaster requiring the involvement of all to rescue those in danger, but also discussions regarding the concept of corporate social responsibility. For such discussions there is a certain text that constantly remains important.

*The Parable of the Sadhu* by Bowen McCoy, published in 1983 in the "Harvard Business Review," has become one of the cases used most often in managerial studies and training courses around the world. It comprises two sections: the actual story of finding the sadhu during a Himalayan climbing

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<sup>19</sup> J.A.F. Stoner, R.E. Freeman, D.A. Gilbert, Jr., *Management. Sixth Edition*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1995, p. 100.

<sup>20</sup> D. Nasaw, *Andrew Carnegie*, p. 229.

expedition, and the author's reflections regarding the relationship of individual morality to principles respected and practiced by the group. This case continues to inspire one to think, and even evokes polemic. Although no mention is made of it in the body of the text, the title inescapably sends the reader to the Bible, and its content – to the New Testament's Parable of the Good Samaritan. But what are students of managerial studies to interpret from this parable? There are several ways of interpreting *The Parable of the Sadhu*, but before we go there it would be a good idea to recall its content.

McCoy, then a New York banker, is climbing once again in the Himalayas. He still remembers a failed expedition from six years previously, when altitude sickness ruled out an attack on the summit. He is in the company of a friend, an anthropologist, and Sherpas as porters. At an altitude of 4700 metres, at a moment decisive for the success of the entire expedition, one of the participants of a group of New Zealand mountaineers climbing ahead of McCoy turns back, carrying down an unconscious and half-naked sadhu who had most probably taken a wrong turn on his way down from the village of Muklinath located high in the mountains – a traditional destination for pilgrims. He deposits the body in front of the New Yorker's group and hurries back to his companions in order to cover a section of the route only passable before the sun manages to melt the steps cut into the ice. A moment later the protagonist of the *Parable* is about to take the same route.

McCoy splits his group into two. He heads on together with a group of Sherpas, while Stephen – his anthropologist friend – and a few Swiss climbers who have just caught up with them (another group climbing to the summit) see to the sadhu. They clothe him, warm him up, and feed him. They also count on an approaching Japanese group that could also take care of him. But nobody decides to head back to the hut located 300 metres lower down, as that would mean an interruption to and perhaps even the end of the entire expedition. By and large each group does what it can in the situation, since they cannot interrupt the planned itinerary and since they can always count on the next group and their contribution to saving the sadhu.

After completing the expedition and conquering the summit, McCoy is unable to appease his conscience, especially as nobody knows whether or not the sadhu survived. Everybody essentially did “what they should have done” and continued with their expedition. Nobody opted to modify their plans and take care of the other person. “What would have happened,” wonders the author, “had Stephen and I carried the sadhu for two days back to the village and become involved with the villagers in his care? In four trips to Nepal my most interesting experiences occurred in 1975 when I lived in a Sherpa

home in the Khumbu for five days recovering from altitude sickness. The high point of Stephen's trip was an invitation to participate in a family funeral ceremony in Manang. Neither experience had to do with climbing the high passes of the Himalayas. Why were we so reluctant to try the lower path, the ambiguous trail? Perhaps because we did not have a leader who could reveal the greater purpose of the trip to us."<sup>21</sup>

McCoy compares the mountaineers to company managers who without ethical leadership are unable to cope with sudden challenges. This is precisely how it was in the case described: nobody attempted to persuade others to choose the most difficult route – most difficult as it led downwards. Yet at the same time these mountain roamers did not make up one group constituting the bearer of common values and norms. All in all the interpretation given by the author himself indicates the role of organisational culture, which "suggests" to individuals how they should behave. It is the company's system of values that should be the support for all staff.

Bowen McCoy, in considering the issue of leadership in an organisation and organisational culture, therefore highlights only one aspect of the whole story. Yet he somewhat obscures the fundamental theme, parallel in its purport to the biblical parable, that is the question of who our neighbours are and what we owe them. Proceeding in the spirit of the good Samaritan would have meant interrupting one's expedition, taking care of the sadhu, and that "lower path." If the high-mountain climb was to be a kind of test or exam, then in this light it proves an illusory test, as McCoy did not pass the real exam. He did not even notice what this real test involved. Focused on the so-called main goal, he was incapable of altering his plans and did not notice that at that moment his humanity was being "tested."

The entire organisation of the expedition, the money invested, the people involved, the strenuous ascent, and the day-to-day coordination of the entire undertaking all served the main goal. It would seem that McCoy was essentially right in asking: "What right does an almost naked pilgrim who chooses the wrong trail have to disrupt our lives? Even the Sherpas had no interest in risking the trip to help him beyond a certain point."<sup>22</sup> The mention of the porters' behaviour was meant to suggest that even the locals, those closest to him, behaved with reticence.

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<sup>21</sup> B.H. McCoy, *The Parable of the Sadhu*, in K.R. Andrews (ed.), *Ethics in Practice. Managing the Moral Corporation*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass. 1989, p. 206.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 204.

Stephen has certain suspicions in this respect, ones he speaks of to his friend. “I wonder what the Sherpas would have done if the Sadhu had been a well-dressed Nepali, or what the Japanese would have done if the Sadhu had been a well-dressed Asian, or what you would have done, Buzz, if the Sadhu had been a well-dressed Western woman?”<sup>23</sup> He is therefore suggesting that the mountaineers would have treated differently somebody they would have acknowledged as a compatriot. Then they would have behaved like the merciful Samaritan, although this comparison would not actually be relevant, as the biblical Samaritan saved a complete stranger, and it was this strangeness that was the test of his compassion.

McCoy returns years later to the significance of his case, and states that its reception differed between countries. Hindu businessmen told him that they considered the attempt to help the sadhu, who could have been there deliberately seeking his own death as a path to holiness, a manifestation of the typical arrogance of the people of the West, who everywhere want to impose their own standards. And so one cannot formulate an ultimate and universal appraisal of what happened. Stephen saw everything in the light of the Christian ethics of compassion. The author and narrator – as he claims himself – proposed a solution within the utilitarian spirit: help as much as one could, and continue on one’s expedition, thereby seeing to all interested parties benefiting.<sup>24</sup> One could of course always suspect that the proportions of the benefits distributed would be different if, instead of a sadhu, they had encountered a “well-dressed Western woman.”

## Rich and poor

In a certain sense a person of the West always will balance between accusations of arrogance and imposing their own point of view (even if they consider it compassion) and their own guilty conscience, most frequently linked to the religious ideals they subscribe to. Perhaps it really would be better to be guided by the principle of “the greatest good for the greatest number.” It is also a fact that the syndrome of the “bad Samaritan,” meaning the situation in which help is refused or insufficient help is given, is a practice frequently discussed – for example during debates regarding famine and malnutrition in the world, when the question of why we are doing so little arises.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>24</sup> B.H. McCoy, *When do we take a stand?*, “Harvard Business Review” May – June 1997, p. 6.

The guilty conscience of the bad Samaritan may be experienced in particular by a reporter or journalist whose task is precisely to observe and recount. In 1993 a reporter from South Africa took a famous photograph in Sudan, showing a vulture awaiting the death of a girl dying of hunger. The photograph brought the photographer the Pulitzer prize, but he – when asked what he had done for the girl – admitted that he had only chased away the bird, and then continued on his way, believing the appropriate services would look after the child. It is not hard to guess that his reply met with outrage, which pushed the photographer into depression – which plagued him for the rest of his life. On the other hand, photographs of this type alert public opinion, and as a consequence contribute to an increase in aid for the starving people of Africa. Paweł Kwiatkowski, commenting on this story in his book, adds: “In addition one should remember that the photographer is an extension of our eyes: we also see photographs of this type in the newspapers, yet we do not provide help for these poor people.”<sup>25</sup>

In applied ethics this problem is considered within reflection over the relations between poor and rich parts of the world, the problem of hunger in the world, and in regard to the “bad Samaritan,” that is, the one who chose not to help).<sup>26</sup> As Onora O’Neill writes, moral problems are nothing new. If we were politicians, contemplating our own ambitions or even lust for power, we could easily find appropriate philosophical treatises and examples in fine literature that would allow us to think through our own situation. One could, for example, point out the fortunes of Lady Macbeth, which may prove very helpful in this respect. However, when we consider the problem of famine in the world, the works of literature and philosophy, or religious tradition, give us little support. Not because there used to be no famine, but because today we are in a totally different situation, and we can do much to fight this plague. At the same time a number of by no means easy questions are arising. Send aid to poor countries, or help them in economic reforms? Help limit natural population growth, or take their students into our universities? Provide unconditional aid or aid under certain conditions, such as observing human rights?

Traditional moral theories give us little help in finding the answers. The good Samaritan knew what he should do, but what is a Christian today supposed to do? Send money, get involved in aid campaigns? Fight

<sup>25</sup> P. Kwiatkowski, *Przedsiębiorstwo Apokalipsa. O etyce dziennikarskiej* [Apocalypsis Inc. On the Ethics of Journalism], Rebis, Poznań 2003, p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. P. Smith, *Bad Samaritans, Acts, and Omissions*, in R.G. Frey, C.H. Wellman (eds), *A Companion to Applied Ethics*, p. 475.

for fairer rules in international trade? If giving help – for whom, in which country? What about the poor people in our own back yard? The answer to the question “who is my neighbour?” is not so simple. The biblical parable does not provide obvious answers. Not only Christian ethics is in trouble; so too are other conceptions.

According to Onora O’Neill, creative criticism of the existing theories is necessary.<sup>27</sup> Her words are confirmed by the discussion continuing to this day among philosophers, economists and activists in numerous charity organisations, discussion provoked – among other things – by Peter Singer’s well-known article from 1972, *Famine, Affluence and Morality*.<sup>28</sup> His arguments were sharpened further by Peter K. Unger in his book published in 1996, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*.<sup>29</sup> And in 2006 another well-known philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah, returns to the matter.<sup>30</sup>

The key concept for this author is “cosmopolitanism,” based on two ideas. The first proclaims that we have obligations to others, including those outside of our immediate family or even homeland. The second idea makes the first more concrete: not only is human life as generally understood important, but above all the value of “particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance. People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. Because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life. Whatever our obligations are to others (or theirs to us), they often have the right to go their own way.”<sup>31</sup>

Kwame Appiah writes of our unquestioned duties towards fellow beings far from us, yet simultaneously ascertains that one cannot place too exacting demands before the bearers of these duties, taking into account the “pattern” that Adam Smith demonstrated in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith wrote that the news of a gigantic earthquake that lay waste to an entire em-

<sup>27</sup> O.O’Neill, *The Moral Perplexities of Famine and World Hunger*, in T. Regan (ed.), *Matters of Life and Death. New Introductory Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Random House, New York 1986, p. 297.

<sup>28</sup> P. Singer, *Famine, Affluence and Morality*, “Philosophy and Public Affairs” vol. 1, no. 3, Spring 1972.

<sup>29</sup> P. Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996.

<sup>30</sup> K.A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism. Ethics in a World of Stranger*, Penguin Books, London 2006.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 13-14.

pire would horrify anybody. However, after some time everybody would go back to their everyday lives. Yet if one were to suddenly find out that they were to lose their little finger the next day, there is no doubt that they would be unable to fall asleep or achieve calm so quickly. We are, perforce, selfish beings.<sup>32</sup> “Taking Smith’s answers seriously, though, requires that our cosmopolitanism should not make impossible psychological demands.”<sup>33</sup>

There are, however, philosophers who think otherwise: that we should allocate most of the money we possess to saving people who are dying in distant regions of the world – if we do not want to behave dishonestly. There are even those who equate doing nothing with killing. That if one allows people to die of starvation, even people thousands of miles away, then one is an accomplice. I have already mentioned Singer’s article, which opened the entire debate. There is a certain thought experiment there, which could, in brief, be called deliberation of the shallow pond problem. The philosopher describes an ornamental pond that he passes on his way to giving a lecture. If a child were to fall into it, then he would jump in without hesitation to save it, paying no attention to his ruined trousers. And neither does he believe anybody could deny that such would be his duty. Such conduct would essentially be in keeping with the fundamentally uncontroversial principle saying that: “if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it.”<sup>34</sup>

The value of the ruined trousers is of no significance here. Just as the car upholstery is not important when wanting to take an injured person to hospital. This example comes from a work by Peter Unger, who wondered over the situation of the shallow pond, and proposed a similar thought experiment. A driver, who has recently renovated his vintage Mercedes, encounters en route a student who asks to be driven to hospital. If his injured and bleeding leg is not immediately treated at hospital he may have to have it amputated. Most people, in Unger’s opinion, would acknowledge the ruined upholstery of a recently renovated car to be nothing compared to the favour the driver could grant for the student.<sup>35</sup>

Yet Unger also asks: if one were to receive a letter from UNICEF requesting one hundred dollars to help 30 dying children who without this

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<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 156.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 158.

<sup>34</sup> P. Singer, *Famine, Affluence...*, p. 231.

<sup>35</sup> P. Unger, *Living High and Letting Die...*, p. 143; see also K.A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism...*, p. 159.

money would have no hope of surviving, would one not then have just the same duty to help one's fellow beings? Certainly. But then if we consider it our duty in the case of the first one hundred dollars, what about the second hundred, the third, and all the subsequent hundreds? Peter Unger asserts, sharpening Singer's reasoning, that in keeping with this logic it is bad not to allocate almost the entire riches of the world to saving other human beings.<sup>36</sup>

Appiah, though, views this issue differently, keeping Adam Smith's warning in mind: "The problem with the argument isn't that it says we have incredible obligations to foreigners; the problem is that it claims we have incredible obligations."<sup>37</sup> He also claims that the example of the shallow pond should not be subjected to a calculation of the moral costs and benefits. It is quite obvious that trousers do not matter when somebody's life or, for example, a child's health is at stake. But calculating one's costs in terms of money and the question asking why this logic should not function in the case of the next hundred dollars is spurious. In line with this question one could just as well not save the child but sell the trousers, then saving a much greater number of children by sending 100 dollars to Africa.

It is better therefore not to "commercialise" the shallow pond situation. After all, it is about a so-called critical situation, in which it is our duty to react. Yet one cannot deduce extreme consequences from it.

A person has a right to live in line with the concept of the fundamental human rights, which – writes Appiah – is something every cosmopolitan agrees with. Yet he or she must realise that the constant guaranteeing of this right depends on the existence of the nation state, which must primarily take care of its citizens. It may not be capable of fulfilling all of its duties – as is often the case – but fellow beings living far away cannot be such a burden. This duty cannot affect us so strongly: why exactly should we have to hand out the greater part of our property? Every one of us should participate in helping the countries of the Third World, but not individually and not at the cost of everything one possesses. After all, we have duties towards our own children, other relatives, friends and many different groups. My life and the life of my loved ones also has a certain value, and why we should have to drastically lower its quality is an unknown. "For if so many people in the world are not doing their share – and they clearly are not – it seems to me I cannot be required to derail my life to take up the slack."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> P. Unger, *Living High and Letting Die...*, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> K.A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism...*, pp. 159-160.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.

By referring to the well-known example of going to the opera, Appiah asks: “What would the world look like if people always spent their money to alleviate diarrhea in the Third World and never on a ticket to the opera (or a donation to a local theatre company, gallery, symphony orchestra, library or what have you)? Well, it would probably be a flat and dreary place.”<sup>39</sup> After all, you are not killing anybody by going to the opera. Millions of people all around the world spend money on various things, including luxury goods, although they could be saving children facing death. Therefore one cannot equate a music-lover to somebody who does not wade into a shallow pond to help a child.

Appiah also points to more empirical and, simultaneously, dramatic issues. Charity organisations continue their strivings, many people send cheques and save children’s lives. Thirty children in Bangladesh can, as a result, drink clean water, and they will not die of dysentery. But this aid is not increasing their chances in life. “Death isn’t the only thing that matters. What matters is decent lives. And if what you save them for is just another month or another year or another decade of horrible suffering, have you really made the best use of your money? Indeed, have you really made the world less bad?”<sup>40</sup>

Apart from seeing the wrong done to children, one also has to identify the economic mechanisms leading to this wrongdoing: customs tariffs, protection of the home markets of rich states or groups of states, the mismanagement in Third World countries, and corruption. Only then may aid be effective. Therefore there has to be knowledge supporting heart-felt reactions. “Cosmopolitanism is about intelligence and curiosity as well as engagement.”<sup>41</sup> As for foregoing prosperity and handing out the entire surplus that a person of the West has at hand, it is worth remembering the great philanthropists. In answering Unger, Appiah recalls Bill Gates: if, at the start of his career, he had handed out all of his money, he never would have become a billionaire and the world’s biggest philanthropist. Or if the Americans or Europeans were to cease their consumption, then the global economy would collapse, and with it so too would the aid allocated for the development of poor countries. It has to be emphasised once again that the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 166; the necessity of foregoing numerous luxuries, including haute cuisine or going to concerts, was written about by Susan Wolf: *Moral Saints*, “Journal of Philosophy” vol. 79, no. 8, August 1982, pp. 421-423. I shall add that it is precisely where people go to the opera and theatre that the most donations are collected for charity.

<sup>40</sup> K.A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism...*, p. 167.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 168.

greater portion of this aid is badly spent. Only where the government and social institutions function well can aid be effective. “Institutions of land tenure, which are often intertwined with cultural assumptions that may be hard to change, are sometimes at the root of rural poverty” – writes Appiah, practically repeating the arguments of researchers of economic culture, from Edward Banfield to Hernando de Soto.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore spending money well on aid requires numerous studies and reports, wisdom rather than heroism, sociological, economic, and culture studies that fill our duties with specific content. In addition aid can neither ruin the helper nor significantly lower the quality of his or her life. Because – as one may conclude from the numerous analyses – it is precisely this concern for the quality of one’s own life that compels us not to agree to other people’s poverty. Simultaneously the category of quality of living is an analytical tool and stimulator of concern for others. The scale of the latter depends on numerous factors, among others on proper assessment of the facts.

## Understanding the sadhu

For me *The Parable of the Sadhu* is not only a parable about individual and collective ethics. Above all it concerns duty towards another person, regardless whether in the Samaritan situation there is an individual or a group. Neither is it purely a metaphor of so-called careerism, meaning ruthlessly climbing the career ladder. The top really does resemble organisational hierarchy, and careers involve a lot of corporate climbing. Other people and their problems go unnoticed, there is no time for selfless friendship, sometimes one even has to shove a rival off into the abyss. The typical personalities of climbers who reach the very peak of an organisation were the focus of Michael Maccoby’s book *The Gamesman: The New Corporate Leaders* (1976) and the article summarising it: *The Corporate Climber Has to Find His Heart*.<sup>43</sup> This article also functions as a Harvard case and frequently accompanies discussions regarding McCoy’s story. Yet here as well the interpretation of the message in *The Parable of the Sadhu* omits the most important theme: what duties do we have towards our fellow beings?

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<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, pp. 169-170.

<sup>43</sup> M. Maccoby, *The Corporate Climber Has to Find His Heart*, “Fortune” December 1976, p. 98.

My interpretation would be different. The attitude of the good Samaritan in relation to business, meaning profit-oriented activity (as opposed to non-profit activity), means foregoing the profit! In a specific situation, the calculation that is of key importance for business is abandoned and higher values are served, that is, to put it metaphorically, the climb is interrupted in order to help the sadhu. And the decision does not have to be absurd from a business point of view. Among his six general types of business activity, Henri Fayol distinguished security measures related to protecting personnel and company assets.<sup>44</sup> One can therefore imagine a situation, e.g. a natural catastrophe, in which saving people is the most important.

Of course ordinarily this concerns more mundane situations such as, for example, the noise or smell from a manufacturing plant that bothers its neighbours. Can one then imagine foregoing profit in the name of helping fellow beings? Would we not be demanding too much? This is precisely what the doctrine of corporate social responsibility is about. The truth is that, at least in the short-term, it means a drop in profits. Things are similar in regard to professions: the doctor's obligation in certain situations is to provide help without payment, and as such foregoing profit. CSR is therefore an appeal for a type of professionalism in management, for noticing our duties towards fellow people. A great paradox of the financial crisis 2007-2009 was that big companies demanding state aid were referring to their social role, pointing out their social functions as justifying aid from the state. The same kind of reasoning lays at the foundations of the stakeholder concept. It was Berle and Means who wrote in the nineteen-thirties that, because of their impact on society, big corporations had ceased to be just ordinary private businesses – since they fulfilled the function of social institutions.<sup>45</sup> Today big companies in trouble (“too big to fail”) refer to this reasoning, indirectly admitting that proponents of the concept of corporate social responsibility are right.

Therefore *The Parable of the Sadhu* raises the problem of abandoning (at least in part) the company's main goal. It introduces us also to the broader problem of duty towards another person. It allows a review of numerous concepts and thought experiments relating to the question in the title, and going beyond purely business issues. The question “who is my neighbour?”

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<sup>44</sup> J.A.F. Stoner, R.E. Freeman, *Management. Fourth Edition*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1989, p. 42 (Security measures accompany technical, commercial, financial, accounting and managerial functions in the strict sense.)

<sup>45</sup> A.A. Berle, G.C. Means, *The modern corporation and private property. Revised edition*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York 1968, p. XXVI ff.

asked today opens the doors to philosophical deliberation, but does not provide an ultimate answer, just like the story told by McCoy. The decision to choose the “lower path” cannot be rash. Arguments about cultural superiority or throwing money away might still appear. The fact is that only a profitable company can serve society well, and only well-considered and well-organised charity can help those to whom it is addressed. This, among other things, is what Appiah had in mind. We still have the right to go climbing and to go to the opera, because above all it is where people go to the opera that making collections for charitable goals is possible. If the question about one’s duty to one’s fellow beings constitutes the CSR concept, then at the same time it also forces us to make a multifaceted inspection of this issue. Above all, though, it forces us to combine sensitivity with analysis, emotions with a rational inspection of reality. The degree of complexity in the discussion regarding counteracting poverty in Third World countries is definitely higher than the degree of complexity in the discussion regarding CSR. Nevertheless, here as well it is far from small.

Ten years ago life itself added another comment to *The Parable of the Sadhu*. The story is similar, except that here the mountaineering expedition is not only a metaphor for business, but is also business. In the spring of 2006, a 34-year-old Brit, David Sharp, died in the Himalayas on the way to Mount Everest. As he sat dying next to the path, approximately forty climbers walked past him. Perhaps some thought he was dead, others claimed that it was too late to help him, and others still – that the conditions were so tough that it meant death for any climber who broke a leg or even simply collapsed. The story acquired significant publicity, not only among mountaineering fans but also in the world media, and particularly in the Internet.

All of those Everest expeditions that passed Sharp were commercial. Their participants pay from fifty to sixty thousand dollars, while professional mountaineers and Sherpas lead them to the summit. Everybody is in a great hurry, and everybody would like to “conquer” the peak that they have paid for. The fact that the path to the summit has become so busy brings to mind even more the Parable of the good Samaritan who helped a stranger on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. However, mountaineer Anna Czerwińska warns against making rash judgments, especially as not all of us are capable of imagining what people go through in the mountains, and specifically on the route to Everest, where during the climbing season there are several expeditions every day. “You have dozens of people surging there non-stop, most of them having won on the exchange or come into an inheritance from their granny, and who have paid fifty thousand dollars for the only chance

in their lives to stand on the roof of the world. In addition, the entire crowd is a little light-headed because of the oxygen deficit. At that point you just think of one thing: that dozens of people have died here, but I'm going to climb it and nothing's going to get in my way. [...] [A] person is just a part of a huge caterpillar sliding upwards. You get lost within the human mass. Precisely as on the Marszałkowska Street [in Warsaw], here you can die in the middle of the day and nobody will notice."<sup>46</sup>

*The Parable of the sadhu* serves today's ethical deliberations in many diverse ways. Also in the context of not taking measures that might save the life of a person in danger. (This is also a legal issue, especially in Anglo-Saxon culture, known as the "bad Samaritan problem.") The biblical question, "and who is my neighbour?" (one I should love as I love myself) continues to open up new fields of ethical discussion, including on the matter of the businessperson's duty towards employees and other company stakeholders, especially in the situation of globalisation of the economy and the internationalisation of all interpersonal contacts related to these processes.

### Other parables, other religions

I have focused on two parables that have long been present in ethical reflection. We can of course also find many others in the Bible, even more connected to business. The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16: 1-8) has a surprising ending (in which the man seems to be praising the dishonest practices of his manager whom he must fire). Parables without a clear interpretation actually stimulate the imagination, and incline one to seek new arguments.

There are also many different religious traditions and they all constitute foundations for ethical reasoning. Suffice to recall the Asian cultures and their religious traditions, which in a situation of fast economic growth in China, South Korea and India is leading researchers to also seek the causes of economic success in the religious imagination shaping the work ethos and methods of company management. Neither is it possible to avoid discussion between representatives of different religious traditions. The same ethical

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<sup>46</sup> *Idę, skacząc po górach. Z himalaistką Anną Czerwińską rozmawia Szymon Hołownia* [Jumping through the mountains. A Himalayan mountaineer Anna Czerwińska interviewed by Szymon Hołownia], "Rzeczpospolita" (supplement "Plus Minus"), 2006, no. 158, p. 12.

problems may be interpreted differently in different cultural contexts. The Confucian approach to the issue of human rights could serve as an example.<sup>47</sup>

As such, focusing on the Christian tradition does not mean ignoring the impact of other religions, but is simply a narrowing down of the issue. I am interested in certain biblical themes and how they are reflected in the deliberations of business ethicists and entrepreneurs themselves. Although one cannot disregard these themes, one has to remember that their interpretation changes over time. Nobody today would be able to interpret the Parable of the Talents in the spirit of Social Darwinism as Andrew Carnegie did. The issues of corporate social responsibility gain more from the abandoning of the paternalistic tone of the captains of industry of that time. As for the Parable of the Good Samaritan, it – as I have strived to prove – still has significant potential in this respect and can constantly be “told” anew. In a pluralistic, post-metaphysical world, narratives are becoming an essential and the only support for ethical reasoning. A parable imposes nothing, yet at the same time opens up new possibilities in the defining of the existing situation. In a world without the absolute, we are condemned to reasoning and argumentation, and it would not be possible without referring to the narratives that culture has to offer us.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See e.g. A.D. Bailey, *Confucianism-Based Rights Skepticism and Rights in the Workplace*, “Business Ethics Quarterly” vol. 21, 4/2011, p. 661, and in the same issue, A. Strudler, *Morality Without Rights*, p. 672.

<sup>48</sup> See D. Burrell, S. Hauerwas (eds), *From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics*, in D. Callahan, H.T. Engelhardt, Jr., *The Roots of Ethics. Science, Religion, and Values*, Plenum Press, New York – London 1981, p. 75

