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INFOETHICS – A NEW TREND IN THE SCIENCE

MICHAŁ WYROSTKIEWICZ

Abstract. Infoethics is a concept that arises at the interface between normative science, cognition and communication sciences and media sciences. It is a complete novelty. The conducted research recognizes it among many scientific concepts and finds its proper place and creates foundations of its research methodology.

Keywords: infoethics, morality, information, communication, media, human ecology.

1. INTRODUCTION

The primary (general) scientific objective of the project described here was a reflection on the exploitation of information (data) from the perspective of moral theology, meaning its acquisition, processing, storage and transfer. The idea was to test the subjective aspect of these activities; to diagnose and describe how exploiting information affects the human-person, and especially the role this plays in the integral development of this entity. This was to reveal the sensitive points (areas) from the point of view of moral theology in the process of exploiting information. This in turn would contribute to the development of the rules governing this activity in such a way as to make it a positive factor for the already mentioned integral development, which is seen as one of the basic moral imperatives in the life of the human person. Thus, I created the foundations and pillars of infoethics, which is understood as a new concept in the context of moral theology.

As used herein, the term “infoethics” has been taken from the teachings of Pope Benedict XVI. It makes a scientific reflection on the morality of the use of information, a reflection that - writes the Pope - is to be an “analogy to bioethics, existing in the field of medicine and scientific research on life” [1]. It therefore has to be - to put it generally - a collection of arguments and standards to steer the advancement of mankind regarding information. This direction is to be - as Benedict XVI states - “jealously guarding people”, i.e. ensuring their proper, meaning central place in the world and enabling them to achieve their goals and find meaning in their existence.

The previously mentioned development of the foundation and the pillars of infoethics includes clarifying the area of exploration of this emerging concept, identifying and naming the objects of the undertaken research, identifying the ways and sources of morally evaluating the use of information, and to precisely define and consolidate the concepts used with respect to those that already exist in science - e.g. information, communication, the web surfer [2], and those that are completely new and introduced, something necessary to do in the course of this study. These concepts are the result of the

original scientific work conducted. These include among others: environmental infocomponents, infocracy, anticommunication, and the communicative act. Using the nomenclature functioning in the framework of moral theology and by analogy to the internal division in this field, we can say that in this way we have developed the beginnings of fundamental infoethics (overall). This can be a good starting point for the development of this concept, whether it can be cultivated within the framework of moral theology, or – alternatively – as an autonomous prescriptive approach. It is therefore a definite contribution to the development of a broadly perceived science.

In addition to the above mentioned fundamental issues of infoethics (general or fundamental infoethics) perceived as part of special moral theology, an important effect of the scientific work described here are the solutions to ethical problems based on the foundations of the exploitation of information (special infoethics). In these studies, I described the effects of acquiring, processing, storing and transmitting information via the Internet. However, this was not the only issue undertaken. This research, according to the title of the project presented here, concerned the personal aspect of exploiting information in a broad way. This is shown in the above described fundamental issues.

Issues concerning internet morality – or, as stated in the title of the monograph, which contains a fundamental part of this history, meaning its “(im)morality” [2] – are a result of the application of the developed fundamentals in a particular area of human activity. The fact of obtaining consistent results that are positively verified in different contexts without a doubt proves not only the veracity of the developed fundamental theses, but also their universality. This appears to be very valuable for the emerging science of infoethics.

2. METHODS

Although the research related to morality, it is worth noting that in wording the above central theses, it is not sufficient to remain in the area of moral theology’s knowledge, but it is necessary to go beyond it. Achieving the desired results would be impossible without reference to the sciences of cognition and communication, philosophy, sociology and psychology, as well as broader knowledge about the media, media education and information technology. This clearly shows that the research studies were of an interdisciplinary nature, which seems so obvious for this broad area of research.

It is worth noting that the key methodology used in the conducted explorations was the characteristic for human ecology moral paradigm of ecology [3]. Such an approach in the spirit of human ecology demonstrates the originality and even novelty of the analyses. Human ecology was also a tool for organizing this anthropological thesis, including the contents on the broadly understood meaning of the human person’s environment. Given that the research is characterized by the use of human-ecological “optics” (the clearest example is the aforementioned ecological paradigm), which itself is the result of incorporating a reflecting on the moral and theological methodological elements typical of the natural sciences, one can discern the transdisciplinary feature. This undoubtedly is not typical of moral theology, and therefore an expression of the originality of the project.

3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The foundation of the research is the knowledge of the moral theology's anthropology. Anthropological theses created in the spirit of human ecology are the starting point and the first tool used to verify the nature of morally studied activities. They provide the reasons for conducting detailed analyzes and constructing syntheses. All our reflections ultimately come down to - as has already been mentioned at the beginning – a statement on how some specific activities involving the exploitation of information, undertaken in specific circumstances and using special tools (mainly the information society and the Internet, but also in all media) influence the integral development of a concrete person. This focus on personal development is to emphasize the idea that morality – or, as we can say, referring

to the title of the monograph – immorality is always a deep personal matter. A proper assessment of the moral nature of an activity must take into account not only the circumstances and actions concerning the matter, but also – and above all – the identity of the acting person: his nature and essence. This anthropological emphasis, which emphasizes the need to pay attention to ecology understood as compatibility with nature – is one of the characteristic features of this research.

The emphasis on the personal dimension of morality does not conflict with stressing the importance of the social dimension of human existence [4; 5]. This is a consequence of the fact that the human – a person – is essentially for the community, or even simply for communication (*homo communicans*). This means that forming the community (*communio personarum*) is for him natural to the extent that it brings up a moral imperative: a human person must enter into relationships with others, they must create a community of people in order to live a full life – to be a fully human person. A community of people is so important in the life of every human person that it appears to be almost a quasi-transcendent reality – as I wrote in the mentioned monograph. It is the fundamental value for every human person, necessary for their natural functioning, achieving the objective and finding meaning in their existence.

A community is the necessary beginning of communication, one of the manifestations of information exploitation, which consists, as already mentioned above, of acquisition, processing, storage and transmission. In this way, it is communication that turns out to be “the key to the whole social issue” [2]. Generally understood, exploiting information appears as a basic, necessary human activity on earth, and therefore the main task, which can lead to “tensions of an ethical nature” and along with it come moral effects [2; 6].

In carrying out this natural task, media plays a big role in exploiting information, among which the Internet deserves special attention. Information and infrastructure that enable its exploitation are so important in the life of the human person that it appears to be an infocomponent, one of the three (along with nature and society) basic elements of the natural environment of the human person perceived from the perspective of human ecology [7].

A clear distinction between the social and community character of human existence, presenting a community of people as a quasi-transcendent reality, the way of perception of the communication the key to social issues and exploitation of information which are the core business of the human person are the important original results of my conducted research. These also include introducing into moral theology the term “exploitation of information” after defining it for the purposes of this research work [2]. Redefining the subject was also one of the key terms, namely “communication” that was closely connected with the community [2]. An absolute novelty are the following terms: anticommunication [6; 2], infocracy [8], environmental infocomponent [7] and infoascetics [9].

Communication as a subject of infoethical reflection in moral theology is a complex issue. To a great extent this is due to the fact that it is naturally an interpersonal phenomenon (which should be highlighted – emphasizing that truth is an important result of the study), and thus, from a methodological viewpoint, it is a social fact. This means that at least two entities participate in it – at least two rational and free individuals that have their own understanding of good, their own intentions, their own goals and their own circumstances; they find themselves in different moral situations. Thus, although the efficiency and quality of communication depends on the joint efforts of all participants and each of them individually, the moral evaluation is always made in relation to a particular entity. The fact that others participate in communication, from the point of view of moral theology, only adds circumstances (*circumstantiae*), and they have an impact on the final assessment of the moral act. However, they are not able to change the classification resulting from the subjective goal (*finis operantis*) and the objective goal (*finis operis*) [10]. Emphasizing the personal responsibility of every participant in the communication processes is an important point of this scientific research.

The subjective aspect of the exploitation of information made in terms of moral theology clearly concerns problems in the media (mass media), as already mentioned. In the modern world, they in fact are the major media carriers, becoming for the people of the twenty-first century (and even the XX) obvious and basic tools for information acquisition, processing, storage and transmission. Among other things, it is evident that the use of the media and its role in the functioning of and influence on the

integral development of modern human has become the basis of the innovative thesis speaking about the existence of the infocomponent within the natural environment of the human person (this mainly concerns the importance of the media infrastructure, which formed the media understood as tools and as institutions). The study helped determine the ambivalent nature of the media in relation to the development of a person [7].

Media have an ambivalent character to the integral development of the human person. On the one hand, the media appear to be a powerful tool for communication. In this situation, they are recognized as a reality that can contribute to the integral development of individuals and society as a whole by helping us to get to the truth, making community ties and supporting freedom. On the other hand, it is not difficult to see them as sources of slavery (especially addictions), as factors affecting effective enslavement, the reasons for the lack of critical thinking and exploring the need to seek the truth, or even media untruth and violence, and as a result these are factors devastating the community and supporting selfishness. Consequently, it can all lead to nothing but the degradation of humanity and reducing the “personal element” in the life of a specific person or society, or even the integral regression of humanity. It is worth noting that the adverse impact of the media bears a moral responsibility not only on the widely understood sender (i.e. the people of the media, creators of media), but also the audience. The need to acquire knowledge necessary for the proper use of the media, due to their above-mentioned role in the modern world, should be seen as a moral imperative [11].

An important problem in this research was the matter termed *Morality in the information society*. One of the original aspects of this project was to draw attention to the community nature of the information society, which is undoubtedly a novelty in this research. It is original because in many of the existing market studies (mostly non-theological), the authors focused primarily on the meaning of information society (emphasizing its “informationness”). We lack such investigations and publications that emphasized that such a society is primarily a society. You can even venture to say that this issue is not valued enough (although some conditions for such thinking have already been developed – in Poland, a precursor to this point of view is J. Nagórny [12]). Focusing attention on information, informationness and information technology in the modern world, if man is overlooked in this study, he is reduced and seen as a kind of network element of information and information technology. An analysis of the nature of information society has become the basis for the development of the natural constraints specific to man, where rules of conduct have the character of moral imperatives, the observance of which allows us to keep a real community spirit alive (that is, a spirit of *communio personarum*) in a society and provide the integral development of each person in society [13; 15].

The entire above signaled “ethics for the Internet user” is preceded by a reflection on the essence and nature of the information and data processed by computers. Information is presented as the primary reality – a kind of principium of the world, something that exists “from the beginning” and will exist “to the end” but only changing its form, the result of its exploitation. The main exploiter is the human-person. Man acquires, processes, stores and transmits information, thus shaping the world. Of course, such actions bring about moral consequences. All this is starting to reveal the role and importance of information exploitation taking on the form of computer data and the wider creation of reality, including the social and personal development of individuals.

An important element of research is to show the identity and the ensuing moral situation for the Internet user (of course, in terms of the “average” moral situation - in the strict sense, as we know from general moral theology, it is always a very personal experience for every human being). In this context, I pointed to the fact that the surfer is a person, which is the main feature of his identity. The purpose and meaning of his existence are the same as for all people. Also, an assessment of his activities is carried out according to the same criteria, which are the essential sources of morality (*fontes moralitatis*). This web surfer is a human person and is to be the “focal point of information society”.

The fact of belonging to this society greatly affects the functioning of the Internet user: it enforces certain behavior and limits. Similar effects also lead to the fact that the basic tool of activity is the internet. It is easy to succumb to these mechanisms. This is due to a great extent with the physical and

mental conditions of man. Therefore, the publication often emphasized that the surfer cannot allow being treated – even by himself – as a specific element of the computer information system. An important argument is also acknowledging that the almost unlimited access to all kinds of information and its increased exploitation cannot be equated with communication, which is essential in the creation of a real community. Lack of communication is the inability to create a community. Because this is necessary for human and personal development, the surfer must take care not to stop at the level of simple exploitation of information, but go on to communicate. In the context of discussing the community, we are also talking about the need to physically experience another person. This is due to the spiritual and physical structure of the person, which is the basis for the spiritual and physical experiences which are elements of integral development.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Undertaking such research is seen as important and highly relevant today, at a time when information and exploiting it are regarded as a basic good and skill. Today we speak of a time of the existence of society that is highly valued (and sometimes even a transvaluation), but not because of the widespread computerization and the popularity of the products of information technology (emphasizing this point of view, it also describes the originality of this project).

Although undoubtedly a reflection on the personal aspect of the exploitation of information is partly a moral theological reflection, however, at this stage of the research, there is no doubt that the emergence of infoethics as a separate concept in moral theology (in the mainstream of moral theology next to bioethics, social moral theology, etc.) appears to be sensible, justifiable and beneficial to science by practically using its results. This idea is one of the most important results of the carried out research.

Infoethics research can and should become a specific quest within moral theology. It is specific mainly due to the subject matter, but also methodologically, which – as a consequence of dealing with this subject – calls for interdisciplinary work. There is no doubt that we cannot sensibly, reliably and comprehensively answer the moral questions related to this area, which creates infoethics research, without knowledge on the science of media and communication, as well as many other areas dealing with specific aspects of the exploitation of information (e.g. linguistics, editing, computer science, physics, the science of cognition and communication, psychology). We must know the nature of information and the principles and ways of using it, including technical issues. Without this knowledge, we are not able to respond in a satisfactory way to many moral-infoethics questions; we might not see many problems, and some of the answers may prove to be incorrect (because, for example, of the unresponsive nature of the media process, or even communication). Thus, knowledge in these areas that are not theological is necessary for conducting meaningful research on infoethics; it is necessary to properly understand the subject of the act (*finis operis*), constituting one of the basic criteria of the sources of an act's morality (*fontes moralitatis*).

Noting and stressing the above fact, even the natural emergence of infoethics as a specifically autonomous (quasi-autonomous) area of expertise (“unique” and “quasi” because – as noted – it is, though an exceptional, part of moral theology), I want to draw attention to the systematic research results on infoethics that can become a set of norms on the use of information. They can become consistent and very specific guidelines for those who want to consciously use information. Applying these tips will not require going into the intricacies of moral theology and making a complex reflection aimed at answering the emerging questions, but will make it possible to find answers, giving reasons and explanations. Here we explicitly point out the social utility of such research, which is their positive aspect.

It is worth noting that these performed tests were not designed to be a final, complete, constructed, developed and described work on infoethics. They were not a meta-academic exploration in the field of scientific studies. However, they naturally took on such a form (it is obvious that when creating a new concept it is necessary to consider these types of questions), yet these necessary meta-scientific elements

were treated as “passage moments” – the unique tools for exploration compatible with the original goals and objectives (as pointed to above). A thorough, systematic, holistic (textbook) characterization of infoethics as a unified scientific concept might be the next step. Its foundation was prepared by my research. In this way, the achievement which is their aftermath emerges as a contribution to further developing scientific projects and organizing knowledge, which once again highlights their importance for the development of moral theology, and the overall perception of science.

Returning to the issue of a detailed analysis expressed in the slogan *the Internet and (Im)Morality*, it must be said that it this mainly concerned investigating the potential and very likely moral situation of the subject conducting information activities based on data obtained by empirical investigators and to give them indications as to what behavior would be most useful for them. Of course – according to the methodology of normative science, in the carried out research area – these precepts take the form of moral norms, the observance of which is seen as a guarantee to preserve their own identity, while moving towards integral development. The conclusions developed in this way on the one hand give rise to a thorough body of detailed infoethics, but on the other hand are exemplary and contribute to further reflections being made within the emerging moral-science concept seeking its final form.

The above description shows that the presented scientific undertaking undoubtedly affects the development of science, and particularly moral theology and ethics. Firstly, this is because it presents and utilizes an innovative way of conducting research using the ecological moral paradigm. Secondly, because it provides new detailed knowledge introduced into special moral theology. Thirdly, because it forms the clear foundations of a new concept in moral theology called infoethics. In addition, it assigns a specific place and strengthens its position in the system of sciences. The objective of this study mentioned above was achieved.

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Address: Michał Wyrostkiewicz, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Aleje Racławickie 14, Lublin, 20-950, Poland.

E-mail: m.wyrostkiewicz@gmail.com.

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У статті висвітлено сутність інфоетики як нового напрямку дослідження в гуманітарній науці. Автором обґрунтовано власну концепцію інфоетики на стику нормативної науки, пізнання і комунікаційних наук, наук про засоби масової інформації. Запропоновано істотно нові підходи до визначення наукових понять, основ методології дослідження інфоетики у сучасному науковому просторі.

Ключові слова: інфоетика, моральність, інформація, комунікація, засоби масової інформації, екологія людини.