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Cosimo Jaś William
John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (Poland)
ORCID: 0009-0004-9335-5894

Jan Kłos
John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (Poland)
ORCID: 0000-0002-8043-3820

The Call of Duty and Adverse Circumstances

Powinność i niekorzystne okoliczności

Abstract

This paper is a commentary on the short story entitled *The Healer*, and delves into the philosophies that precede and seek to explain the actions of the characters and the relevant plot points. Centring around the bond between human beings and the situations that life has brought to them, this commentary sets out to seek out why humans react the way they do in the face of pain and suffering. With the aid of Jaspers' philosophy, and the works of Graham Greene, C. J. Williams and J. Kłos proceed to expand upon what humans truly desire most when driven to times of desperation, and what guides them to make potential life altering decisions. When dealing with the world of *The Healer*, the chaotic mix of a setting based in World War Two, the presence of disease, and the need to uphold loyalties and duties provides a formula ripe for exploring the relationship between suffering, family, and adversities.

Key words: *decisions, disease, duty, fear, suffering.*

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą filozoficzno-literackiego komentarza do opowiadania zatytułowanego *The Healer* (Uzdrowiciel), odnoszącego się do działań bohaterów oraz istotnych punktów fabuły. Skupiając się na więzach międzyludzkich i sytuacjach, które przyniosło im życie, niniejszy komentarz ma na celu znalezienie odpowiedzi na pytanie, dlaczego ludzie reagują w taki, a nie inny sposób w obliczu bólu i cierpienia. Odwołując się do Jaspersowskich sytuacji granicznych i dzieł Grahama Greene'a, C.J. Williams i J. Kłos analizuję to, jak ludzie zachowują się, gdy są zmuszeni do desperacji, i co kieruje nimi przy podejmowaniu potencjalnych decyzji zmieniających życie. Jeśli chodzi o świat *Uzdrowiciela*, mamy kontekst II wojny światowej i wynikający z tego chaos, obecność choroby oraz potrzebę zachowania lojalności – to stanowi tło dla analizy relacji między cierpieniem, rodziną i przeciwnościami.

Słowa kluczowe: *decyzje, choroba, obowiązek, strach, cierpienie.*

Good or evil, it is yours,
you belong to it, and this side the grave
you will never get away from the marks
that it has given you.

G. Orwell

This article seeks to analyse the moral dilemmas confronting human agents in difficult circumstances, especially when they are called upon to make decisions in spite of those circumstances. We have taken as a point of reference a short story whose main plot is an event that took place during the Second World War. The original version of the story was written in Polish and published in a collection of short stories.[1] *The Healer* portrays a man who, regardless of the war situation, is determined to stand by his duties and continue his practice of curing people. Furthermore, the story shows that when important values are at stake and you realise that your enemies can help aid in the desire to uphold them, they unexpectedly cease to be enemies and become your last resort.

Indeed, wars redefine human relationships and write their own scenarios. Yesterday's brothers become today's foes; the situation being typical of a civil war in particular. The whole process is further reinforced when inhuman ideologies intervene; as we learn from history, there are ideologies which in turn can reduce some members of humanity to subhuman and weaker, while others play the role

[1] J. Kłos, *Uzdrowiciel* [The Healer], in: the same, *Koncert a-moll i inne opowiadania* [Concert in A-Minor and Other Stories]. Lublin: Norbertinum, 2003, p. 61-75. The short story was translated into English by Hugh McDonald. We are referring here to the English manuscript. In the references, we shall be quoting the manuscript as Healer.

of the master race—the basic premise of National Socialism. Then the process of elimination is accelerated and the methods used are justified. If remorse arises—after all, natural human reactions never die—one can always resort to certain apparently mitigating circumstances, namely that orders must be carried out.

As regards the conflict between moral obligation and adverse circumstances *The Healer* resembles the gloomy atmosphere of the literary picture of the world penned by Graham Greene. We mean especially his well-known trilogy: *The Heart of the Matter*, *Brighton Rock*, and *The Power and the Glory*. These three novels depict harassed protagonists: the young criminal Pinky (*Brighton Rock*), Major Scobie in the grips of pity (*The Heart of the Matter*), and anonymous "whisky priest" paralysed by paroxysms stretched between sacerdotal duties and sinful failures. The resemblance is not exact, for in Greene obligation is depicted as a temptation and mercy is mingled with pity. However, for the protagonist of *The Healer*, the house of mercy is always where it should be—in the truth. What all these texts have in common, nevertheless, are the unexpected challenges posed by the changed situation.

Now in *The Healer* the titular healer (quack doctor) is not tempted in this manner. He remains steadfast in his calling, as if nothing wrong has happened. Given that there are no hints to the contrary. Thus, the duty towards the suffering appears to gain a universal value that crosses over boundaries of races, nations, and political decisions.

In contrast, the "whisky priest" of Greene's *The Power and the Glory* has dilemmas of a different kind. His fidelity to sacerdotal duty turns out to be a trap, that it was an inert attachment to duty that decided his fate. And this was Greene's effect, his trademark: a man immersed in the consequences of his sin, who at the same time is a priest faithful to his priestly vocation. Ultimately, the reader is left with a question mark: is the dying priest a sinner or a saint? Greene seems to warn the reader: do not jump to conclusions, if you are too hasty in making a condemnatory judgement. In Słowikowski's case, there are no such dangers

Whilst there are sudden twists and turns in Greene's world, in the *The Healer* the action seems to flow smoothly from one moment to the next, though not without tense anticipation. The healer (quack), as we learn in the story, is a good father and husband. He has inherited a special talent for diagnosing and treating people, being a specialist in alternative medicine, one might say, using the modern term. Because he is well rooted in what we might call common morality, he is at peace with himself.[1] He has no addictions, extramarital

[1] Greene succinctly describes such a morality in his letter: "First I would say there are certain human duties I owe in common with the greengrocer or the clerk—that of supporting my family if I have a family, of not robbing the poor, the blind, the widow or the orphan, of dying if the authorities demand it (it is the only way to remain independent: the conscientious objector is forced to become a teacher in order to justify himself). These are our primitive duties as human beings [...]. (Pryce-Jones, 1963, p. 99)

affairs or illegitimate children. The only focal point around which his life revolves is his diagnosis and subsequent treatment. What links the two worlds, Greene's and Kłos', are complicated circumstances; both are worlds turned upside down, incoherent and in chaos. (see Kłos, 2012, *passim*) The war has put the quack in danger; suddenly his talent for healing people has become a wager and taken on a whole new dimension.

The Plot in Brief

The line between enemies and allies can be a blurry one, some may always be considered one or the other but oftentimes it is the circumstances in which one is entrapped that forces his hand to decide who is who. In one scenario someone may be a fellow countryman not worthy of a suspicious eye and in another a devil that cannot be trusted. However, what is it then when one must confide in that devil, or better yet, reach out for a helping hand. Can a so-called enemy truly help? Would they even help if given the chance. Perhaps it is not so clear to distinguish individuals in such a way as humans are complex and so are the relationships between them; so if the narrative shifts between friend or foe independent of the individual, perhaps there are no enemies or allies in the truest forms of the word, but merely people. Just people who play their roles in whatever way is deemed necessary. In the story entitled *The Healer*, the premise is set up to put the characters in a dilemma of associating with who they see as the enemy. The Healer is a man named Tadeusz Słowikowski, a Polish man with a hereditary talent of being able to diagnose and cure any patient brought to him and opposite of him is Mayor Steinkopf, who holds power in the midst of Germany's rampage during the Second World War. With this being said, it is obvious that the relationship between the two men has already had a foundation long before they even met. But how could this be? How can two individuals already have a baseline for their connection before even meeting?

All the information they have about one another is the product of rumours and cultural issues, but nothing really concrete and personal. However, there is nothing else it could. With Mayor Steinkopf being an important German political figure and Słowikowski being a Pole with a strange gift; the culture at the time sets them on opposite sides of the field. Their true connection starts when misfortune falls upon Mayor Steinkopf and his son. The Mayor's son is struck with an illness that not even Germany's best physicians and doctors can figure out. Mayor Steinkopf, with his hands essentially tied behind his back, is forced to seek out the help of this mysterious Polish *miracle worker*. This action in itself not only symbolically hurts the notion of German pride, but also the ego of Mayor Steinkopf; how could a man with undying loyalty to his country's cause seek out what seems to be some mere trickery? If the best German science could not cure his son, how could some Pole without formal education do so? And he

resorts to irony, a powerful weapon of criticism known since the time of Socrates. The German derides:

> He helped, he helped ... Some hocus pocus with urine! Why not then? What could it harm him? Have you thought about how we are going to look in the eyes of our government? That would make a fine story on the front page of the newspapers. A German official gave his son over to the hands of a Polish folk doctor. He didn't have confidence in the doctors of the Reich. (Kłos, 2004, p. 3)

However, in the case of Socrates, irony is indeed a powerful weapon, but in Mayor's case it is only a sign of surrender and helplessness. The scepticism itself does not merely come from the disdain for a quack doctor, but for the fact that the individual in question is seen as a pest by Steinkopf and his party, a fact which adds to his sense of helplessness. All those that the German government deemed "undesirable" were meant to be exterminated, not collaborated with. But nonetheless, Steinkopf finds himself with his hand extended towards Słowikowski in order to save his son.

Perhaps at the end of the day, the allegiances, contracts, and political ties lose their control when faced with a much stronger force, a person's true desires. Throughout all these social stigmas and being pushed and pulled in multiple directions by society, it seems that at the end of the day, it is what is in a person's heart that will drive their actions. Whether that be the acceptance of a society or the health of their family. And it is in that where they will truly find who is friend and who is foe. As personified at the end of *The Healer*, when the Russians begin to invade, Steinkopf extends a helping hand to Słowikowski as a token of gratitude for his assistance. All the animosity and hate have evaporated in the face of a true bond, based not on the world's view of who they were, but instead who they were to each other.

The Power of Man versus Hope

It must be observed that the healer does not stop his practice of curing people after the war has broken out. Such a behaviour must have been outright suspected. In general, gatherings of people are suspected and prohibited by the Nazis.

The call of duty is almost always confronted with adverse circumstances. Has it ever been otherwise? These circumstances may come from without—from oppressive political systems, from threat; they may come from within—from some blots on character, cowardice, temptations to find shortcuts through bribery and the like. The literary protagonists of the so-called Greeneland (the world created by Graham Greene in his novels mentioned before) suffer severe predicaments in the places where they live. History provides us with ample

examples of people who were thus exposed to trial and yet manifested their dauntless courage and endured: from ancient Antigone and Socrates, through Thomas Morus, to heroes of the twentieth-century wars. The natural reaction under such unwelcome circumstances is fear, denial, or flight. There are people, however, who irrespective of their situation manage to stand up to imminent danger. We must bear in mind that this, shall we say, inherent inadequacy between the individual person and his political, economic and social conditions is the natural fate of humanity. The human person is not a mathematical formula; he or she is a dynamic being, a whirlpool of various processes and, it must be stressed, a mystery.

The literary healer is such because external conditions actually contradict his steadfast adherence to his duties, and yet he does not give up. Unlike Greene's protagonists, who give in to inertia and despair, the healer resolves to take action. As French historian and sociologist Jacques Ellul aptly describes it in his thought-provoking book *Hope in Time of Abandonment*. Sometimes God seems to have withdrawn from the city of man, so that man can be more active in practicing hope. Man is put to the test in confrontation of adversities. There no props to help him continue the struggle of life, and going forward he must. There is hope in action. As weak as the human beings are, they must strive to use whatever feeble resources they have. Therefore, let us stress, God seems to have withdrawn from the human playground at the time of war, so that man could rise in hope. (Ellul, 1977, p. 210-214) Elluls notes "that hope [...] *consequently* applies to man." (Ellul, 1977, p. 211)

Both Steinkopf and Słowikowski have hope. The German officer has hope that his son will be cured; the quack doctor has hope that he will cure the boy, and thereby save his own family. We do not think that the healer places his hope on a utilitarian scale: that his success will bring security to his family. After all, despite his long practice, he can never be sure about success. Medical diagnosis, and its subsequent treatment, are governed by induction. And induction, as we know, does not give infallible knowledge. Our conclusions in induction are based on the given n cases. And we cannot predict with a hundred percent certainty the outcome of the n+1 case.

But there is something deeply mysterious and miraculous about hope; that it can unite enemies in mutual emotion. A high value is at stake for each of the characters. The power of man is miraculously transformed over the course of events into the power of hope. The German officer, powerful as he is, must surrender to hope, must give way to hope. And this hope is placed in the hands of the enemy, in the hands of someone inferior, someone who does not belong to the master race! War and suffering can bring unexpected changes.

The transition from power to hope in the case of the German officer is worthy of note. He has to acknowledge his own weakness and the danger of being exposed, assuming that this is his real concern. It can only have been

an exaggerated precaution. Steinkopf denies any threats to himself on account of his contacts with the Polish healer. The Mayor covers his hope by a patronising and pretentious tone:

> Do not imagine that I have lost confidence in our German doctors. Quite simply, I wanted to see what power lies dormant in these Polish herbs. Such observations would benefit German science. (Kłos, 2004, p. 8)

Of course such high-flown speeches make no impression on the healer. He perfectly senses their pretentiousness. Rather, they only testify to the Mayor's inner struggle. An inexplicable and incurable suffering has redefined their relationship. Steinkopf, the planner, the child of the enlightened era, has not taken into account the effect of such suffering, the suffering that has encroached upon his life without asking for permission. It is like a motion that has breached the protocol. And now he has to ask his enemy for help. In that sense, the boy's disease is something unpredictable and dangerous for the German officer. He has learnt that family ties may unexpectedly put his loyalty to the State at stake, and become more powerful than the mission of the master race. He hesitates whether this decision will undermine his political position, but such hesitations have given way in the face of paternal concern.

Steinkopf has to rely not only on a Polish specialist, but also on dubious medical practices. A representative of a master race whose members are so enthusiastic about carrying out pseudo-medical experiments with advanced ambitions must resort to the help of a quack doctor when the search for esoteric answers runs dry. This must have been a great lesson in humility for him. At such moments, family ties seem to outweigh loyalty to the state and political ambitions, which is a positive message for humanity: the family does indeed seem to be prior to the State. A person can never entirely cease to be human. Moreover, we must add that this attachment to family is not, so to speak, tainted by treachery, deceit or partiality. Rather, it is guided by fidelity to the responsibility for the relatives entrusted to Steinkopf's care. He has managed to retain his humanity in his love for his son.

Modernity has brought about many turning points in its course. When the humans realised their creative role in reconstituting the world by the blueprints of their own minds, they had to suffer from time to time the violent social eruptions. The social upheavals took place, for example, in the twentieth-century in the forms of the Bolshevik and national socialist revolutions. In his insightful discussion of the clash between the pre-modern and modern eras, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor defined secular time as "the absence of an action-transcendent grounding." (Taylor, 2007, p. 209) This could be true, assuming that a given time is an enclosed area with no access of to what is unpredictable, what comes from the so-called human factor. But such

an outcome is never possible. There is always a chance for action-*transcendent* moments.

There are moments that shatter what has seemingly been constructed as stable and permanent. The German philosopher, a representative of existentialism, Karl Jaspers called them *borderline situations*. (Jaspers, 4) Suffering is one such situation, especially the suffering of loved ones. Steinkopf realises to his surprise, and even horror, that he can no longer rely on his political system and formal procedures. What is more, in this dire need of help he is ready to lose, or at least to risk, his position for the sake of a loved one. Thus, struggling within himself between the Scylla of the bureaucrat and the Charybdis of a father, he matures into a decision. And these pent-up emotions apparently cause the German officer to burst into this agitated tirade:

> Is it not better to die right away, rather than to infect others, to force your own weakness before the eyes of others? Why should they dull the spirits of others, remind them of the gravity of matter, pollute their minds, which could have been flying high and uncovering the hidden orders of nature, extracting from her jaws hidden mysteries ... But no, it is not so easy, man must wallow in his weakness as if he fell into sticky tar. He tries in vain to free himself from the clinging fluid full of human sweat, waste and vomit....

Then he concludes in resignation:

> All this is making the machine of the state break down. This war cannot be carried on any longer with ordinary people. We must create supermen. Ordinary men are not able to transform into a nameless society, a mass of people without mutual connection, mannequins who can carry out orders. You see for yourself that we are standing here helpless in this situation which should not exist at all. You need me, and...' Steinkopf dropped his voice, 'and I need you. (Kłos, 2004, p. 7)

Time is never entirely *secular*. When confronted with Jaspersian borderline situations, one of which is undoubtedly suffering, there are traces of transcendence and that uncover that reality infinitely exceeds our preconceived plans. In Steinkopf's impassioned speech, there is a sense of anger, hatred and resignation at the same time. Anger because something has happened that has gone beyond the instructions; hatred because it has happened to him; and resignation because he has suddenly felt his total inadequacy and helplessness. An enlightened consciousness must surrender to the unexpected.

Furthermore, Steinkopf realises with full clarity the sense of belonging. Such familiar terms, seemingly forgotten, as dwelling, home, and love return from their land of enforced exile. In the dying eyes of his son he can see again his own humane face. As we read in the story, "he looked in the faded eyes of Hans, in whom the flicker of life seemed to be dimmer every day." (Kłos, 2004, p. 1)

Antoine Saint-Exupéry put it beautifully in his superb *The Wisdom of the Sands*, writing about the spiritual side of the person: "Whereas life is the glow those eyes once had, which are now but vacant dust." [Saint- Exupéry, 16] Steinkopf feels he can revive his son's eyes, but this time not with a military order, and giving orders is his usual occupation, so not by virtue of his privileged position, but through the feeble power of Polish herbs. As we enter the drama of human life, we must be prepared for mysteries and contradictions. Even the German officer in his rank has to learn that he is not a master of life and death. It is easy to eliminate prisoners of war, human beings that mean nothing to him, but he is helpless when his son needs him.

The Lüneberg Variation Anew?

German officers enjoyed games out of boredom or demoralisation. If one realises that they are the master of someone's life and death, and know that no matter what they decide, they will suffer no consequences, a chasm opens up for countless possibilities to inflict suffering and death. Lord Acton's famous warning that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely becomes the perfect reference point here. The moral value of rulers depends on the kind of people they are. It is a well-known historical fact that the Nazis had no qualms about employing criminals in their industry of total destruction. One can easily imagine a degenerate ruling over a group of people who, according to his ideology, are subhumans and enemies of his country and obstacles to progress. There is no limit to his morbid inventiveness of the harm he can inflict. Especially when he knows that he will suffer no consequences for his decisions.

One example of such a life-and-death game comes from Paolo Maurensig, who in 1993 published a novel entitled *La variante di Lüneburg* (the English version of *The Lüneberg Variation* was published in 1997). The title refers to a chess strategy. Now let us take a brief look at the plot. (Maurensig, 1998, *passim*) Two commuters, Frisch and Baum, are returning by train to their home near Vienna. To pass the time they play chess, which they often do because they love the game. During the game, a young man enters their compartment and tells them a story.

The story takes place in Germany in the 1930s. At that time there were two boys who were chess prodigies, one was Tabori, a young Jew, the other was the son of Aryan parents. They were rivals in chess. During the Second World War, Tabori was sent to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where many Jews were usually sent. Shortly afterwards, a new camp commandant, Frisch, arrived at Bergen-Belsen. He happened to be Tabori's former rival in chess. Now, being a commandant, he continued his hobby, but found no one among his colleagues in the camp who could match his talent. To compensate for this disappointment,

he demanded that Tabori play with him, and made his conditions clear. Richard Cohen describes them in his book *How to Write Like Tolstoy*:

> Tabori will receive extra food and a lighter work detail so long as he plays with the commandant twice a week. And there must be a wager. Should Tabori lose, then an escalating number of his fellow inmates will be put a gruesome death, with him an enforced onlooker: the two men will be playing for human lives—only Tabori has developed a special series of moves, the Lüneberg Variation, which Frisch is unable to counter. (Cohen, 2019, p. 141)

Słowikowski has no Lüneberg Variation to his rescue. All he has is his herbal practice with uncertain treatment results. Who is able to predict the results of treatment? Before the war, he treated people without risking his life and the lives of his loved ones. Now the situation is different. In this respect, he resembles Tabori from Maurensig's novel. Eventually, it turns out that the German officer who played with Tabori in the concentration camp is the same Frisch who now plays with Baum.

Despite some analogies, there are fundamental differences. Does Frisch want Tabori to win the game? Obviously not. Frisch of course wants to win, they were keen rivals in the past, but at the same time he may fear that Tabori, fearing for his life, will try to give him the upper hand. He will not accept it, for the rules of the game must be obeyed. He therefore put the lives of the Jew's fellow prisoners at stake. We have every reason to believe that Frisch wanted to ultimately defeat Tabori. The only fear he might have felt was that he might lose his playing partner or that Tabori would fake the game.

The Germans organised a mass extermination industry, but at the same time they were law-observing maniacs. (It is well known that the Nazi murderers attached great weight to the observance of the law in their otherwise arbitrary world. One need only mention the notorious Dr Joseph Mengele, known as Doctor Death, who adhered with the utmost care to all medical procedures during the delivery of the child he was soon to kill. This is the greatest paradox of the morbid mind—to abide by the rules in a ruleless world, which it has created itself.) (Posner, 2000, *passim*)

In the case of Steinkopf and Słowikowski, the situation is totally different. Steinkopf hopes that the quack doctor will succeed, not because he admires his talent for healing or is worried about his Polish family, but because his own son is in danger. They are not former rivals, like Tabori and Frisch, but complete strangers to each other. Consequently, there are no ill feelings between them. It is the war that has brought them to this awkward situation. Besides, Słowikowski is not a Jew, although he is still an enemy of Steinkopf's. Moreover, what for Frisch is a mere pastime, for Steinkopf is a serious undertaking. And he

manages to escape, while Frisch is taken down by the young man who has entered the compartment.

Their intentions are completely different: Frisch intends to hurt people to satiate his own satisfaction; Steinkopf intends to save his son. Frisch sets a condition whose purpose is his entertainment and the sacrifice of other people; Steinkopf's condition is the life of his son. Frisch finds pleasure in inflicting suffering on people; Steinkopf wants to save his son from a fatal illness.

The worst thing that can happen is to unleash the imagination of bad people without any constraints. Both Frisch and Steinkopf make it clear that they can do whatever they wish with their victims. And they are certain they will suffer no consequences. Steinkopf holds that he will not face any unpleasantness on account of his acquaintance with the quack doctor. We can read him say: "Do not think that there is any danger for me because of my contacts with you." (Kłos, 2004, p. 9)

Frisch protects Tabori for his own enjoyment, Steinkopf protects Słowikowski and his family for the sake of his son. The price for their protection in each case is the same: someone's life, but the purpose is different.

Turning now to the main thrust of our text, we can say that duty can indeed be a justifying factor. Słowikowski shows that no matter what kind of historical turmoil we are dealing with, there is always room for human feelings. There are fundamental values such as suffering, mercy, sacrifice, human relationships and no political circumstances can wipe them out. These circumstances put both virtuous and villainous people to the test. They have the chance to either prove their virtue or become worse.

Conclusion

Socrates was saved from despair by his steadfast adherence to the truth. Słowikowski is saved by his concern for those who suffer. And unlike Greene's harassed protagonists, the healer has no reason to feel remorse. When written "is saved," there are two aspects: firstly, he is not tempted to act against his conscience and betray; secondly, his treatment has succeeded. Suffering that can be alleviated has no weapons. It is merely an appeal to whoever can help, a quiet appeal. It is true that we sometimes say that suffering cries out for vengeance to heaven, but this cry is soundless.

The real healing begins when the protagonists abandon their power and resort to hope. Therefore, the second protagonist of our story, Steinkopf, has also learned an important lesson: no political system can replace human relationships. Challenges arise in people's lives that require a complete re-evaluation

of attitudes. It can be said that the German officer saved his humanity through the suffering of his son.

During treatment, the folk doctor is guided by the hope that the treatment method and herbs used will bring a positive result. He knows that the safety of his own family depends on his success. But success in this case can never be the result of mathematical calculations, and therefore can never achieve the precision we obtain in the sciences. Moreover, adverse circumstances prove that people are not pure planning machines immune to the unexpected calls of their personal relationships. This is an optimistic message because it says that all inhuman ideologies can never completely eliminate our natural relationships and are ultimately doomed to extinction in the presence of human kinship.

In the context of the main dilemma: duties versus circumstances, it should be noted that circumstances are rarely, if ever, conducive to the performance of duties. In any case, one should not count on them. On the contrary, there are always more or less obstacles to the performance of duties. Duties result from an inner *recognition* and *acknowledgement* of the truth, not from a favourable arrangement of external circumstances. This makes it clear that the observance of duties will always require a certain kind of sacrifice, because the person is not an inert resultant of external circumstances.

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to

***Cosimo Jaś Williams**, Graduate of The Bishop Gorman High School in Las Vegas (Nevada, USA); student of applied anthropology at The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (Poland).*
E-mail: owerocosmic2099@gmail.com

and

***Prof. Jan Kłos**, Ph.D. - Professor of philosophy, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (Poland).*
E-mail: jan.klos@kul.pl