Krzysztof Kiciński

Maria Ossowska – Person & Oeuvre

When the works of Maria Ossowska are discussed by people who met her in person, it is striking that their reflections regarding her work are almost always accompanied by reflections regarding the person. At first glance there would seem to be nothing special about this; reflections over the output of a brilliant scholar tend to go in tandem with interest in the person, if only because the relationship between the person and their work may sometimes, and especially in the humanities, be interesting from a purely cognitive point of view. I believe that in Maria Ossowska's case, though, it is something more, something tied to some kind of specific discrete charisma the professor had, both as a 'private person' and as a scholar. The field of science practiced by Ossowska is also surely of some significance, morality constituting the main object of her research. There are questions that, in a certain sense, seem quite natural here: Who was the person who delivered judgments in this field? What was this person's own conduct like? And what were their 'private' views on various issues? However, in the comments presented below I shall go beyond these questions, as I am concerned above all about the relations between – if one may say so – the 'personal traits' of the author of *The Foundations of the Science of Morality* and her scientific views. I am convinced that in Ossowka's case, reflection regarding the person is in many cases conducive to a better comprehension of those views, of the style of science she practiced, and even of her methodological preferences.

Maria Ossowska is rightly considered the founder of a discipline that she called the science of morality, and certainly a leading cofounder of the sociology of morality, constituting the core of this science. It is worth imagining the historical context in which Ossowska lay the foundations for the science of morality. A feature distinguishing the new discipline was intended above all to be a defined stance, a "stance of the impassive researcher of a certain factual state of things, a stance of he who researches moral phenomena as a botanist researchers plants and a linguist – lingual phenomena"[1]. This took place at a time when a descriptive approach to morality was exceedingly rare, despite the existence of its precursors, for example from the Durkheim school. Attention was drawn to this fact by

[1] M. Ossowska, *The Foundations of the Science of Morality*, Warsaw 1963, p. 9.

Klemens Szaniawski, emphasising that the tradition of establishing moral duty weighed extremely heavily on any reflections then on ethical issues[2]. As Ossowska demonstrated on many an occasion, works that authors presented as papers intended to objectively analyse moral facts usually proved camouflaged morality plays, which under the guise of impartial analysis furthered an ethical program dear to the author. Moreover, this was something the author was not always aware of due to the rather widespread shortcomings in methodological culture.

The fact that Ossowska in particular decided to choose a different route, and stuck consistently to it, testifies to her enormous intellectual independence and other qualities of character, as it is far from easy to stray from the main paths, defending alone an approach that today as well is frequently questioned. This choice also testifies to an integrity constituting more than a scholar's virtue, because it would be hard in this case to draw a line between professional integrity and personal integrity. For Ossowska, what she described as the 'smuggling' of one's own moral preferences, under the pretence of conducting an objective analysis of the facts, could not be reconciled with a scholar's honesty. It was undoubtedly precisely this personal and professional integrity that inclined Ossowska to warn readers of the book *Moral Norms: A Tentative Systematization* that it was a work in which, unlike all previous books, the author allowed herself "to express freely my sympathies and antipathies", emphasising simultaneously that this could not be completely avoided in any work dealing with emotionally charged concepts.

Not only those who knew Maria Ossowska personally, but also attentive readers of her works could see that she had very distinct 'sympathies and antipathies' of her own, also in the field of morality (which by no means clashes with the postulate for the stance of an 'impassive observer' when practicing science about morality, just as a bacteriologist's personal evaluative attitude to a disease does not stand in contradiction with his 'impassive' research regarding this illness). She perfectly realised that personal moral preferences influenced the choice of field of research. For example, in her preface to *Moral Thought in the English Enlightenment* she wrote: "English ethical thought appealed to me particularly due to there being little phraseology in it, because it is clear and strives to stick to the facts. As for this period, it seemed particularly appealing due to its characteristic emancipation of ethics from religious dogma and because of the dominant trait in it – the praise of goodness"[3].

[2] K. Szaniawski, *Poznanie i troska o wartości,* 'Literatura' 1974 issue 34
[3] M. Ossowska, *Moral Thought in the English Enlightenment*, Warsaw 1966, p. 11.

Ordinary human goodness was a value that Ossowska held in particularly high esteem. A second such value was dignity.

As a researcher of morality, Ossowska emphasised the existence of two concepts of dignity in our cultural circle. According to the first of them – mainly linked to Christian doctrine – every person is entitled to dignity due to their human nature, implying the possession of a soul. According to the second, dignity is a value that any person may possess, but which they may lose if they do not behave in keeping with certain rules. It would seem that Ossowska had various reservations regarding the former concept: the argument of privileges resulting from the possession of a soul did not appeal to her, with the accentuating of man's exceptional position among other living beings smacking of anthropocentricism containing a certain component of species egoism, which Ossowska – very kindly disposed also towards other living creatures she did not deny moral subjectivity – could have felt offended by. However, one cannot deduce from a statement found in *Moral Norms*, that she would not deal in this book with the concept of dignity assuming its inalienability, that she would have reservations to the position ascribing every person defined rights due to their human-ness. On the contrary – the issues of human rights and freedom were very dear to Ossowska. She analysed them broadly in her theoretic works, while also speaking explicitly on the subject in published commentary. For example in the discussion regarding the new penal code she stood firmly on the side of opponents to capital punishment. Her practitioner's position in these matters did not differ significantly from that occupied by present-day human rights defenders. However, it was most probably due to her high methodological culture that in general she did not justify these rights to 'natural dignity', as she understood **that it was the content of the concept of 'dignity' undergoing precise definition thanks to it taking into account content of ever more concretising notions of human rights and freedoms, rather than vice versa – that from the very concept of dignity one could deduce human rights and freedoms, sometimes very detailed.**

Almost a quarter of a century has passed since Maria Ossowska died, yet one could risk the hypothesis that her depiction of the issue of dignity – which I believe has been the most penetrating in Polish literature – is becoming increasingly valuable. This is because it seems that a monocular perspective in grasping this dignity is currently beginning increasingly distinctly to accompany the otherwise extremely important ideological defence of the individual's rights and freedoms, and this in the name of the individual's dignity and the inalienable value every person is entitled to. Since a person's dignity, and therefore their

fundamental value, simply results from belonging to the human species (or – which is closely tied to this – from the possession of a soul), then the difference between the aggressor and the assaulted, between the murderer and their victim, the rapist and the raped, recedes in a way into the background. What is more, in law-abiding countries the issue of human rights is articulated above all in the context of care for the interests of those who violated the law, who infringed somebody's welfare, who constitute a threat to individuals and society. The welfare of those wronged as a result of such actions or are potentially threatened is, in this perspective, almost not associated with human rights. The perspective emerging from Ossowska's works restores the equilibrium: people are only equal in a certain sense, and the fact that everybody is entitled to a certain package of fundamental rights does not at all mean that every person has the same value; respect has to be deserved. A person who has morally degraded of their own accord is contemptible. Only in a certain sense is a blackmailer a person; otherwise, he or she is a 'specimen'.

At this point it has to be stressed right away that Ossowska herself did not display any special severity in assessing people, and was capable of being understanding, even very much so. Hers was rather a case of clarity in the criteria for appraising than moral or psychological rigorousness. She was rigorous in setting the moral standard above all in regards to herself. Not only did this express a certain attitude to life, but also a worldview according to which moral values obligated above all those subscribing to them.

If we were to consider the personal traits of the author of *The Foundations of the Science of Morality*, traits that could have influenced the shape of this science, the characteristic form of descriptive reflections on morality, then we cannot ignore something that Ossowska herself seemed to glimpse in herself. During an event celebrating her scientific career, she half-joked that she'd been lucky in life, as she had usually done what she most liked doing in life, and in addition she was paid for doing so. She was a classic example of a scholar, and not an 'academic employee'. She was characterised by extremely powerful cognitive needs and motivations, autonomous (in Allport's sense of the word) in regard to needs of a 'lower order'. She was extremely focused on what she was doing, and even late in life displayed an unfailing curiosity for facts and views on subjects that interested her. To the writer of these words – when he confessed to finding it difficult to make effective use of short fragments of time for his scientific work, as 'getting into the matter' was in itself time-consuming – she answered: "Yes, I know that others usually have a problem with that, but when I get home I can immediate finish a sentence in a paper lying on my desk". That statement was a little terrifying, as it probably meant that the professor – who after all was by

no means indifferent towards what was happening around her – had at the same time some part of her psyche that even for a moment did not part company with the problem she happened to be working on. It is highly probably that one of the significant premises of the programme for the objective researching of morality was her cognitive inquisitiveness and the conviction that moral phenomena, no less so than other facts, constituted a fascinating puzzle worth pondering over; that the social, historical, cultural or psychological conditioning of norms, of role models, judgments passed by people, and moral attitudes and convictions were – just like their social consequences or functions – problems constituting a cognitive challenge. A variety of benefits may of course result from research into morality, for example educational, but these benefits do not have to constitute any legitimisation for cognitive undertakings, as the latter do not require additional justification, they constitute autotelic value.

Unimpeded by short-term problems that, for practical reasons, had to be resolved, and unaffected by scientific fashions, Ossowska focused above all on the fundamental issues in her research: on the problem of the justifiability of norms and judgments, including moral judgments, and their functionality and cultural universality; on class-related conditioning; on the moral motives behind conduct; and on the historical development of moral concepts. She did not push these fundamental issues into the background even during the most trying periods for her and for the fortunes of her country. There are frequent mentions in memoirs of how, during the occupation, she was an extremely active participant in the work of the underground Warsaw University, that she wrote papers dictated by her civic concern, that she took part in operations for rescuing Jews – and that is all true. But it is worth remembering that the events of those cruel years were incapable of dislodging her from her self-designated path of fundamental research. During underground seminars, students she was tutoring analysed the problems of European philosophy, and it was then that the book *The Motivations of Action* was written. If its content related at all to its era, then the relations are very subtle.

Is there something wrong in such behaviour, which seems a little inappropriate for a situation demanding the subordination of one's entire energy to the requirements of the moment, involvement only in current matters, in problems directly tied to these matters? How, in such a period, could one spend so much of that energy on meticulously analysing the works of Aristotle of English thinkers who had passed away two centuries beforehand? Does this not deviate from the ideals of dignity that demand, above all, that one fights violence? When answering these questions, one has to bear in mind what the occupiers' goals were, one of them to transform Poles into a nation without their own intelligentsia, into people

functionally intellectually at no more than mid primary school level. In such a situation, was not the continuation of topics from the times of the University's freedom in Ossowska's seminars – despite armed patrols strolling by the house – the most adequate response to the occupying forces' insane policy, to their plans regarding Poles and polish culture? It was a response demanding fortitude of a philosopher whose work a brutal soldier wants to destroy. Even if Ossowska had then interrupted her probing of the fundamental issues of her discipline, and not written up a few papers clearly related to the needs of the moment (essays published during the occupation: *Z etyki stosunków merkantylnych [lit. On the ethics of mercantile relations]* and *Wzór demokraty [The model democrat]*), her attitude would have still been appraised similarly. Ossowska's conduct in the post-war period was similar, as it was in the most difficult period of the fifties when she was dismissed from the University. However, I am not referring to the fact that she resisted the official Marxism; after all, she was a mature scholar perfectly armed intellectually against ideological invasion (admittedly, as the history of those years teaches us, this did not constitute a condition sufficient for maintaining intellectual identity). It is rather that at this time she was following her long-term research program a little as if she was ignoring real life. During this period she compiled her excellent book *Bourgeois Morality* – probably her most mature work in the field of the sociology of morality – which although published in 1956 at the time of the approaching thaw, was written for writing's sake during the darkest period of Stalinism, with no hope then of its publication.

Maria Ossowska was very frequently recalled in a variety of circumstances as having always been 'on the right side' at various moments of our history. Before the war she was on the side of democracy, supported – as we would say today – by an enlightened civil society devoid of social and ethnic prejudices. I have already recalled the time of war, and so perhaps it would only be worth adding that she never spoke of those difficult years as a period demanding personal heroism, although her activities deserve such a description. In the post-war period she did not publish any paper that she would have had to recall with embarrassment, she intervened in regard to persons persecuted for political reasons, and was a signatory to a protest letter against censorship, the 'List of 34'. In March '68 she defended the students and participated in operations providing assistance. Yet it does not seem right to view Ossowska from an overtly political perspective, although the image is then a very positive one. Because her peculiar and rare value was linked above all to her extraordinary resistance to situational pressures, thanks to which she did not cease to be a normal scholar in an abnormal

world, a creative scholar, effective in her work, not losing interest in the fundamental matters. She created around her an island of normalcy that constituted an invaluable quality for her students and colleagues. She was one of those few people thanks to whom at least certain aspects of society's cultural continuity were retained. In this sense her activity quite obviously held a political and social dimension, but Ossowska herself, both then and in the present day – if we may be permitted such a psychological experiment – would definitely not have allowed her role as a scholar to be dominated by her role as a social activist, and all the more so a political activist.

Maria Ossowska never did express a strict definition of morality, but neither did she treat this as a particularly threatening obstacle to research into the phenomenon, as she considered it an element of the greater whole, of ethos or culture, and analysed it in a broader context. This was one of the reasons of her enduring interests in issues of culture (perhaps dating back to before she showed interested in morality, after all she studied under Bronisław Malinowski in London) and the practicing of cultural comparative literature. The research attitude preferred in the science of morality inclined Ossowska towards a cultural relativism. And because penetrating analyses made her distrustful of the possibility of justifying the rightness of norms and judgments, comparative research and historical studies led to the conclusion that it would be very difficult to indicate universally recognised moral norms, while belief in objective values seemed not to fit at all within her cognitive paradigm – then with no major risk one could ascribe Ossowska (as a scholar) with moral relativism (although she never claimed that values are relative, or even that judgments and norms are definitely unjustifiable).

This moral relativism in a cognitive sense was not limited of course to the area of research, as it was certainly also a component of Ossowska's overall worldview. However, in this case such a definition should be used with caution, as Ossowska would presumably not sign her name to it as a reliable doctrine. Extremely demanding in regard to the scientific or philosophical justification of a particular position, she would certainly state that relativism, as a general philosophical or methodological doctrine, is also insufficiently justified. However, Ossowska reached the conclusion from research into the morality of various cultures, eras and social environments that it would be very difficult to indicate truly universal moral norms, that people have very different perceptions of good and bad, and that in addition rightness in axiological disputes cannot be demonstrated in the manner applied in the case of disputes of facts, for example resolving whether the Earth is round or flat. Thus by standing on such a

position, Maria Ossowska – for her private use as well – had no solid philosophical basis for the norms and values she acknowledged. She was convinced that in regard to somebody who would display scepticism towards those norms she would be unable to contrapose cognitively compelling arguments. In addition she was an agnostic, and as such could not seek support in God, either in the sense of personal support or in the sense of belief in the existence of an objective bastion of moral values.

However, as a person Maria Ossowska did display a moral adherence to principles to a degree rarely encountered, although without pathos; she helped people discretely, reacting as if in a natural way. She could always be counted on. She was very demanding towards herself. "The only thing one must do is die," she apparently said once, listening to an account of people who supposedly had to do something as they were threatened with sanctions. She did not like holding others to account, especially when they were already in a difficult situation. A principle that guided her, one she mentioned repeatedly and associated with British tradition, was: promise less than you do. Although she spent the majority of her life in a political system far from the ideal, she probably fulfilled almost to perfection the attributes of the model citizen of a democratic country, a model she specified herself. She was most certainly guided in life by models she careful chose herself, as perfectionism – and not only purely moral – was one of her major traits.

In times when one so often hears that moral relativism is responsible for a moral decline and various forms of anomaly, that belief in a firm and invariable catalogue of values is a condition for ethical conduct, a question that arises is: **what fundament was Ossowska's ethical adherence to principles, a trait she displayed in life as a person, based upon**? For somebody sceptical of the justifiability of norms, from where did she draw her conviction that the moral norms she subscribed to were unconditionally binding, and moreover – not only treated this as a conviction, but was actually guided by them in her conduct? These are questions important from both an ethical and cognitive point of view, yet at the same time very difficult. After all, in this case it is easier to state a fact – the meaning of which is in itself very important – than to explain it. And that fact may be expressed as follows: Maria Ossowska is testimony that certain philosophical and worldview assumptions, frequently – today as well – treated as an essential condition for a person's morality and in particular the attainment of high moral standards, are by no means such a condition. Returning to those difficult questions, let us turn our attention to a few circumstances that may throw some light on the problem that has been raised.

Although Maria Ossowska believed that moralities in different groups and cultures differed, and was very autonomous in her own moral convictions, this does not mean that she felt alone in them. Her youth passed by among people who most certainly did not lack moral figures of authority, persons fulfilling the conditions – using her terminology – of role models. As such, she definitely had what a sociologist would call her reference groups. For most of her life she was also in a relationship with another outstanding person, her husband Stanisław Ossowski, who was also highly aware of values and held the virtue of perfectionism high within their hierarchy (in this regard it is worth reading *Social Psychology* that he wrote during the occupation).

In Ossowska's case, scepticism towards doctrines preaching the absoluteness of values was only a specific case of her general methodological scepticism, due to which she was decidedly distrustful also of all other doctrines that, in her opinion, could not be thoroughly justified, and – somewhat paradoxically – this included the doctrine claiming the relativity of all values (a major quantifier energetically fought by Ossowska!). All the more so if the doctrine were to preach the rightness of nihilism, since in regard to the problem of the absoluteness of values and justifiability of norms and judgments Ossowska was not so much a non-believer as an agnostic. And that with a certain reservation, since she did not claim that justification was essentially impossible, but only stressed that known justifications were not convincing for somebody who thought in a scientific manner and displayed an appropriate standard of logical culture.

Although Ossowska moved away from Christianity and was critical of various components of it, she was moulded by Christian culture in the deepest sense of the word. Her private morality only strayed from Christianity in certain points, and in many was convergent with it. For example, she was thoroughly good-willed towards animals, but then among figures of Christianity we had St Francis of Assisi or Albert Schweitzer, who extended his morality to embrace all living beings. Ossowska's approach to matters of dignity was certainly not identical to the Christian approach, but nevertheless they are connected for example by the idea that a positive judgment has to be deserved, that it is frequently not an easy matter and requires the virtue of dedication. The obligation to constantly better oneself, such a characteristic theme in Ossowska's profile, also has much in common with Christian tradition. Just as the Kantian conviction, deriving from Christianity, that every individual constitutes particular value that may never be treated purely as a means, as it also constitutes a goal in itself.

Finally, it must be emphasised that although the existence of people like Maria Ossowska constitutes empirical evidence that belief in absolute values, in universal moral norms, as well as the conviction about them being rooted in a divine transcendence, does not constitute a condition essential for achieving a high standard of morals (unless defined such that this relationship becomes essential on the principle of tautology), this evidence is not tantamount to the refutation of any connection at all that such belief and convictions have with that standard. Cultural relativism or disbelief in the absoluteness of norms and values certainly, in a logical sense, has nothing in common with moral indifferentism, but then is a high culture of thought not necessary to understand that?

Ossowska and people of her ilk really are outstanding individuals, capable of moral self-creation, of creating their own extensive system of convictions, including moral convictions, that can constitute a compass of conduct, a source of motivation, the basis of a system of self-control. But certain questions do arise: Is the possibility of achieving such a system of convictions, a system constituting a product of one's own reflections and experiences, not an attribute only of those people transcending the ordinary? And that both in the sense of their intellectual capacity and their qualities of character. Is moral autonomy of this kind also possible, and to what degree, in the case of more ordinary people? In the case of such people, is the role of philosophical, worldview and religious arguments preaching the absoluteness of principles and moral values not a condition significantly more important than in the case of persons of the calibre of Maria Ossowska? These do not seem to be questions to which it would be easy to provide a well-reasoned answer. Therefore, although important from a cognitive and practical point of view (e.g. moral education), it is worth retaining a certain level of criticism regarding one's own stance if it determines unambiguously how things stand in this matter.

Warsaw, May 1997