Ethos. Kwartalnik Instytutu Jana Pawła II KUL
38(2025) nr 4(152) 15-20
DOI 10.12887/38-2025-4-152-02

FROM THE EDITORS

THE COMFORTING POWER OF THE OBVIOUS AND BEAUTY

"Courageous thinking" is a phrase which intertwines a common human activity, a natural one, one might say (for is it not the case that thinking can be in a way compared to breathing?), with a certain moral quality. Drawing on the tradition of classical philosophy, one might even go as far as to state that the expression in question directly combines thinking with a virtue, namely, that of courage. Thus, what the phrase "courageous thinking" implies is neither thinking in its commonplace understanding, nor the kind of thinking analyzed by Józef M. Bocheński, who focused, above all, on describing the methods of thought characteristic of the so-called scientific realm and on juxtaposing them with philosophical methodology.[1]

However, the concept of courageous thinking analyzed in this volume goes beyond the understanding of thinking as an intellectual argument marked by observance of certain rules and indifferent to the external world in the sense that the feedback from subjects partaking of it, or their attitudes, are considered as insignificant: what matters in the case of such an approach is the correct course of argumentation, demonstrating, for instance, adherence to the principles of formal logic. Rather, the concept of courageous thinking discussed here involves a spiritual mindfulness, triggered by the thinking subject's cognitive confrontation, or even conflict, with external reality.

It is only when we consider the circumstances of an action that we can understand the meaning of courage as a concept, including that of courageous thinking. Interestingly, such circumstances do not need to involve the actual presence of persons other than the acting subject, or the subject's direct contact with a particular person, for that matter. What is significant, though, is what we can call their intentional presence. In some cases—probably even in most cases—this presence involves the elements of their outputs that thinking necessarily incorporates, such as those related to tradition, fashion, and taste, but also precepts and proscriptions, including the administrative ones. Occasion-

[1] See J. M. B o c h e ń s k i, *The Methods of Contemporary Thought*, trans. Peter Caws, Carnegie Corporation of New York (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1965).

ally, such presence may entail violence. Therefore, it is only in the context of its circumstances that we can discuss the courage of thinking.

A frightening image of the impact of such circumstances on a thinking subject can be found in George Orwell's renowned novel *1984*.[2] The totalitarian state its plot describes resorts to the services of a special force called Thought Police which prosecutes thought-crime.

> 'What are you in for?' said Winston.
> 'Thoughtcrime!' said Parsons, almost blubbering. The tone of his voice implied at once a complete admission of his guilt and a sort of incredulous horror that such a word could be applied to himself. He paused opposite Winston and began eagerly appealing to him: 'You don't think they'll shoot me, do you, old chap? They don't shoot you if you haven't actually done anything—only thoughts, which you can't help?...'[3]

While Winston Smith is arrested for a somewhat different offence, neither his crime involves treason. Just before he is detained, he reflects that his ultimate line of defense against the omnipotence of the Thought Police, is himself, his inner life: "With all their cleverness they had never mastered the secret of finding out what another human being was thinking."[4] And yet, he thinks, it is in his thoughts, in his reflections, that his "crime" takes root: his "crime," or his relationship with Julia, his attempt to save his memory, his longing for the past, his attachment to beautiful objects, and his need to be in nature. He had the courage to think about all these things. And this is why he is punished now. He is subjected to an investigation and tortured, and forcibly made to deny the fundamental correspondence between thoughts and things. It is then that O'Brien, a secret member of the Thought Police who interrogates him, reveals to him the goal of their actions, or perhaps the ultimate goal of the existence of a perfectly totalitarian state: "The Party is not interested in the overt act: the thought is all we care about."[5] In the ghastly world depicted by Orwell, the most tyrannical oppression consists in an intrusion into the sanctuary of human rationality, the realm of thought. In such cases, courage is tantamount to bearing witness to the fundamentals: "Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth's centre."[6] Yet a grim memento from Orwell is Smith's demise when he is broken by O'Brien in the process of interrogation. In the universe depicted in *1984*, no sanctuary

[2] See George Orwell, *1984* (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2013).
[3] Ibidem, 239–40.
[4] Ibidem, 172.
[5] Ibidem, 259.
[6] Ibidem, 87.

can withhold the violence that comes from the government institutions. This essentially pessimistic vision of the human nature, so deeply rooted Orwell's thought, is a result of his consistently antitheistic anthropology which leaves no space for religious hope.[7] One might juxtapose such a standpoint with that of Hanna Malewska, who was, incidentally, among the first Polish readers of *1984*: "A Christian additionally experiences the special power of God's Grace that is always *now* the source of help, but continues, as such, outside time. A Christian's deep and lasting experience should be that not only is there no absolute determination of things, but also that in no situation is there no way out leading 'upwards and inwards.'"[8] To a Christian, the courage to choose this way may well mean choosing martyrdom, which is probably the highest price paid for the courage of thinking.

When addressing the issue of courageous thinking neither can we perceive it as "a process in the head, in a completely enclosed space," as described by Ludwig Wittgenstein in a note of his.[9] The reason why we cannot do so is that it is only a thought that has been in some way expressed, or maybe merely formed and in the process of being transferred from the realm ("enclosed space") of pure reflection into that of expression, that can be subject to appraisal or verification. Apparently, what we encounter at this point is a rarely addressed paradox of thinking about thinking. Strictly speaking, one might say, what is appraised or evaluated is a result of thinking, essentially its outcome, which has gone beyond the "enclosed space"[10] and assumed an intersubjective shape. Such a shape not infrequently embodies an opinion articulated in speech or writing which might take the form of an argument in a debate, an article, a sermon, an essay, a public address or a book. If the paradox of thinking about thinking can be continued, we find such a continuation once we encounter the problem of medium through which a thought, or rather thoughts, are expressed.

The most highly organized expressions of the human spirit make up the world's repository of masterpieces. Courageous thinking can be found, for instance, in Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote of La Mancha*, William Shake-

[7] This, however, does not mean that Orwell showed no religious sensibility or that he did not realize the transformation Christianity introduces into human reality. Indeed, in his review of Graham Greene's *Heart of the Matter*, where he included insightful remarks on other so-called Catholic novels, we find evidence to the contrary. See George O r w e l l, "The Sanctified Sinner," *The New Yorker*, July 17, 1948.

[8] See Hanna M a l e w s k a, "Odszedł i zapomniał, jaki był," in Hanna Malewska, *O odpowiedzialności i inne szkice: Wybór publicystyki (1945-1976)*, ed. Andrzej Sulikowski (Kraków: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, 1987), 132.

[9] Ludwig W i t t g e n s t e i n, *Zettel*, eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 105e.

[10] According to Wittgenstein, such an interpretation of thinking, which divorces it from the external world, gives it "something occult." Ibidem.

speare's *Hamlet*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, as well as in Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, and the series *Breaking Bad* directed by Vince Gilligan.

However, already the array of titles mentioned above shows that it is by no means the case that the creation of any recognized masterpiece necessarily involves courageous thinking. Indeed, numerous items now stored in the mental repository of masterpieces came into existence owing to the remarkable talents or skills of their respective creators, combined with the craft they mastered and their moral discipline, while courage would not turn out indispensable in their creation. Was it not true about the phenomenon of Frederic Chopin's music, the timelessness of Leo Tolstoy's novels, and the appeal of Ridley Scott's movies? On the other hand, though, courageous thinking in art by no means guarantees that a masterpiece will result. Ironically, courageous thinking in the realm in question oftentimes evolves into provocation. Provocative art was popular in early modernism and characterized by despise of middle-class audiences, expressed by the "mock the philistine" catchphrase. One might venture the claim that our times have witnessed the ultimate disgrace of art demonstrating such a kind of courage.

Rather, the artist's courage, once he is free from political, administrative or legal pressures, consists in a non-dogmatic approach to the aesthetic and occasionally social norms, in a creative transformation of the tradition, confrontation with the likes of the audience, and defiance of the expectations of the patron. An attitude like this is grounded in a positive motivation, namely, in a courageous thinking about the goal of all art, which is beauty. Among those who showed an acute perception of that fact was Gustave Flaubert, who drafted his ad hoc manifesto in a letter to George Sand:

I do not share in Tourgueneff's severity as regards *Jack*, nor in the immensity of his admiration for *Rougon*. The one has charm, the other force. But neither one is concerned *above all* else with what is for me the end of art, namely, beauty. I remember having felt my heart beat violently, having felt a fierce pleasure in contemplating a wall of the Acropolis, a perfectly bare wall (the one on the left as you go up to the Propylæa). Well! I wonder if a book independently of what it says, cannot produce the same effect! In the exactness of its assembling, the rarity of its elements, the polish of its surface, the harmony of its ensemble, is there not an intrinsic virtue, a sort of divine force, something eternal as a principle? (I speak as a Platonist.).... For on the other side art has to be a good fellow; or rather art is what one can make it, we are not free."[11]

[11] Gustave Flaubert to George Sand, Monday evening, 3rd April 1876, in *The George Sand—Gustave Flaubert Letters*, trans. Aimee L. McKenzie (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1979), 363.

The conclusion of this personal aesthetic manifesto, which, at its core, challenged the modernist "art for art's sake" dogma, demanded courage, indispensable in any age. Yet Flaubert demonstrated courage not only in his letters, replete with memorable critical remarks,[12] but also while working on *Madame Bovary* and *A Simple Heart*, or while compiling successive entries for his *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. And it was against *Madame Bovary* that the French government brought charges, making Flaubert confront the truly imperial prosecutor, Ernest Pinard.[13]

The fact is that courage not infrequently triggers its contestation, which may occasionally result either in acts of violence or in limitations of the freedom of speech. History, however, demonstrates that courageous thinking succeeds in breaking the resistance of its opponents and does so by inspiring admiration, or even delight, however long a time and reflection such a process may demand. This is how others, whether they are readers, listeners, the faithful or citizens, come to appreciate courageous thinking, occasionally becoming its beneficiaries. Indeed, such was the lot of religious reformers, statesmen working for the sake of good causes, responsible scientists, reliable philosophers, and visionary artists.

Maciej Nowak
Translated by *Dorota Chabrajska*

*

With the present issue we say farewell to Krystyna Borowczk, who passed away on October 3, 2025. A member of the original editorial team of *Ethos: Quarterly of the John Paul II Institute*, Krystyna was fully committed to the tasks Fr. Tadeusz Styczeń entrusted to her. With her good command of Italian, she focused on translating articles which were later published in *Ethos*. She also translated lectures delivered by international scholars at the conferences held by the John Paul II Institute. Her attitude to her professional duties

[12] "Would you believe that Flaubert's letters, the ideas you can find there (do not fall off your chair), can be found in the writings of German philosophers, for instance Max Scheler's, and Keyserling made them the direct foundation of his system". Andrzej Bobkowski to Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Paris, May 15, 1947, in Andrzej Bobkowski, *Tobie zapisuję Europę: Listy do Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza*, ed. Jan Zieliński (Warszawa: Biblioteka "Więzi," 2009), 31. The excerpt was translated by Dorota Chabrajska.

[13] And it was probably the only reason why Pinard's name has been handed down by history. See Frederick B r o w n, *Flaubert: A Biography* (New York and Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 326–28.

matched that to building friendly relations among the Institute's team. We shall remember her as a radiant, positive person, a competent, colleague dedicated to her responsibilities, but also as one who introduced the charism of *Comunione e Liberazione* spirituality among us. As such, she will remain in our grateful memory.