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Ethical perfectionism as one of the solutions to prevent anti-civilization activities: an analysis based on the case study of Joseph Beuys

The aim of this article is to show — in a broader practical and social dimension — an ethical stance that in the mid-50s was put forward by Karol Wojtyła (it did not, however, have much impact either on theoretical works or social life). For this purpose, we shall discuss the case study of Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), a German artist who, as we shall argue, brought about, with his actions, a collapse of civilization in a certain area dependent on him. We shall also draw on the concept of the so-called “long march through the institutions” that will additionally reveal a socially important context of events that Beuys initiated in his field.

Our purpose is to show that perfectionism may be an important response to anti-civilization activities, both on an individual and social plane.

The article is divided as follows:

- presentation and development of the concept of perfectionism,
- discussing Joseph Beuys and his activity,

- presenting Joseph Beuys' activities in the light of the doctrine of "the long march through the institutions",
- indicating in what way perfectionism may be one of the pillars of counteracting anti-civilization activities,
- conclusions.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism both as a notion and as an ethical concept is hardly known even though it is one of the fundamental components of Karol Wojtyła's ethics¹. Therefore, we shall recapitulate its main points so that we may later use it to interpret the case of Joseph Beuys.

Let us start by defining the term. According to Wojtyła, perfectionism "emphasizes becoming a better person by every good deed"². In order to clarify this concept, we must explain what Wojtyła means by the terms "good" and "becoming of a person". We shall, therefore, consider the thought of St Thomas Aquinas with whom Wojtyła entirely agrees as far as the issue of perfectionism is concerned³. St Thomas (and later Wojtyła) begins with the famous thought: *ens et bonum convertuntur* [being and good are convertible]. According to St Thomas, good, as the goal, is to contribute to the objective improvement of a being that is consistent with the nature of this being. This, however, brings us to the point of scholastic speculation. Wojtyła, however, anticipates the problem and points to the

1 K. Wojtyła, *W poszukiwaniu podstaw perfekcyjizmu w etyce*, "Roczniki Filozoficzne" 5 (1955–1957) no. 4, p. 303–317. Wojtyła explains that this is only a preliminary study that needs to be elaborated on (which has not been done so far. See K. Wojtyła, *W poszukiwaniu*, p. 303.

2 K. Wojtyła, *W poszukiwaniu podstaw*, p. 303.

3 Wojtyła refers to the following texts by St Thomas Aquinas: *Summa theologiae* I 5, 1; I 5, 4, 2; I 6, 3; I 17, 4; I 19, 4, 1; I 23, 4, 1; I 48, 1; I 62, 8; I-II 18, 1; I-II 18, 3, 3; I-II 18, 4, 3; I-II 19; *Contra gentiles* I 37; II 41; III 20; *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* 1, 1; 21, 1; 21, 2; 21, 5; 21, 6; 24, 4; *Quaestiones disputatae de malo* 2, 5, 2; *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* I d. 19, q. 5, 1, 3; I d. 19, q. 5, 2, 3; I d. 8, 1, 3; II d. 1, q. 2, 2, 2.

Additionally, Wojtyła refers to two earlier philosophers: Aristotle and St Augustine. We are, however, interested in perfectionism in the version that he adopted from St Thomas.

important aspect of St Thomas' teaching that allows us to overcome the purely speculative scholastic categories and enter real life. Wojtyła writes: "His [St Thomas'] philosophy of being entirely took into account the whole dynamics of reality. Reality is dynamic — we experience changes in being. These changes always consist in the actualization of some potentiality which means the actual coming into being of something that previously existed only in potentiality, i.e., it did not exist in reality. Since it has started to exist and does exist, then it is the perfection of a given being [...]. Thus all perfection, i.e., good, consists in existence"⁴. Further on we read: "we say that a given being is good only to the extent that we find in it the fullness of existence appropriate to it. That is when not only its substance exists (*ens simpliciter*), but when all its necessary accidents exist as well (*entia secundum quid*)"⁵.

The above quotations clearly show that Wojtyła, with St Thomas' teaching, refers to a human being, and not to some abstractions: he refers to a fully formed being (*ens simpliciter* + *entia secundum quid*). Only the actually (currently) existing being can be this kind of being. Moreover, this kind of existence appertains solely to individual beings in their actual existence, that is, in this context, an acting individual⁶.

However, in their freedom, human beings may turn to both what improves them as well as what degrades them. This is what Wojtyła clearly indicates⁷. Thus, apart from our will, it is our reason that is an indispensable and essentially important element in the whole structure of our actions.

Thanks to his/her reason, an acting agent can recognize the nature of things and choose a goal — i.e., good — that will improve him/her. Likewise, he/she can choose a goal — i.e., an evil — that will degrade him/her⁸.

Do we encounter the problem of individualism in this mode of thinking? Definitely not. Significantly, Wojtyła emphasizes that according to St Thomas perfectionism should be understood as "teaching about a human

4 K. Wojtyła, *W poszukiwaniu podstaw*, p. 307.

5 K. Wojtyła, *W poszukiwaniu podstaw*, p. 307–308.

6 K. Wojtyła, *W poszukiwaniu podstaw*, p. 309.

7 K. Wojtyła, *W poszukiwaniu podstaw*, p. 309.

8 K. Wojtyła, *W poszukiwaniu podstaw*, p. 304.

being that perfects himself in accordance with his rational and social nature both in the natural and supernatural order”⁹.

Summing up two essential aspects of the above-quoted definition (man’s becoming better with every good deed of his), i.e., “good” and “becoming of a person”, we should emphasize that good is understood as closely related to being in three ways:

- as a trait of existence, i.e., if something exists, it means it is good
- as the actualization (coming into being) of potentiality that results from the nature of a given being i.e., the improvement of a given being in a way determined by his/her nature
- as a relationship with the Supreme Being. This relationship does not allow, among others, to reduce the perspective of improvement to a closed individualism¹⁰.

In this light, “a good deed” is one that objectively improves a person morally if he/she acts in freedom. This can be done only when it realizes a potentiality that results from the nature of a being in the perspective of a broader good, i.e., a community good.

As for “becoming of human beings”, thanks to their will guided by the light of reason, they can perfect themselves by realizing the potentialities that result from their nature, or they may not recognize them or, despite having recognized them, act against their nature, i.e., degrade themselves. Thus, according to Wojtyła, “the becoming of a human being” means becoming morally good or evil due to one’s own choices. To use a metaphysical expression, it is about contributing to — or inhibiting — the growth of the nature of a given being.

If we take into account the community context, the above conclusion expressed in metaphysical terms has vital consequences: morally good actions enrich a community, i.e., enrich its existence with something that is in accordance with its “nature”, while morally bad actions impoverish a community. This impoverishment does not have to refer to the here and

9 K. Wojtyła, *W poszukiwaniu podstaw*, p. 309.

10 Because of the character of this analysis, we do not elaborate on this issue and only point out its vital presence.

now; while discussing the case of Joseph Beuys, we shall see that it may have far-reaching effects.

Despite its concise character, the above proposition is very demanding in practice. Nonetheless, in part 4 of this paper, we shall argue that perfectionism is an adequate response to the anti-civilization, morally and metaphysically evil actions exemplified by the case of Joseph Beuys.

Joseph Beuys

The German artist Joseph Beuys was the originator of an intriguing combination of revolution, politics, and art. Some people described the latter in terms of prophetic genius and total revolution, while others accused it of being inspired by Nazism, intensely conservative and conformist in character¹¹. Notwithstanding various opinions and their justification, the activity of Beuys became a model of creativity in certain milieus. Beuys won acclaim as “an avant-garde star” and was recognized around the world — even by people not interested in art¹².

In 1946, Beuys became a student of monumental sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts (hereinafter: the Academy) in Dusseldorf. At first, he learnt in the studio of the artistically conservative Joseph Enseling. After three terms he moved to the class of Edward Matare who was more artistically experimental. Here Beuys felt much better. It is crucial for us to stress that all three sculpture professors at the Academy at that time (Enseling, Matare and Joseph Mages with whom Beuys had no contact) taught traditional methods of sculpting.

After graduating, Beuys freelanced and exhibited his works from time to time. He suffered from a deep depression for two years that he overcame

11 B. H. D. Buchloh, *Beuys: The twilight of the Idol. Preliminary Notes for a Critique*, “Artforum” 1980 no. 18, p. 35–43 (<http://www.neugraphic.com/beuys/beuys-text9.html>).

12 *Beuys* [a movie], directed by A. Veiel, 2017, Germany, specific time: 00:08:20 — 00:08:41.

with the help of his friends as well as the patron Franz Joseph van der Grinten. He got married¹³.

With such experience, Beuys, who was being more and more recognized in the milieu, returned to the Academy in 1961 as a teacher of sculpture. During these 11 years, he taught in a completely different way than his predecessors. Unfortunately, in the Academy archives, there are no program plans of his nor any notes describing his teaching. When we take into account the meticulousness with which the archive collects and orders documents related to the Academy, we may reasonably agree with Brigitte Blockhaus and Miriam Mülle who worked there that Beuys never submitted such plans¹⁴. This, however, would be in line with his method of working: any formal or organizational requirements equaled unnecessary oppression that hindered creativity. We know from the accounts of his students, from various discussions and photographic documentation, etc., that Beuys' mode of teaching was spontaneous and experimental to the extent that at times both his confused students and Beuys himself did not know what to do next¹⁵.

Beuys emphasized how crucial it was for students to master the skill of drawing. At the same time, his opinion on the traditional study of form was radically pejorative. He focused on bringing out one's subjective creativity and sensitivity¹⁶. He also insisted that students must be adept at sculpting at the same time suggesting (though not demanding) that each student makes at least one head out of clay¹⁷. As a result, after a few years of didactic transformations, the main trait of his teaching was discarding traditional sculpting expertise and focusing on "criticism". Consequently, during his classes, a wide range of topics was subjected to criticism, from

13 J. Kaczmarek, *Joseph Beuys. Od sztuki do społecznej utopii*, Poznań 2001, p. 17.

14 Information obtained at the turn of June and July 2023.

15 P. Richter, *Beuys: "To be a teacher is my greatest work of art!"*, De Witte Raaf 1994, p. 3.

16 I.e. elements that are important for an artist. However, without artistic expertise, they may become infantile.

17 This does not suffice to shape one's sculpting skills. In order to have a decent sculpting expertise in clay one needs to make several dozen or several hundred sculptures (depending on one's talent).

the issue of the borders and the role of art, through political, social, and economic problems, to the notion of freedom and ecology¹⁸.

It is not easy to reconstruct Beuys' ideas because his statements and actions were often vague or contradictory¹⁹. How can we interpret, for example, his candidacy for the Bundestag and European Parliament at the same time from two ideologically opposed parties: AUD (Aktionsgemeinschaft Unabhängiger Deutscher) and the Greens, i.e., from a right-wing and a left-wing party?²⁰

As for Beuys' ideas, one can undoubtedly consider "utopia" to be the central notion that is present in all his mature work. According to Beuys, "utopia is simply a way of saying how the future should be, a long-term plan you have to realize in your daily life, a plan that makes sense over the next ten or twelve years"²¹. Thus utopia is simply an action whose aim is to implement some plan. The classic trait of unattainability and the elaborate character of utopia are removed. Instead, we are left with the impression that it is possible to implement ideas of a given utopian project.

This interference in the common scope of meaning results from the precept that was important and persistent in Beuys' thinking and that he consistently implemented. He expressed it best in the slogan: "The transformation of concepts should precede the transformation of reality"²².

When we bear in mind the field of Beuys' activity, we may obviously assume that this transformation may also, or perhaps primarily, refer to the notion of art. It was indeed the case. As a representative of the concept of total art²³, Beuys considered the field of his activity to have no boundar-

18 P. Richter, *Beuys*, p. 2–10.

19 A. Saciuk-Gąsowska, *Joseph Beuys. Na obrzeżach Europy*, in: A. Saciuk-Gąsowska, K. Jurecki, *Joseph Beuys. Obrzeża Europy*, Bielsko-Biała 1997, p. 13.

20 J. Kaczmarek, *Joseph Beuys*, p. 38.

21 *Joseph Beuys: Polentransport 1981. Opere di Joseph Beuys dal Muzeum Sztuki di Łódź* [cat. exh.], Milano 1993, p. 60.

22 J. Beuys, *Aufruf zur Alternative*, 1980, <https://pinakothek-beuys-multiples.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Aufruf-2.jpg>.

23 For total art anything may be the "material" of processing, including man, social phenomena, political or economic space, etc. See, for example, performance art by Julita Wójcik "Obieranie ziemniaków" [Peeling Potatoes] from 2001.

ies: art encompasses everything and everyone. At the same time, according to the idea of Social Sculpture that he formulated²⁴, the activity of an artist should focus on “carving within a society” with any methods. The objective is to transform society in order to implement a utopian vision of a community that, as Beuys adds, must be built on the basis of love. To Beuys, this love is Christ, the central figure of reality²⁵. Alas, Beuys does not explain who Christ is to him nor the way he understands love.

Since elaborating on the nuances of Beuys’ artistic vision is not the aim of this article, to those who would like to learn more on this topic we recommend the orderly, systematic and synthetic study by Jerzy Kaczmarek²⁶.

The art of the 20th century expressed the idea of the permanent revolution in various ways that we can also observe in Beuys’ activity. The enormously strong utopian trend that is central to his thought was not the idea he himself came up with. Neither was the radical character of his actions and the attempts to entirely re-evaluate existing patterns and models²⁷. What connects Beuys with various trends of the 20th-century avant-garde is also the belief that we are capable of achieving or constructing an ideal social form. Also, one must not overlook in his work the occult elements that artists of that period were widely interested in²⁸.

A certain climax in the history of Beuys’ influence took place on the 10th of October 1972, when, on his initiative, the work of the Academy’s secretariat was (again) stifled²⁹. A similar occurrence took place in the previous academic year³⁰. Beuys demanded that those rejected in the standard recruitment process be also put on the list of admitted students. In his eyes, “every human being is essentially a creative being if only he/she is given

24 J. Kaczmarek, *Joseph Beuys*, p. 31.

25 R. Rappmann, *Der soziale Organismus — ein Kunstwerk*, in: *Soziale Plastik: Materialien zu Joseph Beuys*, Achberg 1976, p. 21.

26 J. Kaczmarek, *Joseph Beuys*, p. 24–37.

27 J. Kaczmarek, *Joseph Beuys*, p. 121.

28 J.F. Moffitt, *Occultism in avant-garde art: the case of Joseph Beuys*, Michigan 1988.

29 D. Schönhoff, *Mit Beuys Durch Dusseldorf*, Doste Verlag 2018, p. 134.

30 D. Schönhoff, *Mit Beuys*, p. 134.

opportunities to be creative. This is the question of equal opportunities in education”³¹.

Those 46 people rejected in the recruitment process were allowed into his class — Beuys taught them on an equal footing with students officially admitted to the Academy. However, the Academy’s authorities did not approve of this. Their decision met with Beuys’ radical reaction — he occupied the secretariat office. Consequently, Richard von Weizsaecker, the then Secretary of State, issued a letter clearly stating that Beuys’ illegal action was unacceptable³². The problem was finally solved with the help of police troops. Beuys was dismissed from the post he had held since 1961³³.

However, this dismissal did not mean the end of Beuys’ impact on the Academy. On the contrary. It was the culminating point of a certain process that found its symbolic breakthrough in this situation. In fact, due to its peculiar character, it was the beginning of a certain barrage that the provocateur initiated despite the fact that formally he was no longer a member of the Academy. The aftermath of these events was growing.

Teaching how to “produce” (one can hardly evade this problematic term) true art³⁴, deepening one’s outlook of reality as well as sensitivity in order to contribute to the healthy growth of an individual, a community, etc. — all this should be implemented within the horizon of fundamental values: truth, beauty, and good. Moreover, it is a complex process based on the transfer of knowledge and skills from the master to the disciple. Under favorable circumstances, the latter, if he/she is gifted and hard-working, over time turns into a master himself/herself and passes on his/her skills to the next generation. These skills constitute a complex amalgamate of both, knowledge that can be articulated and the practical one — which arises from a long, demanding work with material under master’s guide. In time, with the help of this knowledge, a talented disciple creates his/her own language and technical methods. However, one cannot reach this

31 *Beuys* [a movie], specific time: 00:53:20.

32 *Beuys* [a movie], specific time: 01:03:40 — 01:47:18.

33 *Beuys* [a movie], specific time: 01:02:20 — 01:05:05.

34 True i.e. fulfilling its task of contributing to the growth (perfection) of its creator and the art receiver.

point without one's own initial, proper, and comprehensive education that ensures proficiency of actions in a given material.

Beuys' "didactics" meant, above all, hindering the mechanism of transferring skills, a phenomenon of huge consequences not only in the artistic field. This mechanism takes place in every sphere of our lives and is vital for civilizational development in general³⁵.

In order to grasp these consequences, we must have a closer look at what in essence happened at the Academy and what impact it had on it, as well as partially on other institutions of this kind and the world of art in general. Devastation of the craft and students' traditional skills of sculpting lay at its core.

Employed in 1961 as a sculpture teacher, Beuys introduced changes to the teaching process. We know for sure, that there were dramatic changes in teaching³⁶. Working with a given material (clay, wood, stone, etc.) with the help of traditional tools of processing (hands, chisels, burins, knives, saws, etc.) as well as methods of reproduction/production using negative/casting methods — all these were given up. Beuys strongly disapproved of traditional expertise and "traditional" sculpting objects³⁷. During his sculpture classes, the traditionally understood scope of sculpting craft was abandoned.

Instead, the focus was on discussions and, to be more precise, on the criticism of social, political, and economic issues as well as possible means of influencing a society with artistic activities. Thus, performance art, provocations, installations, etc. became their tools, and sometimes, as the exhibition DOCUMENTA 5 shows, they did not employ even such means and relied on strictly political activities³⁸.

35 K. Karoń, *Historia antykultury. Podstawy wiedzy społecznej. Wersja robocza*, Warszawa 2018, p. 466.

36 In her interesting work on Beuys, Cornelia Lauf analyzes the school and academic education of Beuys himself. She tries to find motives for his own pedagogical activity during his work at the Academy. Cf. C. Lauf, *Joseph Beuys: The pedagogue as persona*, Columbia University 1992.

37 *Beuys* [a movie], specific time: 00:51:48.

38 *Beuys* [a movie], specific time: 00:22:00–00:22:32.

As a result of this peculiar mode of Beuys' "teaching", his students did not have an opportunity to learn the traditional sculpting craft. As K. Karoń³⁹ points out, these young people could not familiarize themselves with traditional sculpting expertise and thus it disappeared from the civilizational resource of the field occupied by Beuys. For over a decade Beuys "educated" plenty of "sculptors" who lacked sculpting expertise and who could not transfer the techniques of their craft further on as it was impossible to describe them in textbooks.

The above conditions, nuances, and personal rotations do not alter the basic fact that while teaching sculpture at the Academy, Beuys violated the mechanism of continuation (transfer of skills) by not giving his young students a chance to get to know and master the traditional sculpting skill. This, in turn, meant that because they were devoid of the skill of sculpting but wanted to fulfill themselves as artists, they had no choice but to resort to performance, installations, etc. In other words, to activities that do not require traditional expertise.

Had this kind of "teaching" taken place in a closed system, i.e., one that has no external inflow of traditional sculpting skills, the latter would have disappeared from the artistic and civilizational resource within a generation.

The long march through the Institutions and Joseph Beuys' activity

It is common to attribute the expression the "long march through the institutions" to Antonio Gramsci. It would be difficult to change this association, however, we must note that despite the fact that it sufficiently renders the

39 K. Karoń, *Historia antykultury*, p. 465. Let us not that Karoń is too harsh and one-sided while describing the issue. Devastation occurred within the institution but it was not so radical as at the same time other teachers transmitted sculpting arcana to students. After Beuys, in 1976, Luise Kimme was employed and she taught, among others, traditional methods of sculpting. See, for example, *Zweihundert Jahre Kunstakademie Dusseldorf*, Dusseldorf 1973, p. 216; *The Kimme Musuem of Art And Sculpture*, <http://www.luisekimme.com/bio.html>.

essence of his thinking, Gramsci is not its author. The expression appeared for the first time in a statement by Rudi Dutschke, a well-known German Marxist leader of the student revolt of the 1960s. It seems that while coining this metaphor he was mainly inspired by the works of Gramsci and the Chinese “long march” (or “great march”) that is the march of the Chinese Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army from Jiangxi Province in southeastern China to northwestern China from October 1934 to October 1935. Of all the participants, the 10% who survived the march under the leadership of Mao Zedong (whose leadership ultimately strengthened during this march) became key members of the Chinese Communist Party. The ultimate success of this march (that continues to this day) means that communists and neo-communists consider it to be a very positive event and at the same time a slogan that buttressed their hope for victory in other fields during other “long marches”⁴⁰.

As for Gramsci, instead of talking about “the long march”, he spoke about the necessity to conduct the war of position and not the war of maneuver.

The same [i.e., the change of paradigm in the military — Authors] refers to knowledge and politics, at least when it comes to industrialized countries in which civil society has become a very complex structure that is resistant to a catastrophic breach of the front line by a direct economic factor (crises, depressions etc.). In a civil society, the superstructures are like a system of trenches in modern warfare. During the last war [World War I – Authors], it

40 During a panel discussion in Hambourg on the 24th of November 1967, Dutschke said: “This process of transformation goes this way [...] a long march through existing institutions during which by making [people] aware systematically and with direct actions, the transformation of awareness of subsequent minorities within and outside the University becomes possible” (R. Dutschke, *Mein langer Marsch: Reden, Schriften und Tagebücher aus zwanzig Jahren podstaw*, Hamburg 1980, p. 15, transl. by Authors). Cf. R. Rożdżeński, *Ateistyczne korzenie ponowoczesności*, Kraków 2023, p. 61. Cf. also H. Diefenbach, *Der lange Marsch durch die Institutionen — und warum er nicht dorthin führen kann, wohin man wollte*, 11.03.2020, <https://sciencefiles.org/2020/03/11/der-lange-marsch-durch-die-institutionen-und-warum-er-nicht-dorthin-fuehren-kann-wohin-man-wollte/>.

seemed at times that a fierce artillery attack had completely pulled to pieces the enemy's defense system, while in reality it had only destroyed its external surface. As a result, during their assault, the attackers unexpectedly encountered a still effective defense line. It is the same in politics during huge economic crises. Due to a crisis, the attacking army does not organize itself quickly in time and space, nor does it acquire the spirit of belligerence. Similarly, the side under assault does not become demoralized nor does it give up defending itself even in the midst of devastation, nor does it lose faith in its strength and future. This state of affairs will surely undergo further changes. However, it undoubtedly turns out that what was missing was the factor of speed, a faster pace of action, and the gradual, decisive push forward⁴¹.

With his metaphor of “a long-term trench war of position” — as opposed to “the brief, effective war of maneuver”, Gramsci significantly changed the thinking and plans of politically engaged Marxists⁴². He was the first to understand why the communist revolution — even though stunningly successful in backward Russia — after its temporary victory following World War I, suffered a devastating defeat in Western Europe in all the countries where it was initiated (Germany, Hungary and Italy). Moreover, in other Western countries, any attempts to induce it failed.

The success in Russia was, as it were, the success of the war of maneuver — one main thrust, seizing power in the center of a great empire. The communists were able to take power and maintain it due to the structure of the Russian Empire. Its chief organizational strength turned out to be its main weakness: it was enough for the communists to seize central power⁴³.

41 A. Gramsci, *Pisma wybrane*, transl. by B. Sieroszevska, Warszawa 1961, p. 584n. One cannot overlook that Gramsci sees great potential in defenders with well-developed positions during a war as well as in a state and society, which is naturally an asset and the foundation of hope for his ideological opponents, including us. We should also emphasize that what he calls “a superstructure” is in fact the core of civilization, its base. This, of course, the Marxists will not admit as for them it is the production relations, or more broadly, economic relations and the power structures that follow them that are the basis of social structures.

42 A. Gramsci, *Pisma wybrane*, p. 587.

43 A similar mechanism of the communist takeover and maintenance of power can be seen in vast areas of China, which additionally justifies our analysis.

However, Gramsci saw that in the West the situation was quite different. Here, apart from the structures of the state and its central authorities, there were many institutions of civil society. Not only did they have a significant impact on the formation of society, but they also had their share in political power. In particular, this referred to democratic political parties that ceaselessly competed with each other, thus not allowing any of them to turn into a totalitarian dictatorship. It was also about Christian Churches which exercised, as it were, spiritual power over the vast majority of society. While writing about the system of trenches and bunkers that cannot be won even after a long and intense artillery attack, Gramsci was referring to the institution of a democratic society, especially the Catholic Church which he thought to be his main enemy⁴⁴.

That is why he was the first one to point out that in order for the revolution in the West to be successful, “a long-term war of position” (or, in line with the later nomenclature “a long march through the institutions”) should be initiated. In the course of such a war, various outposts of social and cultural life will be gradually won so that education, culture centers and communication media will be taken over step by step⁴⁵. The aim is to take control of the theater and cinema, the radio and press, schools and universities according to the rule: *Culture first*. If possible, influence within the Church should also be gained by sending “our people” to the seminaries⁴⁶.

Thus, social awareness will gradually be changed by supplanting democratic and Christian “content” with communist and atheistic ones. However, one should not use brutal or revolutionary measures. Instead, one should hide under the veil of a broadly understood social democracy or the left. Thus, crypto-Marxist parties may win the approval of more and more voters, have a parliamentary majority and form their own government⁴⁷.

44 Cf. D. Rozwadowski, *Kościół w obliczu rewolucji. Marksistowski marsz przez instytucje Kościoła katolickiego*, Warszawa 2021, p. 139–144.

45 Cf. P. J. Buchanan, *The death of the West*, New York 2002, p. 66–67.

46 Cf. B. V. Dodd, *The school of darkness*, New York 1954.

47 Cf. D. Rozwadowski, *Marksizm kulturowy. 50 lat walki z cywilizacją Zachodu*, Warszawa 2018, p. 20–31 and R. Rożdżeński, *Ateistyczne korzenie ponowoczesności*, pp. 68–69. Augusto del

A society that has been transformed and manipulated or even intimidated and stultified will not pose a threat. On the contrary, it will accept drastic changes in culture and law, in the political and economic system which only a while ago it would have rejected as criminal absurdity. However, after proper cultural manipulations, it will accept the changes as an obvious necessity. One must, therefore, with all one's might strive patiently and gradually to achieve cultural hegemony. Beuys' "artistic" activity was part of the implementation of such a plan. We must emphasize that there are no unequivocal sources that would settle whether he intentionally or by default became part of the broader plan of seizing power that Gramsci and his successors outlined. However, there is no doubt that Beuys' activities and concepts that we have discussed (e.g. Social Sculpture) when read through the prism of "the march through the institutions" become clearer. K. Karoń hits the nail on the head when he writes:

What could a teacher at an art academy teach students if he himself had no talent or even modest expertise, building his academic, social, and material status on his incompetence? The answer is simple: such a teacher [...] could not teach his students anything that he himself did not know. The only thing he could do was to train them in critical destruction⁴⁸.

Activities of this kind in the field of art and the whole culture contribute to a gradual overrun of society and its institutions by Gramsci's followers or people who are ideologically close to him. This indeed has taken place because it is much easier to degrade a man and a whole society than to educate and raise someone so that they become beings with a fully realized, human dignity who independently think, feel, decide, and love. That is why

Noce, however, points out that Gramsci also in his cultural disguise is not an objective thinker but a hard, decisive and ruthless communist leader who often in his thinking, method and totalitarianism resembles Italian fascists. Cf. A. del Noce, *Gramsci, czyli samobójstwo rewolucji*, transl. by A. Schymalia, Warszawa 2023, p. 42–133 and S. Krzemień-Ojak, *Antonio Gramsci — filozof kultury*, in: *Filozofia współczesna*, ed. Z. Kuderowicz, Warszawa 1990, p. 61.

48 K. Karoń, *Historia antykultury 1.0. Podstawy wiedzy społecznej*, Warszawa 2019, p. 459.

an expert in the thought of the Italian communist stated: *Marxism died in the East because it realized itself in the West*⁴⁹.

However, Gramsci argued that it is neither easy nor simple to usurp the area with many enemy fortifications. The enemy can defend himself for a long time or even counterattack and finally win this civilizational clash. We argue that Karol Wojtyła's perfectionism may be a useful tool in the struggles for the shape and future of civilization and a man who lives according to this civilization.

Perfectionism and anti-civilization activities: the case of Joseph Beuys

The profile and activity of Joseph Beuys, discussed and analyzed above, allow us to put forward a thesis that his abandoning of the traditional teaching methods, substituting them with, among others, political discussions, as well as a partly realized attempt at totally egalitarian academy admissions were anti-civilization activities. In subsequent paragraphs, we shall argue that adopting a perfectionist attitude both by the participants of these events as well as their heirs made it possible — and still does — to prevent degenerative tendencies that are its result.

It is necessary to explain how we understand the term “civilization”, which will help us grasp the notion of anti-civilization — and why we consider Beuys' activity to have a “degrading” impact.

Aware of the lack of clarity and unambiguity regarding the term “civilization”⁵⁰, we use it the sense that seems to be in line with St Thomas Aquinas and Karol Wojtyła. Thus, following Feliks Koneczny, we understand civilization to be a method of organizing collective life⁵¹ that covers both the community and the individual. A close connection between

49 Cf. A. del Noce, *Marxism Died in the East Because It Realized Itself in the West*, 16.01.2020, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/marxism-died-in-the-east-because-it-realized-itself-in-the-west/>.

50 B. Działożyński, *Cywilizacja. Szkice z dziejów pojęcia w XVIII i XIX wieku*, Warszawa 2018.

51 F. Koneczny, *O wielości cywilizacji*, Warszawa 2015, p. 205.

Koneczny's proposal and the philosophies of St Thomas and Karol Wojtyła results directly from Koneczny's writings⁵², as well as his notion that it is spiritual elements that are most important — they fundamentally organize social life, especially society's attitude toward good and truth understood in a classical way⁵³.

This understanding of civilization will be helpful while characterizing the notion of anti-civilization⁵⁴.

Let us note that the above understanding of civilization is very close to perfectionism as it is built on the same foundation i.e., a specific attitude toward the issue of good and being, reason and man understood as a substantial unity of body (matter) and soul (form). What is more, to Koneczny, the issue of good is the expression of ethical norms, i.e. in practice, the relationship between human beings. In order for this relationship to be consistent with a human nature, the latter must be adequately recognized. This falls into the second of the fundamental spiritual categories: truth. The attitude toward the above two categories largely determines the shape of a given civilization: whether it is a place of human growth and development or his degradation and fall.

We must add that it is especially perfectionism that pays attention to these two categories. It is consistent with what Koneczny characterized as "Latin civilization"⁵⁵.

The above paragraphs show what we understand by anti-civilization activities: those that are contrary to man's (and society's) improvement and growth consistent with his nature.

Let us now be more precise about how we understand the term "degradation". Since a morally good activity improves and develops the agent, then each contrary activity, i.e., activity that is morally evil or indifferent, whenever there is a missed opportunity to act morally well, will be

52 F. Koneczny, *O wielości cywilizacji*, ch. IV.

53 F. Koneczny, *O wielości cywilizacji*, p. 181–182.

54 More on civilization in Koneczny's thinking in: F. Koneczny, *O wielości cywilizacji*; F. Koneczny, *Rozwój moralności*, Warszawa 2020; F. Koneczny, *Prawa dziejowe*, Warszawa 2020, part II.

55 F. Koneczny, *Cywilizacja łacińska*, Warszawa 2020.

a degrading activity. This degradation, just like improvement and growth, takes place on two planes: it not only degrades an individual who is an agent but, to some extent and to some degree, it also degrades a given community. Degradation of a given individual is quite clear, but degradation of a given community needs to be explained. In the light of perfectionist assumptions, we shall distinguish two essential modes of degrading:

- not-bringing-into-being,
- depriving of existence.

These two modes are strictly rooted in the metaphysical assumptions that we have already put forward. Not-bringing-into-being means that despite an opportunity to bring a potentiality into being, we do not do it. In line with the expression *ens et bonum convertuntur*, it is about a lack of existence, i.e., a lack of certain good. According to classical thinking, lack of good is evil on the metaphysical plane. Here it is also a moral evil for this shortage results from the agent's decision that is not morally indifferent. On the plane of a community, not bringing certain good into being deprives, as it were, other members of a given community of a chance to experience this good, which is degrading for them.

As for "depriving of existence", if each existence is good in itself, then ridding of this existence is evil. If this depriving of existence is accidental or there is a case of double outcome, then we can speak solely of metaphysical evil. However, if this depriving of existence is intentional, then we can also speak of moral evil as a given deed was the outcome of a free will.

In light of this perspective, let us analyze the case of Joseph Beuys. We shall conduct this analysis within the framework set out by the perfectionist outlook.

As we have said in Part 2, it is difficult to determine unequivocally Beuys' views. No wonder, as he accepted contradiction and had deeply rooted irrationalism that expressed itself in, among others, prioritizing intuition over reason in practical activity. Fortunately, we do not intend to reconstruct his views. We want to understand how and why his activities (on the basis of which we could attempt to reconstruct the views) impacted their participants and the community.

We have said that good in perfectionism is what objectively perfects a given being. Let us begin with this while analyzing Joseph Beuys' activities. Thus, let us ask: what and who did his activities improve? Let us start with his students.

His actions as a sculpture teacher were, primarily, to educate sculptors or at least to transfer practical skills. The skill of sculpting which, to some extent, almost anybody can acquire, means bringing into being the potentiality that, after coming into being, is an accident (*entia secundum quid*). It is more or less peripheral to what is essentially necessary (*ens simpliciter*) or to accidents that are more fundamental. We may draw a conclusion that with his didactic activity, Beuys did not create conditions for the students to grow, students that were capable of bringing into existence the potentiality of being sculptors. Also, he convinced people devoid of this potential to become sculptors. Despite the fact that he convinced them that they could be sculptors, he did not create the appropriate conditions so that he could fulfill his promise.

Thus what we have here is the first case of degradation — not bringing into being. However, we may also say that in a way we also have the second case here. For if we assume that before Beuys took the post of a sculpture teacher, the space (understood metaphorically) he occupied at the Academy had been adjusted to help bring into being the potentiality of students, then due to Beuys' decisions, it ceased to exist — this space was not transformed but it ceased for it began to serve other goals. Thus we can already see that the case we are analyzing degrades both the individuals and the institution.

If we do not notice — or do not want to notice — the possibilities and limitations that result from the nature of a given being and his/her unique conditions, then it is indeed difficult to find arguments against total egalitarianism that Beuys postulated. We have already said that a goal a given being is heading for in his growth, if it is consistent with his/her nature, is good. Should we leave out the issue of nature, we could not determine if a given goal was good even if it were consistent with the nature of the agent. Perfectionism strongly emphasizes the rational-volitional aspect of human action. Without objective, rational recognition of good that — with the help of our reason — we choose to be the goal of our action, we cannot

speak of moral good, even if we accidentally improve ourselves by this or that bringing-into-being of some potentiality. Thus perfectionism applies only to rational beings, whereas the metaphysical order of good is appropriate to all beings. We can, therefore, say that Beuys' didactic process was at most morally indifferent, which means that in the perfectionist perspective it was degrading.

Accordingly, we can see that an important part of Beuys' didactic activity was, from the perfectionist perspective, plainly anti-civilizational. Let us then discuss its consequences. Beuys educated hundreds of people as "sculptors", many of whom were not familiar with the craft and could not create works of art. However, at least some of them were representatives of Social Sculpture. We should reflect on whether a community was improved by educating such Social Sculptors. The fundamental task of an artist is to create beauty for beauty is the basic trait of art. A work of art, of course, can convey something more than esthetic values. But if a given work of art serves only or primarily to transmit content/qualities other than esthetic, then it ceases to be art. Art that transmits beauty is crucial for every community. This fact is not undermined even by such reductionist trends as, for example, evolutionism⁵⁶.

If, as Beuys claimed, everything is art and the basic objective of art is social change, then is it still art? It seems not. And if it is the case, a community is deprived of art and those who could create it.

Let us note that due to Beuys' activities, the potentiality of being a sculptor-artist of many people who showed aptitude to perfect themselves in this field was not brought into being. Also, many people who had no such aptitude nor a predisposition to engage in political activism were deprived of an opportunity to bring into being other potential talents they had.

What about the question of depriving of existence? Beuys' postulate of egalitarianism reveals that he could not (or did not want to) recognize what is the objective good for a community and for its individuals. Thus we can say that he attempted to deprive of existence certain conceptual contents

⁵⁶ See e.g. D. Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*, New York–Berlin–London 2009.

that were important for the community and substitute them with *a priori* devised constructs. It is, at best, a morally indifferent action that from the perfectionist perspective is degradation.

As for individualism, we can say that Beuys' actions were in line with it⁵⁷. In the perfectionist perspective, in order for one to act for the good of the community, it is necessary to recognize the actual needs of the community as well as the human nature. Also, one must want to improve or perfect the community and human nature. We have already said that Beuys did not adequately recognize either of them. From the perfectionist perspective, without this rational-volitional aspect, one can only speak of individualistic actions.

Hence, during his academic activity and afterwards, Beuys' action was degrading for his students, the Academy community, and certain broader social milieus. Degrading means anti-civilizational, which apart from the meaning mentioned earlier, translates into "violating the method of collective life". We conclude that Beuys' action did violate this method as otherwise it would not have met with such a decisive reaction of the Academy community and state authorities.

Let us now proceed to defend the thesis that perfectionism is an adequate attitude to practically defend an individual and a community against anti-civilizational activities. We have already demonstrated this theoretically. However, we would like to emphasize certain practical aspects that may be very relevant nowadays. For this purpose, let us imagine the situation we outlined in point 2, however, with a different attitude of Beuys' students. Having recognized the good of bringing into being the potentiality of being a qualified sculptor, his students *en masse* change their teacher or report to the Academy authorities that Beuys does not lead them toward

57 To prove this thesis, it suffices to refer to the project *7000 Eichen – Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung*, to which one can hardly ascribe ecological or educational goals. Instead, the project shows a kind of self-admiration that we think was typical of Beuys. See *Beuys* [a movie], specific time: 00:23:10–00:25:40; Joseph Beuys, *7000 Oak Trees* [project], 1982, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/beuys-7000-oak-trees-aro0745>.

this specific goal⁵⁸. Or, they try to change Beuys' stance and demand that he teach them sculpting skills. It seems that his anti-civilization activities would have been nipped in the bud. This example, however, reveals yet another practical problem. How can young people have the ability to recognize objective good if nobody has taught them how to do it?⁵⁹ When they go to such a respectable institution as the Academy, they expect that its renown guarantees a certain educational level thanks to which objectively good goals will be set and achieved. In other words, they believe that Beuys' methods will lead them somewhere. On the other hand, some of his students must have noticed that without any special expertise, one can still function as a famous artist. If they give up aspirations to achieve objective good, they contribute to the anti-civilizational trend set by Beuys.

Let us take into account that some of Beuys' students engaged in Social Sculpture later became teachers of sculpture at academies around the world⁶⁰.

What if Beuys himself had wanted to adopt a perfectionist attitude as well? Then all his and his students' anti-civilizational activities might not have occurred. Instead, we might have gained great sculptors.

The above analyses show that the components constituting what, after Wojtyła, we call perfectionism may be one, though not the only, pillar of counteracting anti-civilizational activities, i.e., activities that degrade man and the community he/she lives in. The example of Joseph Beuys is very helpful to show how in practice such anti-civilizational activities take place and how they could have been hindered. Our argumentation also gives certain solutions that refer to the present situation (that in many areas is not much different than the case of Beuys) and the future.

58 In fact, there were such students, though there were few of them, for example, Norbert Tadeusz who thought that Beuys' activities did not have much in common with didactics. See P. Richter, *Beuys*, p. 3.

59 We leave aside the question of brilliant individuals or people who were taught in this field at home.

60 See, for example, the careers of Lothar Baumgarten (Universität der Kunst in Berlin, 1994–2001) or Peter Angermann who taught in Reykjavik, Kassel, Frankfurt am Main and Nuremberg.

Finally, let us reflect on the role of institutions. If Beuys had stood in the market square in Düsseldorf and from there preached his ideas to random people, he may not have won such acclaim nor exerted such influence as he did thanks to the validation of his action by the Academy. We do not claim that he purposefully wanted to “educate” young people so that they become political activists who would take positions in other institutions, transforming the concepts they would find there, and putting forward Beuys’ ideas. We do not have enough data to say as much. However, we may say that ideas “accompany” people, ideas that improve and those that degrade. Even when the “march through the institutions” is not deliberate, ideas may gain legitimacy, may be adopted and then transmitted further on by people who trusted these institutions. That is why it is so important that ideas be based on perfectionism that objectively improves human nature, and not on some proposals that degrade it.

The case of Joseph Beuys makes it possible for us to underline certain difficulties related to the reception of the concept of “the march through the institutions”. This concept is usually associated with some covert, organized activity of better or worse coordinated individuals or groups. We do not claim that there is such activity. However, a nonorganized and “spontaneous” takeover of institutions by people who act within them in an anti-civilizational manner, may also be considered as “the march through the institutions”. The actions of many such individuals may not be coordinated and lead to various ideological directions. That said, their anti-civilizational character will gradually weaken “the defensive lines” on one or other section of the front of the civilizational struggle (for example by paralyzing the functioning of institutions). Such actions cannot be described as a frontal anti-civilizational attack. Rather, they resemble a guerilla sabotage attack. This, however, does not diminish their potential to degrade.

Conclusions

The aim of the above analyses was to show that perfectionism is one of the adequate elements of response to anti-civilization activities that we encounter in various ways every day.

The analysis of the case of Joseph Beuys helps us discern that institutions operating in accordance with ideas that morally and metaphysically improve a human being, are crucial for the growth of society and individuals. Grounded in rational-volitional premises, perfectionism allows us to fully understand human nature, and shows how to cherish and improve it. Thus, it fits deeply into two ideas that are close to Christian thought:

1. institutions should, above all, serve people (or society) and not, for example, utopian ideas
2. people should serve others, and not only themselves

As we have demonstrated, Beuys activity did not respect any of the two ideas. He used the Academy to promote his own anti-civilizational ideas and there are grounds for claiming that his non-teaching activities were to a large degree tainted with an individualistic approach. The solutions that we have outlined strengthen our thesis that perfectionism is one of the crucial pillars of responding to activities that degrade a human being and destroy civilization.

The context of Gramsci's philosophy and the concept of "the march through the institutions" additionally underline how important for society and the individual the role of institutions based on ideas shared by society is. Also, they show the significance of the relationship between an institution and society that is expressed in the affirmative attitude of members of society toward a given institution (as opposed to institutions imposed on society by, for example, ideological organs of this or that authority).

Summing up, we have demonstrated that, both on theoretical and practical planes, perfectionism is the right way to preserve and develop civil society. Moreover, it is an adequate response to anti-civilizational attempts — whether intentional or not — to appropriate institutions and the social sphere by individuals or groups that degrade civilization and men who live according to it.

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Abstract

Ethical perfectionism as one of the solutions to prevent anti-civilization activities: an analysis based on the case study of Joseph Beuys

The article uses case studies of Joseph Beuys to show that the ethical perfectionism developed by Karol Wojtyła is an adequate response to anti-civilizational actions, and that Beuys' actions as a lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf were precisely anti-civilizational in nature. In addition, the influence of the concept of "marching through institutions" was pointed out, which strongly

influences civilizational struggles in societies — especially democratic ones. On this basis, it was shown that perfectionism is one of the key concepts that can play a key role in civilization struggles on the ground of institutions.

Keywords: perfectionism, Karol Wojtyła, ethics, Antonio Gramsci, Joseph Beuys, philosophy in practice, marching through institutions, utopia, marxism

Abstrakt

Perfekcyjoryzm etyczny jako jedno z rozwiązań zapobiegających działaniom antycywilizacyjnym: analiza na podstawie studium przypadku Josepha Beuysa

W artykule wykorzystano studium przypadku Josepha Beuysa, aby pokazać, że perfekcyjoryzm etyczny rozwijany przez Karola Wojtyłę jest adekwatną odpowiedzią na działania antycywilizacyjne, a działania Beuysa jako wykładowcy Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Düsseldorfie miały właśnie charakter antycywilizacyjny. Ponadto zwrócono uwagę na wpływ koncepcji „marszu przez instytucje”, która silnie oddziałuje na zmagania cywilizacyjne w społeczeństwach — zwłaszcza demokratycznych. Na tej podstawie wykazano, że perfekcyjoryzm jest jednym z kluczowych pojęć, które mogą odegrać kluczową rolę w zmaganiach cywilizacyjnych na gruncie instytucjonalnym.

Słowa kluczowe: perfekcyjoryzm, Karol Wojtyła, etyka, Antonio Gramsci, Joseph Beuys, filozofia w praktyce, marsz przez instytucje, utopia, marksizm

