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The role of the theory of prototypes in moral thought*

Abstract

In this article I attempt to highlight and briefly analyze some problematic aspects of the theory of prototypes and its implications in moral thought. I focus on the issue of moral judgement and the impact of prototypicality on our understanding of moral concepts. The objective of the article is to indicate the significance of the new perspectives opened by the notion of prototype, but also to point out certain difficulties. Some of the problematic questions emerge from the very existence of the prototype structure of categories and concepts; other problems arise with reference to the proposed implications or postulates which are connected with the acknowledgement of the significance of prototypicality. Due to the recognition of the practical dimension of ethics, the main issues are presented through examples of concepts which are commonly used in everyday life, referring to political and social values, traits of character and emotions.

Keywords

Cognitive science, prototype, moral thought, word meaning.

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1. Introduction

For many centruries, the classical theory of categorization, associated mainly with the works of Aristotle, has influenced different areas of Western thought. In this approach it is claimed that all concepts have clear, well defined boundaries, and belonging to a certain category is dependent on possessing the necessary and sufficient properties. An object is either a member of a certain category or not, which means that it is impossible to fall under an abstract concept to some extent or in some respects. In addition, all the features are considered of equal importance, that is why all category members share the same degree of membership.

The theory of prototypes started to develop in the second half of the twentieth century with the rise of cognitive science.[1] The beginnings of the notion of prototype are mainly associated with later works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the research carried out by Eleanor Rosch. On Polish grounds it was analyzed by a linguist and thinker, Anna Wierzbicka, who attempted to combine the developing of some elements of the prototype approach, with the recognition of the partial adequacy of the Aristotelian way of categorization. I will make an argument for the thesis that her method can contribute to a better understanding of the problematic questions which are analyzed in the article.

Since it is connected with cognitive science paradigm, the theory of prototypes relies on a large amount of empirical data, changing the picture and functioning of different areas of thought.[2] Within the new approach it is claimed that the classical theory was incorrect "(1) for conceptual categories, (2) for categories in the world, and (3) for the hypothesized relationship between conceptual categories and categories in the world."[3]

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[1] The theory of prototypes is developed within the cognitive science paradigm, which is now recognizing the key role of embodiment, as well as the importance of social and cultural aspects of cognition. By "theory of prototypes" or "prototype approach" I understand a spectrum of research and theories that recognize and analyze different aspects of prototypicality.

[2] The actual and recommended influence of cognitive science on moral theory and practice was analyzed in M. Johnson, *Moral imagination. Implications of cognitive science for ethics*, Chicago–London 1993, The University of Chicago Press; M. Johnson, *Morality for humans. Ethical understanding from the perspective of cognitive science*, Chicago 2015, The University of Chicago Press; S. Harris, *The moral landscape: How science can determine human values*, New York [etc.] 2010, Free Press – Simon & Schuster, Inc.

[3] G. Lakoff, *Women, fire, and dangerous things. What categories reveal about the mind*, Chicago and London 1987, The University of Chicago Press, p. 371.

In the case of ethics, this strong claim is of a great significance because it may lead to establishing a link between moral psychology and moral philosophy. Categorization is meant to refer to the real world, even if the nature of this reference is unclear. Therefore, if the classical theory of categorization and its implications in different areas of knowledge were inadequate, they might result in erroneous claims on different levels of moral thought – in a practical domain like moral judgement, in normative ethics, and also with regard to the nature of moral concepts or the validity and reliability of moral rules. The implications of acquiring the new approach for different aspects of moral thought will be introduced in the next sections of the paper.

2. The notion of prototype and the problem of salience

In the new approach it is claimed that there are categories that have prototype structure. Their members do not have to possess all the necessary and sufficient features[4], and they have different degrees of representativity, depending on the number and weight of shared properties, and their similarity to the most prototypical members.[5] Thus, salient features play the key role in the prototype categorization.[6] Yet, while it is clear that category members share some amount of salient features, it is equally obvious that sharing one or even several of the most salient properties does not have to mean that something belongs to a certain category. For instance, although bats share with birds the ability

[4] Cf. "There is seldom any set of necessary and sufficient features possessed by all members of the category. In this way our ordinary concepts are not uniformly or homogeneously structured", M. Johnson, *Moral imagination. Implications of cognitive science for ethics*, Chicago–London 1993, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 8–9.

[5] Cf. "Certain members of a category are regarded as more representative of those categories than other members. The most representative members […] are termed prototypical members and often stand for or represent the entire category". M. Johnson, *Moral imagination. Implications of cognitive science for ethics*, Chicago–London 1993, The University of Chicago Press, p.66. In this respect, the notion of prototype is connected to metonymy, where "people use one well understood aspect of something to stand for the thing as a whole or for some other aspect of it". See R. W. Gibbs, *Speaking and thinking with metonymy*, in: D. C. Holland, N. Quinn, (eds.), *Cultural models in language and thought*, Cambridge 1987, Cambridge University Press, p. 64. Contrary to metaphors, in metonymy there is a contiguity of two concepts within the same cognitive structure, that can be called a frame or scenario.

[6] Cf. D. Geeraerts, *Where does prototypicality come from?* in: B. Rudzka-Ostyn (ed.), *Topics in cognitive linguistics*, Amsterdam–Philadelphia 1988, John Benjamins, pp. 207–229.

to fly – the most salient feature associated with birds – and are living creatures of the size of typical birds, they are not birds (although possessing those properties explains why they could be called birds by mistake or as a joke). The above example seems different from the prototype effects concerning social situations, emotions or moral problems, because it refers to what is called natural kinds. As has been pointed out in literature, "some categories, like *tall man* or *red*, are graded, that is, they have inherent degrees of membership, fuzzy boundaries and central members […]. Other categories, like bird, have clear boundaries; but within those boundaries there are graded prototype effects."[7] However, this does not mean that a problem similar to confusing a bat with a bird could not take place in social and moral domain. Firstly, something may have a different semantic structure, although some elements of the structure may seem to be the same.[8] In addition, it may not always be easy to distinguish those categories which have clear edges (with graded prototypical effects within the category) from those with fuzzy boundaries – which is partially connected with the fact that prototypicality is a prototypical concept itself.

Even in the case of a category that has a prototype structure with blurred boundaries, something may be classified as a less prototypical and less clear member of the category, whereas from another point of view it does not belong to that category at all, because its features are not adequate to regard it as even the most peripheral case. As an example, picturing the above problem with reference to social and moral domain, we can consider the notions of liberalism and democracy. It is known that there are different kinds of both democratic and liberal visions or systems. It is also well known that the meanings of the words *democratic* and *liberal* went through a profound change over the centuries. They are not synonymous, but their contemporary meanings refer to some common values, which are acknowledged in the constitutions of the European countries, as well as in some international legal acts and agreements. On the grounds of the contemporary European values, it can be claimed that a system promoting slavery or the dependence of women could not be regarded as liberal or democratic in today's meaning of these words, although

[7] G. Lakoff, *Women, fire, and dangerous things. What categories reveal about the mind*, Chicago and London 1987, The University of Chicago Press, p. 56. See also J. R. Taylor, *Linguistic categorization. Prototypes in linguistics theory*, New York 1999, Oxford University Press, pp. 43–45.

[8] See D. Geeraerts, *Where does prototypicality come from?* in: B. Rudzka-Ostyn (ed.), *Topics in cognitive linguistics*, Amsterdam–Philadelphia 1988, John Benjamins, pp. 207–229.

it might be called this way with reference to the past, historical meaning. There might also be a group that would call themselves democratic or liberal, relying on the historical meaning of these words. However, by a community associating democratic and liberal systems with recognizing human rights, they could not be regarded as a peripheral, less prototypical form of democracy or liberalism, because slavery or legal dependence of women would constitute a clear, prototypical case of a view or system which is not liberal or democratic. If, on the other hand, we were looking for an example of a system that in contemporary times could be counted as a democracy or liberalism, but only as their peripheral case, it might be a system that would keep the basic democratic procedures, and would recognize the importance of human rights, but would not spread and encourage political and moral awareness in society (whose members are supposed to choose their best representatives). It would be too strong to claim that in a society in which people do not receive sufficient education, democracy is not real – but it would probably only be fragmentary, weak or superficial.

The adequacy and relevance of the above remarks can be questioned or undermined – which makes it clear that the importance of salient features in the process of categorization means that regarding something as a category member may depend on which features will be considered to be more salient or more significant. This, in turn, might be connected with the acquired perspective, that is whether the dominant perspective is of a practical, axiological or ontological nature. In addition, the very decision to give priority to a certain perspective may be treated as a methodological or procedural choice, or may be regarded as axiologically significant.

3. The prototype approach and flexibility in ethics

One of the key questions in moral theory, especially if it is based on rules or reasons, is what are the implications of the fact, that our basic moral concepts have a prototype structure.[9] A closer look at this matter shows that the implications are of major importance for different levels of moral thought. Recognizing the

[9] E.g. concepts such as: person, duty, right, law, will, but also concepts of actions, e.g. lie, murder, or virtues, like bravery, generosity etc. Cf. M. Johnson, *Moral imagination. Implications of cognitive science for ethics*, Chicago–London 1993, The University of Chicago Press, p. 9.

prototypical structure of reasoning requires reformulating the usefulness and validity of moral rules, which are meant to regulate people's decisions and guide their behaviour. The knowledge about how a certain action and its broader context differs from the prototype, is one of the most helpful clues in practical reasoning, moral judgement and coming to decisions. The less prototypical a certain situation or action is, the smaller is the relevance and adequacy of simple rules and the usefulness of deductive reasoning. Therefore, one of the most obvious positive results of applying the theory of prototypes in ethics is gaining the lacking flexibility and sensitivity to circumstances. One aspect of this flexibility is the understanding that certain actions or situations may not be representative of the category of actions and situations, for which a given rule, advice or recommendation was established. Moral rules are usually established for the clear and most prototypical cases, whereas we often have to deal with less representative situations and actions. I will demonstrate this issue by using the example of the cognitive model of *lie*[10], which received a thorough analysis within the prototype approach.

According to the model presented by L. Coleman and P. Kay, the most prototypical case of lying would be as follows: a speaker says something which is false, he believes that what he says is untrue, and his intention is to deceive the hearer.[11] Statements which involve only two or even one of these elements would be still regarded as lies, but not as the most prototypical cases. The peripheral examples of lying include e.g. exaggeration, excuses or other kinds of social lies. This issue is quite well recognized in everyday morality, and even better in jurisprudence, where what is taken into account is not only a particular action, but also the circumstances and intentions understood in a broader sense.[12] The role of circumstances seems particularly interesting, because they do not always influence the central or peripheral placement of a certain action. For instance, killing in self-defence or in defence of other people is still killing, and a lie uttered to a soldier in order to protect the lives of people hiding or escaping from

[10] See e.g. L. Coleman, P. Kay, *Prototype semantics; the English word lie*, "Language", Vol. 57, No. 1 (March 1981), p. 26–44; in: D. C. Holland, N. Quinn (Eds.), *Cultural models in language and thought*, Cambridge 1987, Cambridge University Press; or M. Johnson, *Moral imagination. Implications of cognitive science for ethics*, Chicago–London 1993, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 91–98.

[11] L. Coleman, P. Kay, *Prototype semantics; the English word lie*, "Language", Vol. 57, No. 1 (March 1981), p. 28.

[12] I. e. not only the direct, but also indirect purpose or cause.

a totalitarian regime is a central case of lie (in accordance with the cognitive model that was mentioned above). But those broader circumstances change the prototypical evaluation of the action, not only with reference to emotional approval or disapproval, but also with regard to more formal judgement of moral or legal character. Thus, in order to evaluate a certain action, it is important to know how it differs from the prototype, for which a particular rule was established.[13]

As is visible from the foregoing considerations, an important aspect of the flexibility connected with prototype categorization is the possibility of extending lexical meaning and the resignation from the condition of possessing all the sufficient and necessary features by category members. This semantic flexibility may manifest in various situations. The meaning of words changes throughout history and may be the result of a growing awareness or the complexity of life. Therefore, the extension may be connected with social and cultural changes, but it can also express the ability to deal with new situations that are not resulting from major social or cultural transformations. The fact that "new entities and new experiences can be readily associated, as peripheral members, to a prototype theory, without necessarily causing any fundamental restructuring of the category system"[14], has been emphasized as one of the biggest advantages of the prototype approach. However, this method of dealing with new or difficult cases may have a negative side and it sometimes may be seen as problematic or unacceptable. In those cases, it overlaps with the question of overextension, but is considered from an axiological and not only from a purely semantic perspective. This problem is most evident with regard to moral or evaluative vocabulary, where applying the semantic extension could be harmful or misleading. Widening the meaning of a certain word in such a way that it assimilates people or situations into a given category would be morally unacceptable if this inclusion would be considered harmful or unjust by the object in question. It mainly refers to the extended application of words expressing concepts that in a certain community have negative or contemptuous connotations.[15]

[13] Cf. M. Johnson, *Moral imagination. Implications of cognitive science for ethics*, Chicago–London 1993, The University of Chicago Press, p. 9, and 80.

[14] J. R. Taylor, *Linguistic categorization. Prototypes in linguistics theory*, New York 1999, Oxford University Press, p. 53.

[15] An example of such semantic abuse would be promoting calling someone "a liar" for telling a joke, calling a girl "a whore" for wearing a short dress, calling "a coward" a person who

Therefore, the flexibility connected with prototypicality seems to have both positive and negative aspects. While the achieved flexibility is helpful, practical, and matches some basic moral intuitions, the method of dealing with problematic cases by creating a category extension can lead to semantic abuse by blurring the meaning of the words, and in this way, it may lead to the confusion of two distinct concepts. This, in turn, might lead to a consternation or mistake when it comes to a decision whether a certain action is recommended or not. For instance, some actions which are reckless seem to be so similar to acts of bravery, that one might decide that recklessness is in fact an extension or peripheral case of bravery. However, actions classified as reckless should not be encouraged, as recklessness shares some common features with the lack of prudence, while bravery is a trait of character or action with strongly positive evaluative connotation. Therefore, to avoid doing and teaching things which are morally and practically wrong, it would be better not to classify reckless actions as brave ones, especially when it comes to upbringing and education practice.

As is apparent from the above remarks, such an extension could take place on the conceptual level – i.e. recklessness might be regarded as a peripheral case of bravery – or in moral practice, some reckless actions would be classified as brave acts. Claiming that recklessness should be distinguished from bravery – not only conceptually, but also in practice, does not mean denying their conceptual contiguity. Nor does it mean denying the fact that the boundaries between them might sometimes be fuzzy, which is why it can always be a subject for discussion as to whether a certain action was brave or reckless (or in what respect it was brave, and which part of the action was reckless etc.). The problem pictured in this example is an aspect of a larger issue, that is the role of similarity in the prototype approach.

4. Similarity in prototype categorization

Similarity is connected with the issue of salient features and plays a crucial role in the process of categorization – objects which are more similar to the central

refuses to die in a war, saying that people who are skeptical of religion are "nihilists", people who distrust the politicians are "anarchists", people who do not vote for left-wing parties are "fascists", people who do not vote for right-wing parties are "communists" etc.

members are considered to be more representative, and a certain level of similarity to the prototype is essential to be regarded as a category member. However, the notion of similarity itself is not only difficult and complex, but in addition, it seems to be highly subjective. Therefore, similarity is another factor that on the one hand is necessary in prototype categorization, but on the other hand makes the understanding of this process even more complicated.[16] In order to overcome this subjective aspect, some researchers have put forward the proposals of more scientific measures of similarity, which took into account various aspects of this issue, such as the relations between similarity and difference, the problem of symmetry between similar objects, or a different weight attributed to various properties.[17]

Since the major interest of this paper is the notion of prototype in connection with moral issues, the problem with similarity will be discussed by using the example of several character traits, which in some respect seem to be overlapping, but also show striking differences from one another. Let us consider such character traits as: shyness, modesty, timidness, caution as a self-defence mechanism, reserve, servility, humility. In a specific situation, there might be a problem to decide whether a certain action expresses a feature called timidness, modesty or reserve (or to which extent it expresses each of those traits). And as we attribute different evaluative measures to these attitudes, then it might be difficult to come to a decision as to what reaction or judgement would be suitable in a given context. All the above traits seem to bear what was called a "family resemblance" by Wittgenstein. This leads to a question whether it makes sense to look for a common core. This refers not only to the given examples, but is one of the problems which are discussed within the theory of prototype. There is not a definite answer among researchers about the existence of such a core. Those who agree with Wittgenstein's point of view, claim that family resemblance means that "each item has at least one, and probably several, elements

[16] Cf. J. R. Taylor, *Linguistic categorization. Prototypes in linguistics theory*, New York 1999, Oxford University Press, p. 60.

[17] See e.g. A. Tversky, *Studies of similarity* in, E. Sharif (ed.), *Preference, belief and similarity. Selected writings of Amos Tversky*, Cambridge etc., The MIT Press, 2004, pp. 75–112. See also an analysis of Tversky's model of similarity in: J. R. Taylor, *Linguistic categorization. Prototypes in linguistics theory*, New York, Oxford 1999, University Press, p. 61.

in common with one or more other items, but no, or few, elements are common to all items."[18] Other thinkers suggest that there might be a core, but instead of belonging to the internal structure of notions, it is a result of common experience and shared values.[19] There emerge some other questions that can be asked with reference to the above examples. Is there a continuity or close contiguity between timidness and shyness, or between humility and servility? It seems that there is, but what about shyness and humility, or between timidness and caution? It does not seem so, although in a purely behavioral aspect it might appear that there is. Moreover – do they belong to a higher-order category? They all undoubtedly refer to features of character or patterns of behaviour – but is there a sub-category concerning character traits to which they all belong? These simple questions show some of the practical problems connected with the role of similarity, which might be particularly difficult or dramatic in moral thought.

Apart from the highlighted problems, there has been a lot of research within cognitive science, analyzing the role of similarity in judgement and choice.[20] Although this issue seems to be more connected with moral psychology than moral philosophy, it cannot be *a priori* regarded as irrelevant to moral philosophy, as it widens the knowledge about some of the mechanisms leading to decisions of moral significance.[21]

5. The role of metaphor

It is now well recognized that at least some kinds of metaphors play a constitutive role in human conceptualization – therefore they are an indispensable element of cognition, and are essential in construing prototypical cognitive

[18] See E. Rosch, C. B. Mervis, *Family resemblance: studies in the internal structure of categories*, "Cognitive Psychology" 7 (1975), pp. 573–605.

[19] See e. g. M. Johnson, *Moral imagination. Implications of cognitive science for ethics*, Chicago–London 1993, The University of Chicago Press, p. 90.

[20] See e. g. D. M, Medin, R. L. Goldstone, A. B. Markman, *Comparison and choice; relations between similarity processes and decision processes*, "Psychonomic Bulletin & Review" (1995), 2 (1), pp. 1–19.

[21] However, it is not clear to what extent this knowledge can actually increase the level of rationality and freedom of choices or moral judgements.

models of acts and states.[22] Another aspect of the use of metaphor is the issue of metaphorical extensions[23], or the problem of overextension.[24]

I will refer to the first, more general aspect of the use of metaphors, on the example of the analysis of the sets of metaphors constituting the cognitive model of anger, which was presented by G. Lakoff with cooperation with other researchers.[25] They perform the analysis of the most prototypical scenarios of anger, as well as its less prototypical cases.[26] Although the various kinds of metaphors and metonymies are presented together with elements of a decompositional analysis of anger, the main focus of the authors is on the role of metaphors. Pointing to the embodiment aspect of cognition, they emphasize that the presented metaphors are not used in an arbitrary way, but are strongly linked with physiology and the autonomic nervous system.[27]

What is interesting to note is that Lakoff and Kovecses emphasise that, to their knowledge, in English and other languages, anger is often conceptualized with reference to heat and pressure, but never in connection with cold and freedom from pressure.[28] However, in the Polish language anger is often

[22] See e. g. G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *The metaphors we live by*, Chicago, Illinois 1980, The University of Chicago.

[23] M. Johnson, *Moral imagination. Implications of cognitive science for ethics*, Chicago–London 1993, The University of Chicago Press, p. 4 and 190.

[24] See J. R. Taylor, *Linguistic categorization. Prototypes in lingustics theory*, New York 1999, Oxford University Press, pp. 254–255.

[25] See G. Lakoff, Z. Kovecses, *The cognitive model of anger inherent in American English*, in: D. C. Holland, N. Quinn (eds.), *Cultural models in language and thought*, Cambridge 1987, Cambridge University Press, pp. 195–222, and G. Lakoff, *Women, fire, and dangerous things. What categories reveal about the mind*, Chicago and London 1987, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 380–416.

[26] "The point is that there is no single unified cognitive model of anger. Instead, there is a category of cognitive models with a prototypical model in the center". G. Lakoff, Z. Kovecses, *The cognitive model of anger inherent in American English*, in: D. C. Holland, N. Quinn (eds.), *Cultural models in language and thought*, Cambridge 1987, Cambridge University Press, p. 195–222, and G. Lakoff, *Women, fire, and dangerous things. What categories reveal about the mind*, Chicago and London 1987, The University of Chicago Press, p. 405.

[27] G. Lakoff, Z. Kovecses, *The cognitive model of anger inherent in American English*, in: D. C. Holland, N. Quinn (eds.), *Cultural models in language and thought*, Cambridge 1987, Cambridge University Press, p. 219. They refer to the findings of Ekman's group.

[28] G. Lakoff, Z. Kovecses, *The cognitive model of anger inherent in American English*, in: D. C. Holland, N. Quinn (eds.), *Cultural models in language and thought*, Cambridge 1987, Cambridge University Press, p. 220.

expressed, described – and hence conceptualized – with reference to sudden cold.[29] It is difficult to determine whether it may also have the connotation of freedom from pressure. In some ways it does seem to be so, as people who express their anger in a cold way appear to be more self-controlled, which can be regarded as some kind of freedom from external impulses. This difference, however, does not mean that this metaphor is arbitrary, because both heat and cold refer to body temperature. Thus, anger might be metaphorically connected not so much with a high temperature, as it is implied, but rather with sudden and extreme temperature changes. It is also worth noting that the same metaphors are used to constitute different concepts – heat and cold are popular metaphors used not only for anger, but also with reference to strong, positive emotions, or to conceptualize and describe fear. In those cases, the metaphors referring to body temperature also seem to be physiologically motivated, but convey a different meaning.

The above example demonstrates the fact that cognition is, to a large extent, constituted by multiple sets of inconsistent metaphors. On the one hand, some metaphors are indispensable even in the most abstract notions[30], but on the other hand, when used as a basis for the analogizing or semantic extension beyond prototypical cases[31], metaphors are not very helpful when the attempt is to focus not only on analogy, but also on finding and analyzing some distinguishing features. These problematic issues are not always well recognized, even by researchers who take a lot of interest in examining the role of metaphors.[32] Those metaphors which are not indispensable and constitutive for conceptual structures, still have important functions, such as enriching the discourse or making it more flexible and natural by appealing to the emotive aspect of cognition. However,

[29] It is common to use such expressions as *Nagle powiało chłodem*, or *Odpowiedziała lodowato* (Lakoff mentions the occurrence of a phrase *cold anger* in English language, but regards it as irrelevant. See G. Lakoff, *Women, fire, and dangerous things. What categories reveal about the mind*, Chicago and London 1987, The University of Chicago Press, p. 407).

[30] For the special role of the conceptual type of metaphor in abstract notions and the role of embodiment even in case of mathematical concepts, see G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *The metaphors we live by*, Chicago, Illinois, 1980, The University of Chicago, or M. Johnson, *The meaning of the body: aesthetics of human understanding*, Chicago 2007, The University of Chicago Press.

[31] Cf. M. Johnson, *Moral imagination. Implications of cognitive science for ethics*, Chicago–London 1993, The University of Chicago Press, p. 10.

[32] For instance, M. Johnson insists on acknowledging the imaginative character of morality, and he focuses only on the essential and positive aspects of metaphors, without any interest in those cases when using certain metaphors might cause semantic or even axiological confusion.

it is worth remembering that the used metaphors may have underlying implications and presuppositions that are not axiologically indifferent, shaping our way of perceiving social and moral reality.

6. The theory of prototype and intercultural communication

In the first section of the paper, I made some remarks on the notions of democracy and liberalism in order to picture the significant but problematic role of salience in prototypicality. I also mentioned that the relevance or adequacy of those remarks can be questioned or undermined. However, one of the most vital questions is whether there can be a fruitful discussion between people who understand some basic concepts and words which are used to express them in a fundamentally different way. Also, such a discussion appears to be extremely difficult, and it seems almost impossible to achieve common axiological conclusions if some basic and important concepts are highly positive and receive normative priority in one society, but are associated with negative, forbidden or despised properties in the other community. In the case of an interaction between people with different systems of value, using the same words with different connotations may lead to a misunderstanding or offence. It is partially connected with the question of whether the evaluative or normative aspect of a given concept is a part of its structure, or not.[33] In the area of moral terms it is evident that it would be very difficult to strip words from their evaluative connotations and keep the same meaning.

Another problematic issue connected with the significance of the evaluative factor is the attempt to use evaluative words in the opposite meaning or to provide some words with opposite evaluative connotations, with the purpose of expressing disagreement. This sometimes takes place in subcultures wishing to express disagreement and protest towards the dominant culture[34]. However, expressing disagreement towards other groups in this way would be at best only partially successful, as by this form of protest people would still be operating

[33] Cf. J. J. Park, *Prototypes, Exemplars, and Theoretical & Applied Ethics*, "Neuroethics" (2013) 6, pp. 241–244.

[34] Cf. C. Voshagen, *Opposition as a metonymic principle*, in: (eds.) K. U. Panther, G. Radden, *Metonymy in language and thought*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 1999, John Benjamins Publishing Company, p. 306. Voshagen refers to the slang of Afro-American subculture.

within the same conceptual frame.[35] Moreover, it seems that such evaluative changes are well understood and meaningful only within the community which makes that transformation. If such words are used in a dialogue between parties assigning them with opposite meaning or evaluation, it could lead to further blurring of the communications acts, especially if the differences and the reasons for the evaluative change were not well explained.

The problems listed in the paper indicate the need for making the discourse more understandable – not only within the same linguistic community, but also in the cross-linguistic communications and translations of the interacting cultures' key words. One of the most famous and interesting approaches which attempts to meet this demand is the work of A. Wierzbicka and her school of semantics. Their major contribution was a method of clarifying lexical meaning with the use of natural semantic metalanguage (NSM). The idea was to explain complex concepts by reductive paraphrases called explications, which consist only of elementary conceptual units.

According to Wierzbcka, there are around 100 simple, universal concepts (with some basic grammar rules), whose linguistic exponents (words, morphemes or phrases that express them) in different languages are maximally synonymous.[36] The NSM method seems particularly helpful in intercultural communication, when comparing the meaning of words that express complex and similar concepts – e. g. English *freedom*, Polish *wolność*, Latin *libertas*, or Russian *svoboda*[37]. But it can also be useful for distinguishing similar concepts within the same language – e.g. English *freedom* and *liberty*.[38] She emphasizes

[35] The refusal to propagate words expressing concepts which are connected with axiological connotations or presuppositions that are regarded as unacceptable, seems to be a more fruitful form of protest. This problem also indicates the importance of distinguishing the linguistic community from the cultural community – it often happens that there are different cultural groups within one linguistic community. This refers to subcultures existing within a dominant culture, but also to the co-existence of different cultures.

[36] The practical helpfulness of the NSM approach can be defended even in the case of rejecting this strong claim on the nature of semantic primes. Even if they are not absolutely basic, innate, and the meaning of their lexical exponents in all languages is not exactly the same, this method can be treated as a complementary, or in some cases as an alternative way of explaining the meaning of words and presenting the differences between similar concepts.

[37] A. Wierzbicka, *Understanding cultures through their key words*, Oxford, New York 1997, Oxford University Press, pp. 154–155.

[38] A. Wierzbicka, *Understanding cultures through their key words*, Oxford, New York 1997, Oxford University Press, pp. 154–155.

that "unlike semantic formulae based on various artificial formalisms, NSM formulae are open to verification (they can be tested against native speakers' intuitions)."[39]

To demonstrate this approach in practice, I will shortly analyze some of Wierzbicka's explications. First, let us consider her paraphrases of *fear*, *shame*, and *humility*, to see whether this method might be of some help with regard to the problem presented in section three.

"*fear:*
(X is) *afraid*
X thinks something like this:
something bad can happen
I don't want this
I want to do something because of this
I don't know what I can do
because of this, X feels something bad"[40]

"*shame:*
(X is) *ashamed*
X thinks something like this:
people can know something bad about me
because of this, people can think something bad about me
I don't want this
because of this, I would want to do something
I don't know what I can do
because of this, X feels something bad".[41]

It is worth noting, that in the explications of both *fear* and *shame*, the word "bad" is used in a broader, not strictly moral sens. "Bad" is understood here as something negative and threatening, something that we want to avoid. In contrast, in her explication of *humility*, the main evaluative word is "good", but it is used in a specifically negative sense, as something that – according to X – can be attributed only to Y: "Y is someone good, no one can be like Y"; next, the explication of *humility* contains phrases expressing the assertion of X, that no good

[39] A. Wierzbicka, *English: Meaning and culture*, Oxford, New York 2006, Oxford University Press, p. 17.

[40] A. Wierzbicka, *Semantics, culture, and cognition: universal human concepts in culture specific configurations*, New York; Oxford 1992, Oxford University Press, p. 133.

[41] A. Wierzbicka, *Semantics, culture, and cognition: universal human concepts in culture specific configurations*, New York; Oxford 1992, Oxford University Press, p. 133.

thing can be said about X. The paraphrase ends with "I think this is good."[42] In spite of the ending phrase, suggesting that humility is a virtue, not a vice, Wierzbicka mentions the ambivalent evaluation connected with this concept, which can be considered either positive or negative, depending on the acquired perspective. She analyzes the conceptual structure of *fear* and *shame* together with *embarassment*, revealing their similarity, but also pointing out the dfferences between them. She also addresses the question of their continuity, wondering if the fact that the concepts are discrete, means that the corresponding emotions are also discrete; however, she does not come to a definite conclusion with regard to this question.

In spite of the fact that there are still many questions which are unanswered, the above explications seem to be of some help, as they make a few issues more visible and clearer. With regards to the understanding of the emotions of fear and shame, their common, shared elements are as follows:

- negative evaluation: the condition is not wanted, and is felt as negative emotion; the negative evaluation refers both to the event that caused this feeling (the event is not wanted), and to the reaction to the event (the subsequent feeling is not wanted)
- the reaction is involuntary and automatic (although it might lead to voluntary decisions)
- the feeling of helplessness: "I don't know what I can do" (however, this part of the proposed explications seems to be only partially correct, as shame or fear is usually a stimulus for self-defence or escape).

The difference is that, in the case of shame, the element that is not wanted is specified and refers to possible thoughts of other people about the person experiencing shame. By analyzing these two explications, we may come to the conclusion that feeling shame is in fact experiencing one of the possible kinds of fear. In contrast, the explication of *humility* is constituted by a significantly different cognitive scenario, not only with reference to the prototype feeling, but also the evaluative expressions.

For the majority of the concepts mentioned in this paper (including *anger*, *bravery*, *recklessness*) Wierzbicka proposed her NSM explications, contrasting or comparing them with similar concepts from other languages or within the

[42] A. Wierzbicka, *Semantics, culture, and cognition: universal human concepts in culture specific configurations*, New York; Oxford 1992, Oxford University Press, p. 193.

same language.[43] On the one hand, in accordance with the cognitive approach paradigm, in this proposition values and morally significant emotions or attitudes are shown as emerging from people's interactions, mainly with their social environment.[44] However, what is interesting in Wierzbicka's paraphrases, is that the proposed perspective remains individualistic, and the relation expressed in explications is individualistic: "norms and values are always identified from within— that is, from the point of view of those people who are the bearers of the postulated norms and values (and in their own language)."[45] The prototypical scenario includes an X and an Y, so this is a perspective of an interacting individual. It can be a topic for discussion whether Wierzbicka's description of a prototypical relation is adequate. But the insight in the nature of basic relations which are necessary for human development, indicates that the first, basic interactions, are individual relations with parents, siblings and peers, who are treated individually. Therefore, the proposed perspective is convergent with actual relations that people experience as a basis for their mental and emotional development.

The NSM paraphrases are convergent with the theory of prototypes and the interdisciplinary orientation in acknowledging the constitutive role of embodiment and interaction with environment in human conceptualization. But in contrast to the emphasis on the key role of the metaphor by other researchers, in the proposed explications the metaphors are used only to the extent in which they are indispensable[46], mainly in connection with bodily and spatial orientation (in phrases such as feels *towards* etc.) inherent in language.

This brief analysis reveals that Wierzbicka's propositions can be considered to be a peripheral, less representative example of the prototype approach.[47] While

[43] The NSM method is an attempt to make the meaning of the word as precise as possible. However, this does not mean that within category boundaries there might not be any prototypicality effects.

[44] Cf. M. Johnson, *Morality for humans. Ethical understanding from the perspective of cognitive science*, Chicago 2015, or S. Harris, *The moral landscape: how science can determine human values*, New York [etc.], 2010.

[45] A. Wierzbicka, *English: meaning and culture*, Oxford, New York 2006, Oxford University Press, p. 24.

[46] Cf. B. Tversky, *Spatial thought, social thought*, in: W. Schubert, A. Maass, *Spatial dimensions of social thought*, Berlin, Boston 2011, Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co., pp. 17–39.

[47] For other theories that combine some elements of classical categorization with prototype approach, but would be less helpful with reference to the issues analyzed in the article, see

she recognizes the partial validity and usefulness of the prototype categorization, she attempts to overcome some of the difficulties and semantic obscurity that emerge from the prototype structure. Moreover, in her polemics with Lakoff, Rosch, or Wittgenstein, she indicates that there are many concepts with some prototypicality effects, which nevertheless can be defined in accordance with the requirements of the classical approach.[48]

In the light of the foregoing analysis, it is justified to claim that the NSM method might be at least partially helpful, especially in those cases, where the debate and disagreement is based on semantic misunderstanding. It could also be useful in explaining more serious intercultural differences. With the process of globalization the situation becomes even more complicated, as various cultural groups often coexist within one linguistic community; in addition, one person may belong to various groups with different systems of value. If some basic and commonly used vocabulary is attributed simultaneously with strong positive and negative connotations, and if the meaning of words in moral discourse is made less understandable by the usage of metaphors, metonymies and semantic extensions which in a specific context are not unavoidable or adequate, it might have a negative impact on people's life by increasing semantic or moral confusion.

7. Conclusion

It is justified to claim that the prototype structure of categories and concepts should be taken into account on different levels of moral thought – not only within the scientific framework, but also in the practical dimension and everyday morality, where recognizing the prototypicality effects may have impact on moral judgement and the assessment of the validity and adequacy of a certain moral rule with reference to a given situation. This does not mean that the application of the prototype approach or its significance is unproblematic. The theory of prototypes is linked with acknowledging the role of such cognitive elements and structures as metaphors, metonymies, ICMs, frames etc. However, it is worth

D. Geeraerts, *Prospects and problems of prototype theory*, "Diacronia" 3, August 1, 2016, pp. 12–14.

[48] See e.g. A. Wierzbicka, *Język – umysł – kultura; wybór prac pod redakcją Jerzego Bartmińskiego*, Warszawa 1999, PWN, p. 38.

highlighting, that although those structures are constitutive and unavoidable in human cognition and conceptualization, it may happen that a given analogy will be inadequate or misleading, and a certain metaphor will be harmful or unnecessary in a certain context. Similarly, the fact that different framings of a given situation are possible with regard to judgement and choice[49], does not necessarily have to mean that in a particular case all framings are equally adequate. Another problem is that there could be different opinions on what counts as salient features when it comes to deciding whether an object belongs to a given category or not, and on the validity or suitability of certain extensions. This also refers to the question whether something is less or more prototypical – there might be various answers even within the same community, depending on individual or subcultural differences in perspective, priorities and values. These issues are overlapping with the problem of determining, when a certain disagreement is mainly a result of axiological differences, and when it is due to semantic confusion. Therefore, one of the tasks and points of convergence between the theory of prototype, semantics and moral thought is establishing the right balance between recognizing the flexibility of categories due to their prototype structure, and acknowledging the need to make moral discourse more precise and understandable for its participants, so that the discussion and other kinds of acts of communication could be regarded as fair.

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[49] Cf. e.g. D. Kahneman, A. Tversky, *Choices, values and frames*, "American Psychologist", Vol. 39, No.4, (1984), pp. 341–350.

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