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Joseph: A different Ethics is Possible

1. The masculine form of justice – 2. Males who do not know how to live in the world – 3. Returning to Joseph and rediscovering ourselves – 4. Conclusion

A moral theologian cannot fail to take note of the way in which the moral theologian *par excellence*, Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori (1696–1787), approaches the figure of Saint Joseph and paints his portrait. The resulting sketch seems to gather together, as in a prism, a variety of reflections of light, all of which speak of the character of Joseph¹. His docility and obedience to a divine plan that is apparently incomprehensible, his attitudes of tenderness and care, the anxiety he feels when he sees Mary and the child exposed to dangers, as well as his initial reluctance and his silence, his remaining at his post in a workshop no different from that of any other carpenter – all these are held together by a brilliant narrative that makes him “a just man” already in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 1:19). In the commentary in his Meditation for the seventh day, Saint Alphonsus says that “‘just man’ means one who possesses all the virtues”.

¹ Following already existing traditions of popular religiosity, Saint Alphonsus composed a *Settenario di meditazioni in onore di San Giuseppe per li sette giorni precedenti alla sua festa* [“Collection of seven meditations in honor of Saint Joseph for the seven days preceding his feast”], first published at Naples in 1758. A more recent publication is in Sant’Alfonso Maria de Liguori. 1968. *Opere ascetiche*. Vol. 10. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura. The text is also accessible today online: <https://sangiuseppepreghiere.jimdofree.com/settenari-1/settenario-di-meditazione>.

1. The masculine form of justice

“Justice” in Joseph looks more like a sum total of virtues than some one specific thing in accordance with the conceptual parameters that later gradually developed around this category. Nevertheless, the emphasis placed on justice can offer a good path for reflection on, and for rethinking – with Joseph and his masculinity as our starting point – our models of masculinity, with a particular accent on the ethical perspective of one question that has become increasingly relevant in recent decades, a question with ever wider-reaching implications.

The starting point here is the fact that the model of a successful moral subject that has emerged in the last decades has taken on the category of justice as a central factor and as a particularly important indicator. Theories of rights and political philosophy, moral anthropology and theological ethics have discussed it at length and brought to light its fundamental aspects and its typological specifications; but our interest here is primarily in moral pedagogy, since from its perspective we can see that the construction of itineraries of maturity in the moral subject culminates explicitly in the acquisition of the sense of justice. Justice is the mature stage of the architecture of the evolutionary phases of which psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud), developmental psychology (Jean Piaget), and, above all, the theory of moral development (Lawrence Kohlberg) speaks. While the typical accentuations differ, in keeping with the approaches of each of these authors, their common point of reference lies in justice. In particular, in the pattern of the evolutionary dynamic (according to Kohlberg’s moral theory), the apex of the path – that is, the sixth stage of development, in the phase that he calls post-conventional – consists in the orientation of the subject, strong in the autonomy one has gained, to universal ethical principles that are united within the normative horizon of justice. This generates reflection on the equality of rights for all, and on respect for the individual dignity of each one².

This kind of project of moral maturity seems at first sight open and universal, with a positive anthropological value. Very quickly, however, one grasps that it is based on a conviction that is both precarious and prejudicial, because the model of the moral subject here concerns the human being in an abstract sense, and when we become more concrete, the reference is in fact to the masculine subject. What we have here amounts to a reduction of anthropology, which is kept confined within the narrow perimeter of andrology. Underlying the works of the

² See Lawrence Kohlberg. 1981. *The Philosophy of Moral Development. Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice* (Essays on Moral Development). San Francisco/CA: Harper & Row.

authors mentioned above we find in reality the idea that women are morally underdeveloped subjects, because their approach to the moral horizon moves along a different trajectory, one that cannot be identified with what is thought to be the normative trajectory of justice in its impartiality and universality. And since it is only on the basis of justice that the world can be adequately explained and coherently governed, it falls to the male to govern the world. This function of guide defines both his identity and his role. The traditional accounts of the superiority of the man over the woman³ have startling repercussions here, and prompt reactions of a very different kind.

Philosophical-political reflection already opens up an interesting breach here in its critique of the conventional approach to the theme of justice, in a broader context. It sees that the emphasis in this approach lies on the forms of specification (commutative justice, distributive justice, retributive justice) in an abstract context concerned with principles, while however neglecting the procedural dimensions and the communicative and dialogical dynamics that can help individuals and communities in concrete terms to grow in just attitudes and to behave in solidarity⁴. The critical approach to the traditional structure of the idea of justice, while not making explicit the gender perspective, nevertheless suggests that the problems linked to a reductionism via abstraction also do harm to a balanced gender relationship and to its consequences, since these problems generate hegemonic ideas of having recourse to the idea of justice.

Kohlberg's own student, Carol Gilligan, has assessed and criticized his model⁵ with an explicit reference to the dimension of gender⁶. Her empirical and systematic research highlights the difference in approach and tends to undermine the theorem that underestimates women's moral horizon. What Kohlberg could define as a moral deviance in the female subject is, for Gilligan, in reality the expression of a differently configured model, thanks to a sensitivity and an attitude that do not reach their apex in the sense of justice, but rather revolve around the idea of responsibility and care. The moral subject is not defined in terms of the autonomy

³ The idea of Thomas Aquinas that "the female is a defective and inadequate being" (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 92, a. 1, ad 1) is also reflected in the fact that "the woman is naturally subject to the man, because the man has by nature a more vigorous discernment of reason" (*ibid.*, ad 2).

⁴ The analysis by Dagmar Schulze Heuling. 2015. *Was Gerechtigkeit nicht ist. Politisch-philosophische Überlegungen zu Grundgedanken der Gerechtigkeit*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, is interesting, esp. ch. 7, "Thinking differently about justice" (153–164).

⁵ Carol Gilligan. 1982. *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press.

⁶ See Anna Parola and Lucia Donsi. 2017. "'In a Different Voice'. Gender Differences in Moral Orientation". *Journal of Gender Studies* 16: 146–172.

that makes it possible for the subject to explain and to govern the world; the moral subject finds its consistency in the will to establish stable interpersonal relationships that are capable of constructing the common good and of motivating people to spend themselves on behalf of the destiny of others.

We see here the contours of a confrontation between approaches, a kind of slippage of paradigms – that of justice, for Kohlberg, and that of care, for Gilligan. But where this takes on the form of a real and genuine conflict between the two paradigms, we are in reality asked to look attentively at both the common ground and the real points of difference; this becomes clear in the reception and the reflection on the confrontation-conflict itself⁷.

More recently, Elena Pulcini recognizes with great acuteness that Gilligan's objective is not to theorize about an opposition, and *a fortiori* a reciprocal exclusion, but rather to propose an integration between two different approaches to morality, which are derived from two different modalities of thinking. It is not by chance that Gilligan warns against the opposite risks, both of them spectacular, that are intrinsic to each of the two ethical perspectives: the risk of egocentricity that belongs specifically to the ethics of justice, and the risk of forgetfulness of oneself that belongs specifically to the ethics of care⁸.

One conclusion that may be drawn from this debate is that the recourse to the idea of justice cannot function as an element of hegemonic legitimation of the male power to explain the world and to govern it in autonomy – a power that excludes women and downgrades them to the status of subordinate subjects. The just man, whose illustration and model is Joseph of Nazareth, does not usurp competences that serve to mark the perimeter of his superiority. The code of his justice includes an empathy that is expressed in terms of responsibility and care. Above all, we come to see here the genetic factor of the equality in dignity, of the relational autonomy, and of the sharing of tasks. These horizons are very far from the presumed conviction about people's identity that is the result of a construction of roles that has never been subjected to criticism. They lay bare the historical genesis, the cultural dependencies, and the tendencies to dominate.

⁷ I refer to Owen Flanagan and Kathryn Jackson. 1987. "Justice, Care, and Gender. The Kohlberg–Gilligan Debate Revisited". *Ethics* 97 (3): 622–637; Gunnar Jorgensen. 2006. "Kohlberg and Gilligan: Duet or Duel?". *Journal of Moral Education* 35 (2): 179–196; Sandra Laugier. 2011. "L'etica di Amy. La cura come cambio di paradigma in etica". *Iride* 2: 332–344; Caterina Botti. 2011. "Il pensiero femminista e la riflessione filosofica sulla morale". *Rivista di filosofia* 1: 47–76.

⁸ Elena Pulcini. 2020. *Tra cura e giustizia. Le passioni come risorsa sociale*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 33. Several years earlier, Gunhild Buse. 1993. *Macht-Moral-Weiblichkeit. Eine feministisch-theologische Auseinandersetzung mit Carol Gilligan und Frigga Haug*. Mainz: Grünewald, had pointed to the opportuneness of a creative exchange between a male morality and a female morality, within the horizon of a genuinely human morality (39–45).

A different justice is possible. It does not take shape around the universe of the male who usurps the government of the world. It expands in the relational dimensions that unleash unheard-of resources for life together. If this is to succeed, all men and women are required to show care.

2. Males who do not know how to live in the world

The correlation between the idea of justice and its possible consequences in the expressions of dominion brings us to another series of excesses and imbalances that take particularly alarming forms in our contemporary culture. The category of dominion evokes the *dominium terrae* that combines the original commission stated in Gen 1:28 and its varied reception in the course of history. One trajectory that occurs again and again makes it necessary for us to unmask the anthropocentric approach that has permeated in a disastrous manner the relationship between the human being and nature; its failures are obvious to everyone today. A conception appealing falsely to the biblical text for support has a long history. This claims to legitimate the image of the man as arbitrary exploiter of the earth⁹. However, the verb “to exercise dominion” that is employed in Gen 1:28 does not mean the arbitrary exercise of power. It recalls the most classic form of dominion in antiquity, that of the king. Not only the Bible, but likewise the surrounding cultures repeatedly emphasize that the king’s authority signifies, not a despotic power, but first and foremost responsibility for the people that is entrusted to him, and whom he must protect and make prosperous¹⁰.

The critique of anthropocentrism, in its more or less extreme variants, is an integral part of an ecological sensitivity that also finds incisive expression in the encyclical *Laudato si’* (2015), which does not hesitate to call anthropocentrism “tyrannical” (no 68) and “distorted” (several times: no 69, 118, 119, 122). The crisis and the consequences of modern anthropocentrism are the specific object of a necessary reflection on the task entrusted to the human

⁹ In this context, it has been said that there is a kind of arrogance that is the product of Christianity, while however specifying that “in speaking of Christian arrogance, it must be with the proviso that it is not Hebraic-Christian but Graeco-Christian ‘arrogance’”: John Passmore. 1974. *Man’s Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Tradition*. London: Duckworth, 17.

¹⁰ Sergio Lanza. 1984. “Hai dato la terra ai figli dell’uomo”: Sal 115,16. Fondazione biblica della signoria dell’uomo sul creato. In *L’etica tra quotidiano e remoto*. Ed. Antonio Autiero, 95–116, at 104. Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane.

being. This reflection must nourish our vision of the world, with a view to a sustainable future¹¹.

However, the critique of modern anthropocentrism can easily fall into the trap of a reflection on principles that remains abstract and scarcely contextualized. This means that it will make little impact. This happens especially when too little attention is paid to the fact that even in this case, anthropocentrism basically amounts to androcentrism. It is first and foremost the male human being who is invoked as the arbitrary exploiter of the creation. He belongs to the technologically developed world, and usually to the upper middle class in terms of his cultural background and his social status. It is clear that the ecofeminism of recent decades also contributes to the awareness of this short-circuit. This term, coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne¹², has inspired over the last decades a movement of thought that elaborates a reflection on how there is a profound and not accidental connection between the logic of dominion that is expressed *vis-à-vis* the realities of nature and the logic of the submission of women that is pursued in patriarchal societies. One and the same logic of dominion favors and expresses a system of oppression that simultaneously legitimates the subordination of woman and of nature, offering an arbitrary justification for the exploitation and the dominion exercised over both of them¹³.

The interweaving of the dominion over the creation and the subordination of women also infiltrates another expression of dominion, namely, the dominion over one's own body, and consequently (with a change of forms) over the bodies of other persons. The rationalistic compression that allows the dominion over nature to be exercised draws its motive power from the ancient dialectic between *ratio* and *passio*, with which the Stoic philosophy was very familiar; this was taken up and expanded in a Christian context, also thanks to the emphasizing of the relationship between body and soul, with its dualistic connotations. The forgetting of the senses – indeed, the disparaging of the senses – is closely related to the will to exercise a dominion that holds together the world, the body, and women. Indeed,

¹¹ See Simone Morandini. 2020. *Cambiare rotta. Il futuro nell'Antropocene*. Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane; Markus Vogt. 2021. *Christliche Umweltethik. Grundlagen und zentrale Herausforderungen*. Freiburg i. Br.: Herder.

¹² Françoise d'Eaubonne. 1974. *Le féminisme ou la mort*. Paris: Pierre Horay. See also Caroline Goldblum. 2020. *Françoise d'Eaubonne et l'écoféminisme*. Paris: Le passager clandestin. Françoise d'Eaubonne was writing at the same time as the book by Mary Daly. 1978. *Gyn/Ecology. The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston/MA: Beacon Press, with a more strongly marked theological angle. This is excellently brought out by Lucia Vantini. 2012. Mary Daly nella teologia cattolica: un vulcano inattivo?. In *Un vulcano nel vulcano. Mary Daly e gli spostamenti della teologia*. Ed. Letizia Tomassone, 73–92. Cantalupa: Effatà Editrice.

¹³ Carla Faralli. 2014. Presentazione. In *Donne, ambiente e animali non-umani. Riflessioni bioetiche al femminile*. Eds. Carla Faralli, Matteo Andreozzi, Adele Tiengo, 11. Milan: LED.

the reflections offered by a theory of the passions and of the “emotional difference” also show how the modern identification of women with feelings led to their exclusion not only from the public arena, but also from the *pathos* and from the right to have passions¹⁴.

Laudato si' powerfully unmasks the abhorrent fate of the person who ultimately does not know how to live in the world, because one demands to live there with a yearning for dominion, under the aegis of a reason that excludes. Pope Francis writes in no 155:

Thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different¹⁵.

3. Returning to Joseph and rediscovering ourselves

Saint Alphonsus recognizes and praises in the carpenter of Nazareth a man capable of remaining at his post and of forming interpersonal relationships with love and tenderness, without succumbing to the yearning for dominion or to claims to superiority – well known characteristics of the typical models of the patriarchal culture of his days. The company of Jesus and his loving relationship with Mary¹⁶ make him the just man to whom we should look in order to grasp the hidden mys-

¹⁴ I refer here to the very useful study by Elena Pulcini. 2003. *Il potere di unire. Femminile, desiderio, cura*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri.

¹⁵ *Laudato si'* proposes very effective analyses and perspectives leading to solutions, including how to overcome the anthropocentric bottleneck. This is well put in the following passages: “Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the fainthearted cared about” (no 166), and “we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships” (no 119). One weak point, however, is the lack of attention to the nexus between nature–body–women as the trajectory of expression of the sole attitude to dominion that is generated by the anthropocentric concentration in masculine terms. The tendency to an abstract and conceptual rarefaction in anthropology, as well as an inexplicable aversion to the contributions made by gender studies, noticeably impair both a more complete analysis and an even more emancipatory and resolute vision of the anthropological, ecological, and societal situation – and it is well known that this is the profound intention and the prophetic scope of this encyclical.

¹⁶ “Let us consider here the holy life that Joseph then led in the company of Jesus and of Mary (...) How tender must their conversations have been!” (Meditation for the fourth day). And in another passage: “Bearing all this in mind, consider what affection the just and grateful heart of Joseph felt for his spouse, who was so lovable” (Meditation for the fifth day), in Sant’Alfonso Maria de Ligori. 1968. *Settenario di meditazioni*.

tery and to draw from it lessons for our own lives. Joseph is depicted as one who stands in the workshop in Nazareth, a man in silent recollection, but he becomes a voyager, one who goes. The paths he takes lead him to other places, first to Bethlehem, where Jesus is born, and then to Egypt, where he and his family find refuge. This oscillation between standing and going speaks of the dynamic of a life that has much to teach us about the voyage that leads us, not beyond the creation, nor to mark our own superiority to others, but to the very center of our own selves, where we can rediscover ourselves.

This oscillation and its symbolic value are linked to two reflections that are deeply involved with the possibilities of realizing successful models of masculinity.

First of all, we encounter the dialectic between being silent and speaking. The sacred texts transmit no words of Joseph; we are impressed by the fact that he is a man of silence. In his case, it is the gestures and the attitudes that speak and that make him more than present and communicative, playing an active and decisive role in the destiny of his family and, ultimately, in the history of salvation that is connected to this destiny.

The model of the hegemonic and dominant man ignores the value of an active silence and prefers to rely on eloquent conduct. It claims to explain the world in order to dominate it, and it has a tendency to overwhelm other individuals, in order to be able to subjugate them. This verbose character, sometimes making a great deal of obtuse noise, expresses the “underestimation of women’s capacity for thought”¹⁷ and the will to exclude them, if need be by silencing them. Learning the just language, on the other hand, is an important step along the path on which appropriate models of life come to maturity, since

underestimating the names of things is the worst error of our own time, which does indeed experience many tragedies – but above all, which experiences this semantics, which is an ethical tragedy.¹⁸

Those men who learn the just language live in the world in the right way. They do not refuse to talk about themselves. Nor do they talk about everything else in order to avoid telling their own stories. But nor do they tell their own stories in order to occupy the center-stage and deprive the other person of space. The apprenticeship they have gone through enables them to say what is going on inside their interior world, and to say what they count on, as they look for success in their

¹⁷ Michela Murgia. 2021. *Stai zitta. E altre frasi che non vogliamo sentire più*. Turin: Einaudi, 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

significant relationships. They learn from similar paths that have been taken by various feminine movements, and they acquire a narrative form of their own life stories that favors a theoretical and a practical knowledge with regard to the paths along which their masculinity has evolved¹⁹.

A further set of problems linked to the search for one's identity takes shape by means of language. Here too, we see the dialectic between identity and function, as a heuristic level of comprehension of how one lives in the world. Feminist research has produced a significant level of knowledge about this nexus and about how it has been articulated in the course of history. The definition of what it is to be a woman – namely, as a subject who carries out specific functions, especially those of wife and mother – has long impoverished the self-awareness of the female subject. This can be regained through the transition from the level of functions to the level of self-perception, as the vehicle of the construction of one's identity. And all this is no less important for the male subject. He too has long defined himself via the functions and the roles that others or he himself assigned to him at various times, thereby pushing into the background the question about what he is and devoting his attention instead to the questions that arise about what he does. The parallel between the female question and the male question is the basis of the analytical recognition of the problems linked to the crisis of masculinity and promotes the identification of counterweights that can resolve this crisis²⁰.

When identity is absorbed into the functions, this harms every subject, whether male or female. The antidote to this cannot, however, lie in the return to a strong identity that is thought of as a closed and abstract system defined on the basis of a presumed ontological nature. We have more than enough knowledge of the similarly disastrous effects of this sort of static conception of identity, thanks to reflection on the subject in the context of the modern period, which (as Levinas warns us) has established an ontology of power, thus transforming anthropology into "egology"²¹. It is the criticism of the modern age, not its refusal, that brings an equilibrium into the dyad identity-roles. This criticism makes its way through the

¹⁹ To take one relevant example here, it is interesting to see how the editorial that opened the first issue of "The Journal of Men's Studies" in June 1992 explicitly stated the intention to create a space in which it could be possible for men to reflect on, and to communicate, their life stories. This would be an instrument both for the analysis of the theory and for the praxis of the consciousness of their own masculinity. James A. Doyle. 1992. "Editorial". *The Journal of Men's Studies* 1: 1–4.

²⁰ This is well described by Andrea Waling. 2019. "Rethinking Masculinity Studies. Feminism, Masculinity, and Poststructural Accounts of Agency and Emotional Reflexivity". *The Journal of Men's Studies* 27 (1): 89–107.

²¹ Emmanuel Levinas. 1971. *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. Norwell/MA: Kluwer Academic, 28–38 (Eng. trans.: 1969. *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press).

prism of those relationships on the basis of which every subject defines and rediscovers one's own self. It tones down that kind of "euphoria of identity"²², so that the consistency of the subject is not liquefied. Rather, it is the subject's ability to enter into substantial relationships by taking on the appearances of a "contaminated subject" that is liquefied²³.

4. Conclusion

Can we ascribe to Joseph of Nazareth this metaphor of contamination? If we do so, are we doing him an injustice, or are we making even more truthful the term "just man" that the sacred texts apply to him?

The reply lies wholly within the semantic richness of the metaphor employed here. Like every subject in the world, he is contaminated to the extent that his identity is suspended on the line of the relationships in which he allows himself to be involved, and for which he cares. His way of living in the world makes plausible a perspective that is calibrated, involved, emancipatory – and hence modern – on the forms of masculinity that can be articulated in the life stories of men who are open to relationship.

When we look closely at him, we grasp that another morality is possible, one that abandons the paradigm of control and dominion and embraces the style of sharing and of caring.

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²² Pulcini. 2003. *Il potere di unire*, xiv.

²³ Ibid., xv–xviii. This strong term employed by Elena Pulcini must be understood in terms of the dialectical reference to a conception of the individual to which "there corresponds on the epistemological level a vision of the subject as one who is all the more independent, the more one is isolated; all the more autonomous, the more one is self-sufficient. Here, the rationality of the subject is understood as the capacity for detachment not only from the links and the concrete situations in which the subject is located, but even from one's own bodily condition, which is finite in term and materially conditioned": Brunella Casalini. 2018. Le teorie femmininiste contemporanee, dal paradigma della sovranità al paradigma della vulnerabilità. In *Vulnerabilità. Etica, politica, diritto*. Eds. Maria Grazia Bernardini, Brunella Casalini, Orsetta Giolo, Lucia Re, 27–48, at 30f. Rome: IF Press.

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Abstract: The matter of this paper is the ethics of masculinity in the contemporary world from the perspective of the figure of St. Joseph. As a “just man” St. Joseph has been understood in the writings of St. Alphons M. Liguori as a man who possesses all the virtues. Starting from this assertion the author develops the ethics of masculinity. In the first point is the speech about the masculine form of justice. The next point concerns some of the problems with masculinity in the contemporary world. At the end of this article the author speaks about concrete proposals for the masculinity in our days on the basis of the figure of St. Joseph. The paper presents the possibility of morality, that abandons the paradigm of control and dominion and embraces the style of sharing and of caring.

Keywords: St. Joseph, masculinity, ethics of virtue, justice.

Streszczenie: Józef: inna etyka jest możliwa. Przedmiotem artykułu jest etyka męskości we współczesnym świecie z perspektywy postaci św. Józefa. Jako „mąż sprawiedliwy” św. Józef był rozumiany w pismach św. Alfonsa M. Liguoriego jako człowiek odznaczający się wszystkimi cnotami. Wychodząc od tego stwierdzenia, autor rozwija etykę męskości. Na początku jest mowa o męskiej formie sprawiedliwości. W dalszej kolejności zostały przedstawione problemy z męskością we współczesnym świecie. Na końcu artykułu autor przedstawia konkretne propozycje dla męskości naszych czasów na podstawie postaci św. Józefa. Artykuł prezentuje ujęcie moralności, które odchodzi od paradygmatu kontroli i dominacji i przyjmuje styl współuczestnictwa i zatroskania.

Słowa kluczowe: św. Józef, męskość, etyka cnot, sprawiedliwość.