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## Ideology and disorder

Can we achieve the common good through moral neutrality? A view of Ecology based on the thinking of Władysław Zuziak



## The ecological problem

Despite the fact the media has been widely informing the public of the risks to our planet posed by the ecological degradation and global warming, there are still individuals, organisations and ideological positions which deny the fact of climate change and/or that human activity is its principal cause (AGW: Anthropogenic, or human-caused, Global Warming).

Nevertheless, there is broad international agreement which includes 97% of specialised scientists (Cook, 2016). The most reputable institutions, research centres and scientific journals (NATO, NASA, Nature, etc.) provide ample data and analysis based on meticulous scientific research that makes it impossible to doubt the reality of AGW.

Climate change and its impact on our lives is a challenge that demands the attention of science and the application of advanced technology. It is essential to raise public awareness, increase recycling, and develop new, eco-friendly materials and sources of energy that can serve as an effective substitute for fossil fuels without creating new difficulties for development and the conservation of the natural environment.

However, we cannot forget that this is also an ethical challenge: reducing human impact on the natural environment, the emission of greenhouse gases, etc, will require significant changes to the way we live, the way we consume, our perceived purpose in life and our understanding of economics.

The culture of every era largely determines our relationship to others, to nature, to transcendence and to ourselves. As Zuziak noted, referring to the changing view of nature in different eras, “this was invariably connected with the adoption of a certain moral code resulting from the assessment of the situation, noticeable threats and appearing expectations. These circumstances have led to the development of a hierarchy of values to be followed by members of communities” (Zuziak, 2016a, 23).

Professor Zuziak maintains that the perception of appropriate behaviour and the adoption of an ecological moral code are especially related to three factors:

1. “Assessment of the situation”: what is the condition of the world around us and how is this manifested to us. We must remember that human beings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century live, in general, within an environment that is practically entirely artificial, and even the natural elements within our environment (trees planted in the streets, parks and gardens in the cities, etc.) are due to human action and are intended in many cases to serve decorative or recreational purposes; that is, part of the construction of our artificial reality. This artificiality of our environment constitutes a veil that separates us from nature over which we exert a great deal of power, harnessing it to serve our interests to the point that we have abused the natural world, creating or contributing to the risk of potentially uncontrollable and catastrophic changes.

2. “Noticeable threats”: the statistical increase in episodes of extreme climate phenomena of ever greater dimensions leads us to perceive real damage to nature and a grave risk to ourselves, in turn increasing our awareness and sense of responsibility.
3. “Appearing expectation”: future threats and the message of the scientific community on the effects of global warming make us aware of the ecological problem and gradually assume moral values and ethical behaviour with regards to the environment.

The ecological problem requires ethical reflection that has consequences for our values and our actions. Given the magnitude of the problem, addressing it will require global awareness and a mass response, meaning that many people (billions of people, in fact) will have to assume their responsibilities and act in consequence. Furthermore, some of the causes of the ecological crisis are so profound and far reaching that they will require action on the part of governments working through international institutions or specific agreements to resolve or mitigate them.

In this situation, one may ask: Is it possible to address the ecological problem from a position of moral neutrality? Is it possible to construct a public moral community and a culture of tolerance without assuming a common, shared morality?

## Morality and ideology

How is it possible for certain moral criteria, values and/or codes of conduct to take hold globally or universally? In a free world it is difficult to imagine a vast number of people agreeing on any particular idea no matter how reasonable or correct it may be. During the Covid-19 pandemic we have seen how the World Health Organisation, along with states and the vast majority of the scientific community agreed on a series of recommendations to deal with the crisis, including vaccinations; but at the same time we have also seen how large numbers of people, reflectively or otherwise, have not followed these recommendations or even openly defied them. The debates on climate change have followed, and continue to follow, along the same lines.

What then can be the basis of global solidarity focused on the ecological problem?

There are moments in history when a spontaneous ethical consensus took place within a region or state. To understand this phenomenon, Zuziak considers these moments of consensus and their longevity, reflecting on the case of Polish society during the 1980's (Zuziak, 2016b) as an interesting example which may be instructive.

During those years, the *Solidarność* movement became a principal engine of social change in Poland, attracting the sympathy and support of a large majority of the population. As Zuziak notes, this was not complete acceptance or unqualified support for all the values or ideals of the movement but rather an agreement resulting from a specific situation and favouring different interpretation of actions and proposals: "everyone could recognise some element of their own desires and so give them their own meaning to ideas that seemed to appear 'out of nowhere'. *Solidarność* was characterised above all by its polyphony, and also by the plurality of its meanings. Everyone understood it in their own terms" (Zuziak, 2016b, 59).

These phenomena are not as unusual as they may seem and are usually produced by something new that awakens a social conscience that lay dormant, perhaps due to a lack of existing criteria to interpret new events: the absence of diverse points of view leads, at least initially, to a shared perspective that is able to bring together those who would otherwise disagree.

This was the case of Poland in the 1980's: citizens who seemed indolent, isolated or focussed on their own problems suddenly all looked in the same direction and felt solidarity and identification with a group, an idea and certain values.

In the majority of cases, as in the event of political revolutions or the rise of new technological advances, history shows that the resulting sense of community is short-lived: one could even say that the community is the result of a misunderstanding. This is the case because the constituent groups do not share the same interpretation of reality or vision of what is important in life and how to achieve it. For example, in many countries, for example, when during the first months of the pandemic people showed their appreciation of health care professionals with daily applause and other shows of support. However, some participated in these public expressions because they appreciated the care being provided to patients, others celebrated the heroism of those in the "front line" of the fight against the virus, still others interpreted the gesture as a manifestation of support for a public health system (in opposition to private health care). Over time these demonstrations of support

became one more part of the struggle for power between different political factions.

In fact, these moments of spontaneous unity are more lasting in countries without freedom of expression, where governments can impose, even resorting to violence, a single vision of the truth. In free societies, however, these moments are ephemeral, especially in those which insist on the principle of neutrality based on moral relativism.

Relativism supposes that all positions are valid and that all hierarchies of values are equally dubious and that there is no external reality or criteria that can serve as a common reference point for different voices. Hence, all debate is fiction, because there is no true awareness, hope or desire to reach a shared, even partial truth. All that remains, according to Józef Tischner, is “a preoccupation with power, the anxiety of one’s own will to power” (Tischner, 1998, 294).

The political experience of advanced democracies has demonstrated that relativism, theoretical but most of all practical, supposes the decline of dialogue and, consequently, of democracy itself. Essentially, one does not accept the existence of even partial truths or perspectives which may engage in a dialogue to reach anything but temporary agreement based on a mere transaction of interests. There is no common language for understanding. Moreover, this “anxiety for one’s own will to power”, the desire for political triumph, is oriented towards dissension, allowing each faction to display their differences from others. According to Vattimo (2000), each ideological position seeks to find its own language, a dialect with its own grammar, semantics coherence and particular meaning. “If, in a world of dialects, I speak my own dialect, I shall become conscious that it is not the only ‘language’, but that it is precisely one amongst many” and so “I shall be acutely conscious of the historicity, contingency and finiteness of these systems, starting with my own” (Vattimo, 2000, 17–18).

When speaking of “dialects” or how each faction uses language as an “ideology”, we are referring to a manipulation of reality, framing and reducing it to conform to a previously decided interpretation. What characterises an ideology is its betrayal of reality, deliberately misinterpreting and distorting the facts to fit a set of preconceived notions of the world.

On occasion the concept of ideology has been confused with tradition. They are very different. Tradition is an approach to reality via a historical path forged by a community (Zuziak, 2017). Certainly, a tradition can become immured within itself and become an ideology, but this means it has become

something other than what it should be. If the tradition presents a hypothesis on the meaning of the world and a society wishes to verify this hypothesis it must confront reality and we willing to grow and change through this act of verification.

A relativist society easily becomes a battleground for a great number of ideologies. Such a society is necessarily conflictive because, as we have seen, these ideologies do not seek nor pretend to seek agreement but rather dissension which favours their own interests.

The demise of meta-narratives has not represented liberation but rather the multiplication of windowless, ideological jailcells, that only respond to the emotions, sensibilities or pragmatic interest of its adherents. And each of these narrations “refer to some constituted and hierarchical system of values which determine the aims and actions of its adherents” (Zuziak, 2017, 204).

Under these circumstances, Zuziak notes, “the individuals who had emerged from their hideouts after a brief moral awakening lose hope of improving their reality and return to their hideouts and their distorted vision of the world that feeds their deepest fears” (2016b, 61). It is thus impossible to build a moral community that can seek the common good and face the risks and challenges of the future.

What is the cause of this rapid regress from a community of values and hope to these narrow ideological sinkholes? Zuziak, along with Tischner (1993), attributes it to fatigue with politics in democracies when the citizens perceive the hypocrisy of public debate, that is, its divorce from truth and values. Ultimately, as signalled above, it is due to the rise of relativism. When politics becomes a naked struggle for power only those interested in exercising power are willing to become involved; those with a sincere interest in contributing to the common good are pushed out. This fatigue is followed by distrust (Zuziak, 2016b, 62), because others no longer appear to us as valid interlocutors, no longer a fellow citizen seeking the common good and truth but rather an adversary, one who wishes to gain power at our expense. This type of psychology leads to a fear of what is different, fear of losing one’s position, creating an increasingly polarised society and the further influence of ideology in a vicious circle that is difficult to escape.

The result is a plurality of values mirroring the plurality of ideologies, but these are neither fully thought through nor based on any sincere experience of reality but is fed and feeds upon the narrow dialect of the ideology itself.

## How to create a shared moral structure around the ecological problem?

Another consequence of relativism is the loss of a sense of reality and, consequently, our distancing from it. In other moments of history people received notions of meaning from previous generations which produced a degree of basic consensus, although each individual has the responsibility to verify the validity of this hypothesis through their own experience. However, this underlying consensus permitted a dialogue based on certain criteria that were accepted, at least within the same cultural universe. Today we often perceive that these criteria, this meaning, no longer exists, not even for our own individual lives: “human beings need values to live, to make decisions and to gain understanding, a feeling of security and meaning. However, our world is in crisis. We see that a social and cultural reality no longer create a structure in which we feel safe. The tradition in which we were raised and the authorities that are important to us are denied. We often feel that the world has lost its meaning” (Zuziak, 2014, 7). How can we create a moral community in which people can find a space for personal freedom and growth while also seeking a common good that gives direction and meaning to their lives?

We have described relativist societies where the discourse on how things are, the possibilities of happiness and the common good has been shattered, resulting in a multiplicity of ideological discourses and value structures. We have also noted how egoism impedes consensus since it arises out of a constant struggle and competition for power where winning comes at the expense of others.

It has been observed that solidarity is a value able to bring individuals together and build community. In certain societies attempts have been made to convert the Constitution into a shared moral construct. Focussing on moral values, Eduard Picker (2002) has proposed that human dignity is a central value that can be shared. Zuziak himself, following on Robert Spaemann (1996), has underlined the importance of this value when he speaks of “the personal value of someone equipped with specific characteristics and dignity” (Zuziak, 2014, 8).

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, there is not enough agreement between individuals, between states or even between international organisations that enables us to decisively address the ecological problem.

In the case of states and international organisations this disagreement is due, largely, to the conception of political debates as a form of struggle (non-violent) for power on the international stage and to defend one's own interests. Ecology and the environment have a significant influence on the global power structure, directly affecting economic growth. On one hand, there are the most developed countries with large industrial sectors and high rates of consumption with a far greater impact on global warming but which are reluctant to assume the costs of any effective action. On the other hand, less developed countries fear that addressing climate change will impede their development and expect the largest polluters to assume their responsibilities and take the lead on the economic and industrial transformations necessary.

With regard to citizens, there are those who hold the position that human activity is not the primary cause, or a significant cause, of climate change. While some of these positions verge on conspiracy theories, based on subjective views, biased studies or populist notions while others are based on rational arguments and scientific data that cannot be ignored. Among the latter there are studies that suggest temperature variations are due to normal periodic changes in solar activity (Vahrenholt & Lüning, 2012), or lament the lack of scientific rigour of studies which support AGW (Müller-Plath, 2020), or seek to demonstrate, some with a profusion of data (Lüdecke, 2021), that there are any number of factors that may account for temperature variations, changing rainfall patterns, etc, that make it impossible to affirm AGW.

The difficulty in establishing definitive scientific criteria is an important factor in the absence of a social consensus because it affects the three criteria noted above that are necessary to achieve this consensus (Zuziak, 2016a, 23). However, also according to Zuziak, we can point to other principles which contribute to the difficulties in reaching a consensus necessary for a shared axiological structure in relation to climate change.

As mentioned, human beings engage with reality based on a series of suppositions and conceptions about the world, and the answer to the questions: what happiness is possible? What is love and its place in human life? what is the meaning of reality and of nature? These equations are decisive to having a moral vision that can serve as a basis and criteria to meet any new challenges (Zuziak, 2016a, 24).

A Christian concept, at the centre of which is the human person and human dignity and which affirms the world as the creation of a loving God in the care of the human being, promotes sensitivity and responsibility towards



nature, even regarding it as sacred (Pope Francis, 2015, 220); but this is not the only approach to ecology.

Peter Singer (1993, 88–89) criticises Christian philosophers for this very thing, that is, for putting the human being at the centre of their thinking, accusing them of “speciesism”, in line with his well-known views on animal liberation (1975). Singer seeks to promote a new ethics which situates the interests of animals at the same level as those of human beings and thus produce a greater commitment to the environment. Clearly, the conclusions and consequences of this type of new ethic can be very different from those of a Christian conception of the world. The dialogue between Singer and Christian thinkers has made these differences abundantly clear, as evidenced by the criticisms of Gordon Preece and other philosophers and theologians (2002).

How can we come to an agreement on the proper values for a society if, as we have seen, epistemological and moral neutrality is impossible if not, in many cases, harmful?

Zuziak, following on Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), believes that in order to share a system of values, also with regards to the climate crisis, it is necessary to share a number of fundamental precepts of a certain vision of the world. Furthermore, this is necessary even to interpret and accept certain scientific evidence, that is, to accept certain truths. What is required then is an image of the world (*Weltwild*) which incorporates these and gives them meaning (Wittgenstein, 1984). Relativism, in its appeal to neutrality as the epistemological and moral position of the state cannot bring about this fundamental objective.

If we regard society as the playing field of the struggle for power and where electoral success depends on political differentiation, we cannot hope to reach any meaningful or durable agreement. This will lead to the proliferation of individuals Tischner calls “people from hideouts” (Tischner, 1993), who live immured in their own particular ideology, isolated from other points of view. “A society created by people from hideouts is not only unable to produce a community of solidarity, it is unable to function even as an efficient mechanism. Such a society is characterised by axiological chaos that impedes communication and understanding” (Zuziak, 2016b, 63). In such a situation, any intent at reaching a consensus or engaging in sincere dialogue is interpreted as weakness.

Individuals only succeed in escaping the sinkholes of ideology by recovering their faith in their own strengths and in the goodness of others. It is nec-

essary therefore to create a society of trust, where personal encounters generate bonds strong enough to resist the calls to be suspicious and distrustful. These bonds can only arise through the genuine encounter with others who also sincerely seek goodness and an authentic and shared experience of reality through which it is possible to reach shared truths.

Although this may seem like a utopia, this ideal alone will lead, gradually, to mutual understanding among peoples and to international cooperation. Furthermore, morality evolves, and over the centuries we have seen progress in the moral sphere that we can take as a sign of hope. Overcoming the resistance to the abolition of slavery, the widespread recognition of the rights of women, where much remains undone, the profusion of non-governmental organisations dedicated to helping those suffering from poverty or natural disasters, the growing sensibility to animal suffering, etc, are all evidence of this evolution despite evident setbacks.

The growing awareness and sensitivity to different aspects of reality also brings changes in the moral vision of citizens: “This sensitivity is followed by ethical postulates and the appearance of new hierarchies of values or better understanding of the messages embedded in previous hierarchies” (Zuziak, 2016a, 34). The truth is these changes are not always conscious or rational but can still serve as evidence that basic agreement on fundamental axiological structures is possible, as in the case of ecology. Change is possible, in fact it is inevitable, and necessary: “What we need is a smart transformation of the present hierarchies of values in education, science, economics and politics” (Zuziak, 2016a, 36).

## The responsibility of the university

Zuziak has great confidence in the role of universities in furthering this moral transformation. In fact, he regards universities as the most important actor in this process given that its essential role is both to transmit and to foster tradition. Hence, Zuziak speaks of the university as an “element of social continuity and creator of fundamental structures for cultural development” (Zuziak, 2016c, 141).

We know the importance scientific discoveries have had in the evolution of morality and the essential role science now plays in understanding the challenges we face in preserving our natural environment. In fact, the cur-

rent ecological awareness, while not universal but increasingly widespread, is largely thanks to the work of scientific researchers who have amply demonstrated the reality of climate change and human responsibility for it. These scientific discoveries would have been impossible without the decisive importance of education and support for rigorous scientific research.

However, we must not overlook the fact that the university is not only charged with producing and safeguarding scientific knowledge but also “the values on which such knowledge depends, not only professional skills but also their ethical foundations” (Zuziak, 2016c, 149). Thus, Zuziak maintains that the Catholic university, by its very vocation, has the responsibility for the harmonious development of the scientific and the human. If, as we have mentioned, human dignity is at the heart of Christian ethics, this same value leads immediately to consider the common good. This path evidently also leads to the need for greater environmental awareness and responsibility.

Culture, fundamental to our relationship to reality and to others, is a shared heritage that must be fostered and cultivated, oriented in the right way including, among other aspects, a concern for social justice and ecological sensitivity and awareness. The university has a special responsibility in this process because its function is not simply to teach but to expand the rational, moral and social horizons of students. Thus, “we must provide young people with the tools that permit them to reflect profoundly on their existential goals, the values that Christians are called to uphold, and think critically about the axiological assumptions that are aimed at creating a competitive world” (Zuziak, 2016c, 154).

Thus, the mission of the university, especially the Catholic university, is first to defend the dignity of the human person in all its dimensions; and this again brings us to the importance of emphasising, particularly given the current situation, the relation between human beings and creation, of caring for and respecting the natural world both for its value in itself and also for the common good: “only a human being who believes in the sanctity of the world and of the life given to him has a lasting basis for finding his own dignity and pursuing perfection” (Zuziak, 2014, 10). Furthermore, the university is a place for free dialogue in a community of seekers of truth. It is here that the meaning of creation and a shared axiological structure can be found, not imposed by any ideology or the cultural propaganda of power but rather through freedom and the encounter with others in a mutual search for a shared meaning of life: “A person who continues to seek meaning is re-

sponsible not only for this meaning but also for the other man, trying to find this meaning together with him” (Zuziak, 2014, 13).

This is the case because it is in the free and sincere encounter with others that this community of values is created. The attempt to replace this free community with an ideologically constructed consensus we enter into a competitive society that can only produce separation and distrust. Thus, only by favouring these free encounters between free individuals, oriented towards reaching real and shared truths, can we achieve an agreement on the values that can sustain our perception of the natural world and understanding of life itself. Only in this way can we reach beyond ourselves and perceive the unity of all humanity and of ourselves as inhabitants of a shared world. This is a project which “we can only carry out by restoring, gradually and patiently, mutual trust among all members of society. These goals cannot be achieved using political methods, they cannot be decreed from above nor guaranteed by legislative measures. It requires rather a new project of long-term renewal based on social experience and through which society can be transformed into a community of solidarity and democracy” (Zuziak, 2016b, 69). Although it may appear as if we have only seen fleeting instances of solidarity, based on a temporary confluence of the interests of small groups, the response to the ecological problem will be made possible through a network of interpersonal relationships that transcend national borders and cultural limitations, helping all people to understand our responsibility to each other and to our natural world.

# Abstract

*Ideology and disorder. Can we achieve the common good through moral neutrality?  
A view of Ecology based on the thinking of Władysław Zuziak*

This work examines ecological issues from a moral perspective, drawing on the reflections of Professor Władysław Zuziak. First, we attempt to identify the reasons behind the insufficient consensus on the impact of human activity on environmental degradation. We find that the primary obstacle is not scientific or technical, but rather axiological: we lack, and have failed to establish, a community of shared values that would allow us to agree on the significance and value of the natural world and the effects of our actions on the planet. Second, we argue that this impasse is influenced by ideologies within societies that promote moral neutrality, leading inevitably to social conflict and making long-term, meaningful agreements unattainable. Finally, we outline Zuziak's proposals for achieving consensus by fostering a community of shared moral values centered on the human person. Zuziak also contends that universities have a responsibility not only to advance scientific research but also to promote ethical values and ultimately work toward creating a global moral community capable of addressing environmental challenges.

**Keywords:** anthropogenic global warming, axiology, ecology, university, values

# Abstrakt

*Ideologia i nieporządek. Czy możemy osiągnąć dobro wspólne poprzez neutralność moralną? Pogląd na ekologię oparty na myśleniu Władysława Zuziaka*

Rozdział podejmuje problem ekologiczny z moralnego punktu widzenia, opierając się na przemyśleniach profesora Władysława Zuziaka. W pierwszej kolejności spróbujemy zidentyfikować przyczyny braku wystarczającego porozumienia w sprawie wpływu działalności człowieka na degradację środowiska. Zobaczymy, że główna przeszkoda nie ma charakteru naukowego ani technicznego, ale raczej aksjologiczny: nie udało nam się stworzyć wspólnoty wspólnych wartości, która umożliwiłaby osiągnięcie porozumienia w sprawie znaczenia i wartości świata przyrody oraz sposobu, w jaki nasze działania wpływają na naszą planetę. Po drugie, argumentujemy, że ten impas jest wynikiem wpływu ideologii na społeczeństwa, które promują moralną neutralność, co nieuchronnie prowadzi do konfliktów społecznych i uniemożliwia osiągnięcie długoterminowych, znaczących porozumień. Na koniec zarysujemy propozycje Zuziaka dotyczące osiągnięcia tego konsensusu poprzez budowanie wspólnoty wspólnych wartości moralnych skupionych wokół osoby ludzkiej. Zuziak utrzymuje ponadto, że uniwersytety mają obowiązek nie tylko dalszych badań naukowych, ale także promowania wartości etycznych, a docelowo pracy na rzecz stworzenia wspólnej wspólnoty moralnej, zdolnej do rozwiązywania problemów środowiskowych w skali globalnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** antropogeniczne globalne ocieplenie, aksjologia, ekologia, uniwersytet, wartości

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