

Jonáš Záborský — ethical-philosophical thoughts*

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For citation: Kalajtzidis J. Jonáš Záborský — ethical-philosophical thoughts. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Philosophy and Conflict Studies*, 2023, vol. 39, issue 2, pp. 239–248.
<https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu17.2023.203>

The main aim of the submitted paper is to present the relationship of Jonáš Záborský to philosophy, religion and to everyday ethical-social issues. All these aspects are closely interconnected in his work. Even though Záborský stood aside from the main Slovak national movement of the 19th century, his work is intrinsically linked to the struggle associated with this turbulent period of Slovak history. Záborský is described by many authors as the most prominent figure on the field of morality during the 19th century in our cultural space. Such affirmative judgement is mostly based on his work *'The Wisdom of Life in Temple Speech'*. This work is used to examine the aims of the presented paper. Although it is impossible to characterize his relationship to philosophy and the connection between philosophy and religion explicitly, the present paper describes changes in this field during his life. At the same time, the paper presents the practicality of Záborský's thinking. We demonstrate his struggle and effort to help his nation and to help common people through education and day-to-day work. In this context, the article briefly presents his (moral) attitudes towards such issues as work, usury, lending, and justice. In the context of these social issues with strong moral connotation, the present paper shows how Záborský's life attitude connects love for the nation with the necessity of education. At the same time, the paper uses these issues as an example to demonstrate how, in Záborský's understanding, material improvement can be connected to moral improvement.

Keywords: Jonáš Záborský, philosophy, ethics, social, justice, usury, nation.

Introduction

Jonáš Záborský (1812–1876), national sinner as he called himself, was one of the most important and impressive Slovak intellectuals of the 19th century. A poet, novelist, playwright, historian, journalist, evangelical and later Catholic priest and theologian¹. While he stood aside from the main contemporary national movements represented by Ľudovít Štúr, he was a dominant part of the movement in general. Born into an Evangelical lower nobility family in the northern part of Slovakia (the village Záborie, close to the historical city of Martin), he was educated in Kežmarok, the Prešov Evangelical College² and

* This paper was supported by KEGA project 013PU-4/2019 E-learning module of the course History of Ethical Thinking in Slovakia II. (2nd half of the 18th century — until 1918).

¹ Záborský changed his denomination in his early thirties (1842) mostly for pragmatic reasons. As he stated in his autobiography, in his later years, he greatly regretted the decision [1].

² Záborský gained a profound foundation of philosophy in college, especially under the supervision of a well-known representative of Kant's thoughts — Andrej Vandrák.

later at the University of Halle in Germany. After the return to his homeland, he worked mainly in today's eastern part of Slovakia as a chaplain in Pozdišovce (near Michalovce), later in Košice, and at the end of his life again very close to Prešov in Župčany. His social origin (lower nobility) determined not only his life, work, and relationships, but greatly affected his attitude toward the national movement. There has been a tense relationship between Záborský and Štúr for almost their entire lives. Although Štúr sincerely admired the (slightly) older Záborský, at the same time, he despised him for his origins and attitudes. Unlike Štúr, Záborský saw a great intellectual and economic potential for the Slovak national movement in the lower nobility and clergy. His approach to the nation-making process was critical and non-romantic. On the other hand, Štúr was the leader of Romantic nationalism and considered it necessary to influence, above all, the commoners and only later, through them, the nobility and clergy³.

Attitude toward philosophy

The Enlightenment movement in philosophy expanded to the Hungarian Kingdom⁴ during its later period between the 18th and 19th centuries, and it influenced many thinkers. In line with those ideas, Záborský's intention was to emancipate man on the practical (economic and social) as well as on the spiritual level. The means to this end was education (enlightenment) which should help man to be relieved of everything vague and unreasonable. The practical level of this emancipation also manifested itself in freedom — the freedom of worldview and political view. This freedom was, however, always understood within the borders of laws and the idea of general welfare⁵.

Several authors described Záborský as the most prominent figure who dealt with the issue of morality in the mid 19th century on our territory. Gluchman [3], Jemelka [4] or Mihalková [5] makes this conclusion mainly because of his work *'Múdrosť života ve chrámových řečech: pro všechny roku církevního příležitosti'* (The Wisdom of Life in Temple Speech: for All Year-round Church Occasions). In these published sermons, Záborský, among other things, reflected on the relationship between morality and religion. The practical philosophy contained in the *'The Wisdom...'* is presented as fully dependent and subjected to theological justifications. Religious justifications are a source of moral obligations.

Just like others Slovak enlightenment philosophers, Záborský believed that philosophical ethics (without help) is not enough. According to that belief, moral philosophy does not have the power to make one a good person. He assumed that only Christian ethics has the power to do that. The argumentation goes even further, and Záborský claims that moral philosophy is not only dependent on religion but, sometimes, even stays in contradiction of it. Philosophical thoughts that are trying to teach us how to live are frequently in contradiction with themselves (and that is one of the reasons why we need religion to guide us). Philosophy strongly relies on reason, but reason is often weak and

³ There was an equally serious discrepancy between their philosophical views and attitudes towards the use of the Slovak language.

⁴ Today's Slovakia was part of the Kingdom of Hungary and later (from 1867) part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

⁵ This general welfare is manifested in Záborský's practical thinking, for instance, through the issue of taxes. Despite being considered a burden, they remain a useful burden which helps to improve the general welfare of people (citizens) [2, p. 332–333].

under the influence of affections that guide our actions. Only Christianity has the power to restrain our emotions — without religious faith, morality cannot exist [2; 6, p. 447; 7, p. 306–308, 327].

Our reason and wisdom are very important features, but they cannot guarantee freedom, justice or morality. Reason can help us to understand, but knowledge is not a guarantee of morality. As Záborský states: "...the churches are essential, but it would be shame if the schools would not stand right by them..." Church should teach us about God and our religion, but everything else that is (practically) important cannot be found in them. It is school which teaches us to read, write, count, how to manage our household and how to understand our nation and ourselves. Education will not guarantee virtuous people, but ignorance even less so. The more stupid and neglected people are, the more immoral they become. Knowledge helps them to know and to recognize good from bad [2, p. 45, 46–50, 70–74, 248–250; 3], but it is still not enough. That is because even if we know (with the help of the reason) what is good and what is evil, we often do not have enough strength (strong will) to act in accordance with this knowledge. Faith and education should complement each other.

However, his understanding of religion was not uncritical. In his later years (1866), Záborský questions religious truths with the help of his semiphilosophical works. He reflects on religious truths as something which is established and accepted (which does not mean it is unquestionably true). They are part of the faith, but that does not mean that they do correspond with reality. What is important, on his view, is that nobody (not even the Church) can close itself off from new ideas [8]. Münz [6], as well as Gluchman [3], agrees with the view, according to which Záborský's attitude towards the relationship of philosophy and theology changed drastically during his lifetime. While, by the end of the 1850s, he was in favour of preferring faith over the reason, later he started to prefer reason over faith.

Nevertheless, that does not mean he considered the whole of philosophy to be beneficial. On the contrary; while he admired Classical philosophy⁶, he refused and mocked German transcendental philosophy⁷ which was rejected on the assumption that its thoughts go far from the natural limits of reason. Záborský's stance toward Kant can be found in his published [8] as well as unpublished works (*Promptuarium Theologicum*)⁸. He criticized Kant's gnoseology and ethics. His thoughts were rejected on the idea of antagonism of theoretical and practical reason. The first one deals with theoretical issues, the latter gives us the directives to act, according to Záborský. Nevertheless, how can practical reason tell us what is good when theoretical reason is limited? Is it not a contradiction, he asks? In this context, Záborský, likewise, rejected Kantian agnosticism and the idea that theoretical reason cannot prove whether or not God exists, and that the God is only postulated by practical reason. Záborský claims that the existence of God can be proven with the help of cosmological and anthropological arguments [1; 6; 8; 9].

Much more distinctive is Záborský's rejection of Hegel's philosophy, which was otherwise very popular in the Slovak national movement. Hegel's works were, for Záborský, an example of abstract, speculative, and incomprehensible philosophy which was, in

⁶ He acknowledged Pythagoras, Plato or Aristotle [2, p. 428–443].

⁷ Záborský also knew the work by Spinoza which he used for his philosophical studies on God [6, p. 430].

⁸ Záborský, J., *Promptuarium Theologicum*. Unpublished manuscript. State scientific library in Prešov.

contrast with his thinking, based on common sense. Critique of incomprehensibility can be uncovered in his prose *‘Násměšné rozhovory’* (Joyful Conversations). In the story we can find a priest, who is talking with a student who defends transcendental philosophy. The priest mocks him and describes the advocates of this philosophy as someone who “...pursues the things which are intangible, who wants to make things understandable to others, but doesn’t understand it himself, who explains matters which are unknown by other unknown things, who makes meaningless statements, talks a lot, but can’t see the wood for the trees” [10, p. 216]. There are no comments by Záborský which can be found on Hegel’s philosophy of history, which was highly recognized in the Slovak national movement. Yet with the help of his statements, it is possible to assume that he did not appreciate the lack of place for God in Hegel’s philosophy or mocked his dialectic [6; 10; 11].

Záborský’s relationship to philosophy can be oversimplified with the help of his own words: “The truth is simple; it is only people who confuse it with wiseacre and sterile academic erudition” [2, p. 428].

Ethical and social issues

For Slovakia the 19th century was a time of a dying off of feudalism, and a period of fighting for independence (today’s Slovakia was part of others political structures). New circumstances which appeared — such as the abolition of serfdom — were a prerequisite for the work of national intellectuals (the elite of the nation). The aim of these patriotic intellectuals was to transform the commoners as a social class into the people as a nation. Záborský had extensive experience in everyday work with those people (as preacher, priest, teacher⁹...) who needed to be uplifted. He did not idealize them, and generally referred to commoners in his works as ignorant, thickheaded, or brutal folk. He pointed out that the people, only in very rare cases, could use the freedom they gained by freeing themselves from servitude. The reason is that they are still shaped by servitude and not ready to be socially emancipated. The main reason was underestimation of education, fickleness, herd behavior, and lack of logical thinking [13, p. 101–103]. For him, it was the harsh social reality, and the decision-making process in favor of national needs had to be based on it. It would be pointless to ignore it.

Záborský presented the issue of justice (it was not unusual in our cultural space, and authors from the 16th century above such as Ján Amos Komenský dealt with it)¹⁰ in several of his writings. He was interested in distributive and rectificatory justice. He describes real-life situations and concludes how difficult it is to achieve it. As an example, he uses a story of a rich Jew who takes a poor peasant to court. The lawsuit is swift, and the rich master not only wins, but he also receives compensation. When, in a similar situation, a poor teacher takes a rich Jew to court, the lawsuit lasts two years and the compensation which he receives is ridiculous. Záborský claims that for rich people the common way to win a lawsuit is bribery [15]. The concept of justice is also analyzed in the context of taxes and of arguments for their avoidance [2, p. 334]. He does not only express dissatisfaction with the situation, but also points to a possible solution which he finds in action against the problem — education must be one of such solutions [15].

⁹ He taught arithmetic and accounting at Sunday school in Liptovský Mikuláš [12, p. 21].

¹⁰ In his work *‘Letters to Heaven’* [14].

Záborský operated his parishes as economic entities with the aim of edification (he was active in trade, business, and farming). He interconnected secular activities (such as trade) with educational and political activities. His goal in the context of national emancipation was the long-term social emancipation of peasants. This was to be achieved by the training of individual life strategies and skills appropriate to modernity. These were to be the starting point for engagement at the national level. The goal was to help common people to acquire a new/ modern way of thinking together with new value orientation and life attitude. If this could eventually be achieved, peasants would be able to participate in and benefit from the modernization of society that was taking place [13; 16].

One way to achieve these aims was to improve the fiscal literacy of the common people. Education in this area would prevent the extensive socio-economic problem of the time — usury. This issue was very closely related to another social problem, which was typical for the Slovak countryside in the 19th century — alcoholism. Both issues, which mainly affected people at the lowest social level, were interconnected with a third issue — racial antisemitism.

It was mostly illiteracy, lack of capital and very limited economic skills from which the spread of usury grew. However, it was not just classic money usury. Very common in the then Slovakia was usury focused on commodities, labor, and means of production. Poor social conditions on our territory, the poverty of the lowest classes, and general decline in welfare led outstanding figures of the national movement to engage in establishing social associations (cooperatives). The main aim of those establishments was education and national ‘awakening’. In accordance with the so called Štúr conception of education, those associations concentrate firstly on improving the material quality of life (economic cooperatives), then the social quality with the help of Sunday schools, and thirdly on promotion of abstinence. The final goal was to get people to be able to influence politics (which however required them to be educated, sober, materially secure, and open minded). Záborský did not completely agree with that project, he believed that such awareness-raising activities (with a political objective) aimed at commoners were very poorly functional¹¹. He agreed with the necessity to help common people, and he actively did it through various associations and daily work with them. Politically, though, Záborský believed that it would be much more effective to rely on the lower nobility, intelligentsia (such as teachers) and clergy. Mihalková states that Záborský did not share Štúr’s idealism, nor his political, cultural or language program. He enforced his own conception of progress which was based on rationalism and pragmatism [5, p. 95].

Záborský saw a realistic way of helping the common people to elevate themselves in working with them daily, which should be done by teachers and priests (elites). The provided regular education should aim at their material and social progress. Záborský believed that education could help to improve the moral character of people and only after that, it would be possible to achieve emancipation. Education, morality, and material progress are interconnected in his thinking. Educated people have a better chance of overcoming many harmful superstitions and elevating themselves in practical daily matters

¹¹ “Establishing a sober society? None of those who need it will come to it. Preaching against drunkenness? It is like throwing peas at the wall...” [15]. Despite these claims, Záborský considered alcoholism to be a very serious threat and preached against it. One of the longest sermons from his collection *‘Múdrost života ve chrámovách řečech’* [*The Wisdom of Life in Temple Speech*] is the one that deals with the issue of alcohol [2, p. 137–155].

[15]. Education should not only take place in schools, but also in the family. Home education cannot be replaced by school, and is able to provide physical, intellectual and, at the same time, moral development (moral education can be obtained only at home). Parents should be role models for their children. It is also very important how parents behave long before the child is born. Záborský draws attention particularly to alcohol (maternal alcoholism) and domestic violence by the fathers [2, p. 41–46]. Záborský addressed the issue of alcoholism in his sermons¹² as well as in his prose. One of the most famous is his didactic tale *‘Dva dni v chujave’* (Two Days in a Windstorm). Alcohol is portrayed in the story as the result of ignorance, but, at the same time, as something originating out of poverty and a phenomenon accompanying many other social-ethical problems [15]. Alcohol and alcoholism are interconnected with usury (alcoholics have no choice but to borrow money from usurers), injustice (poor people have a hard time achieving justice in disputes with the wealthy), and anti-Semitism (Jews are portrayed as those who owns the pubs, they are the one who lend the money and, at last, they are wealthy, malicious and unjust people).

At the other (from alcohol) end of life is work. Work is understood as something very important, as something that was given to us by God. Záborský understood work as a religious duty, which means that work should be appreciated as something desirable. Even those who could live without work should look for some occupation. Work makes us happy because it removes many more inconveniences than it causes. God created us in such a way that idleness makes us sad, but labour makes us satisfied. Those who do not believe and agree should, at least, admit that work, however unpleasant, keeps us off from even more unpleasant things; especially poverty and scarcity [2, p. 99–105]. Záborský’s understanding of the issue of work ethics is very similar to Protestant perception. He does not think that work is something bad, something which was given to us as the result of our fall (sin). On the contrary, work is desirable and natural. Similar to Protestants (like Luther, for instance), he does not distinguish manual and intellectual work in the context of importance. Work is understood equally in the sense that it helps us to spend time in a desirable way. In a positive understanding, work is natural to man and helps him to achieve joy, happiness, and to fulfill his life. In a negative understanding, work helps us overcome boredom, illness, and poverty. Furthermore, a hardworking man has lesser chance of getting into debt [2, p. 99–105; 17, p. 229–236].

At the beginning of his sermon which focuses on debt, Záborský states that “...when we give a loan to our fellowman, strict justice is fulfilled... everything above already exceeds the requirements”. This statement is a reaction to Matthew 18: 21–35 *The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant* where we read: “The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go” (Matthew 18: 27) [18]. Záborský keeps looking on the issue and asks if it is permissible to take something back as compensation for what was lent for the time — “more precisely to negotiate the interest from money” [2, p. 328–329]. Answers to this question are different and even Záborský believes that “if one receives back above of what he gave, then strict justice was violated”. However, this statement does not provide a full answer to the problem. Záborský’s reflection of interest was much more progressive

¹² Záborský did not understand alcohol only as an ethical-social issue, but also as a serious economic problem. In his sermon *‘Seeming profit in the distillery industry’*, he presents several arguments against entrepreneurship in this area. The arguments against the distillery industry are based on the necessity of nature protection (it greatly destroys forests) and destruction of other businesses (alcoholics do not need many other things) [2, p. 155–160].

than that. In his opinion, justice is violated only in accordance with the Scripture, but reality teaches us that to charge interest is not against morality if “the interest is modest and in accordance with law”. It is against morality only if the interest is “excessive and usurious”. Záborský knew all the Christian arguments against charging interest (the Gospels, Augustine of Hippo, Gregory of Nyssa... etc.), but he submitted them to critical consideration.

He states that it is important to differentiate between a loan and charity, since many Christian authors fail to include this distinction in their reflections. Even charity is important; it is something different to a loan. A loan is a temporary transfer of property to someone else so that he can benefit from it; it is a transfer of property from someone who is idle, to someone who is entrepreneurial. Charity is when we use a part of our property for charitable goals. In a well-functioning society both are desirable, but they must be distinguished [2, p. 328–330]. Society as a whole will suffer if we fail to do so. Even charity will suffer because how would charitable foundations operate if their money could not be invested — “be entrusted to the hands of a productive man”? Without the possibility of lending the money with interest, social-charitable funds would quickly waste the initial principal, or it (the money) would just lay fallow. Another argument in favour of charging interest is the risk which the creditor undergoes. If he would be forbidden from charging interest, he would certainly prefer to let the money “lay in [the] ground” [2, p. 329–330].

The interest must be modest, because charging excessive interest¹³ is usurious as Záborský states and even presents us with his calculations. Suspicion starts when one charges above 5 or 6 percent. Usurers usually charge 50 and even 100 percent interest and such behavior cannot be called anything other than theft. In that case, Záborský claims, the money is “sent for a conquest”, it is not helping anyone — and this type of behavior must be classified as a theft. It follows that the interest rate is not the only condition which must be fulfilled, so the loan can be classified as usury. Záborský differentiated between a loan for business which could even exceed the legal rate (if it is justifiable), and a loan for the needy (social/crisis loan). Social loans are always vicious when they abuse the position of the poor [2, p. 330–332]¹⁴. Usury is problematic not only for individuals, but also for society. The wrongness lies in the fact that usury creates an evil perception about lending money, and, as such, impedes honest business from developing. Nor does usury promote a healthy business environment because people who control the money are not encouraged to invest it wisely and rely only on usurious lending. Záborský considers best and easiest way of overcoming the issue of usury in the establishing of banks — lending institutions [2, p. 331–332].

Záborský's views on this fundamental social-ethical issue were up to date. This statement is also confirmed with the help of the last section of the second part of the already mentioned tale *‘Dva dni v chujave’*. In the tale, Záborský shows that he is very well-oriented in contemporary economic knowledge. In the story, he mentions the issues of joint capital in connection to inheritance and sale, as well as the need for long-term planning and problems which might come up in fragmented capital merging. He mentions ‘stock exchange’ fraud to the same extent.

¹³ In some cases, Záborský managed to overcome the conventional anti-Semitic stance in relation to money and is not afraid to claim that not only Jews, but also Christians are usurers. Whether among the rich or poor, Christians or Jews, usury can be found everywhere [2, p. 330].

¹⁴ In this sense, Záborský reflects on the social-ethical teachings of important protestant figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. See, for example, Luther's *‘On Trade and Usury’* (1897) [19].

Conclusion

In the current paper, I tried to outline the relationship of Jonáš Záborský to philosophy, religion, and practical everyday ethical-social issues. All these aspects are closely interconnected in his work. It is known that Záborský was able to perceive philosophy quite well during his studies at the Prešov Evangelical college. His attitude towards philosophy and towards the relationship of philosophy to religion cannot be unambiguously determined. The main reason is the fact that these views changed significantly during his lifetime. His attitude towards philosophy was, at the beginning, mostly ironic, even negative. It should be noted, however, that this was a stand primarily towards German transcendental philosophy; Classical philosophy was admired by him. That period of his life, faith (religion) was clearly preferred over reason and ethics — practical philosophy was understood as fully dependent on theological justifications. In his later years (mostly in and after the 1860s), he started to express critical arguments against religion. The main reason was the disagreement which existed between what rigid religion teaches and what we know thanks to progress in empirical research and philosophy. At that time, religion was considered by Záborský to be no more superior to knowledge. He states that the church must open itself and be inspired by these new findings. At the same time, religion (Church) and knowledge (schools) must work together to help common people.

Záborský did not just write about ethical-social issues of his time. His aim was to help people deal with them (even though it must be noted that love for the nation and people never made him blind to existing social problems). Very important, in his view, is moral improvement which will lead people to their emancipation. As it is previously mentioned, education was essential. Education should be provided by a priest in cooperation with a teacher¹⁵. Education is the foundation for further material and social progress. His response to the opinion that education is not enough is that it is better than nothing, and that the education must be understood more broadly. He agrees with the view that when we teach someone to read and write, or to speak a foreign language, it will not affect one's character. What should help, though, is not to stop when they master the reading, we must help them to understand what they read. Knowledge will help young people to overcome the harmful superstitions which they carry. Purely together with education, they will learn also to understand faith (not just formally accept it).

Material welfare can be raised with the help of support giving offices — financial institutions, which accept the money from lenders and fairly (in line with justice) lend it to those who will have use of it. The main aim was to soften the impact of usury on people. What was important for Záborský was not just education, but what he called practical education. Economic literacy was vital, which could help common people to overcome problems with usury and to improve their material position. He pursued that goal especially with the help of his writings such as *‘Bájky slovenské’* (Slovak Fables). He wrote about money lending, generosity, courtesy, greed, honesty, and justice [20].

The work of Záborský can be understood as a description of a transition which Slovak society experienced during the 19th century. It was a transition from a vassal to a national

¹⁵ While the priest reaches the heart, the teacher enlightens the mind.

state [13, p. 105]. One of the main issues which Záborský captured in his works is the process of national emancipation, a transition which was possible with the help of material improvement that affected individual self-confidence. Education focused on economic and financial literacy was important. With the help of practical knowledge, people had a better chance to overcome obstacles such as wide-spread socio-ethical problems — alcoholism and usury. Moral improvement was a prerequisite of national emancipation. Faith and practical education were also a prerequisite of moral improvement. Practical education he meant in the sense that pupils should not just read, but understand what they read and know how to use the acquired knowledge in practical life. Only such methods would raise people morally and materially.

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Received: April 9, 2021

Accepted: February 17, 2023

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Йонаш Заборский — этико-философские идеи*

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Для цитирования: *Kalajtzidis J. Jonáš Záborský — ethical-philosophical thoughts // Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Философия и конфликтология. 2023. Т. 39. Вып. 2. С. 239–248. <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu17.2023.203>*

Основная цель данной статьи — показать отношение Йонаша Заборского к философии, религии и повседневным этико-социальным вопросам. Представленные аспекты тесно взаимосвязаны в его работах. Несмотря на то что Заборский стоял в стороне от главного словацкого национального движения XIX в., его творчество неразрывно связано с борьбой в этот тяжелый период в словацкой истории. Многие авторы описывают Заборского как наиболее выдающуюся фигуру в области морали XIX в. в нашем культурном регионе. Такое суждение в основном основано на его труде «Мудрость жизни в храмовой речи». Эта работа используется для проверки целей представленной статьи. Хотя однозначно охарактеризовать отношение Заборского к философии и связь философии с религией, в статье описаны изменения в этой области в течение его жизни. В то же время в статье представлена практичность мышления Заборского. Его борьба и усилия направлены на то, чтобы помочь своему народу и простым людям через образование и повседневную работу. В этом контексте в статье кратко излагается его (моральное) отношение к таким вопросам, как работа, ростовщичество, кредитование и справедливость. В контексте этих социальных проблем с сильным моральным подтекстом статья показывает, как жизненный подход Заборского связывает любовь к нации с необходимостью образования. В то же время в статье эти вопросы используются в качестве примера, чтобы продемонстрировать, как в понимании Заборского материальное благополучие может быть связано с нравственным.

Ключевые слова: Йонаш Заборский, философия, этика, социальное, справедливость, ростовщичество, нация.

Статья поступила в редакцию 9 апреля 2021 г.;
рекомендована к печати 17 февраля 2023 г.

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* Данная статья является частью исследовательского проекта KEGA 013PU-4/2019 «Модуль электронного обучения курса История этического мышления в Словакии II (2-я половина 18 в. — до 1918 г.)».