ILLUMINATING LIFE. LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI’S PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE

BY

Zofia Rosińska

My intention in the present essay is to underscore those traits in Leszek Kołakowski’s work that can be regarded as belonging to the sphere of philosophy of culture. In his short essay Philosophy of Culture as Primary Philosophy Andrzej Szahaj wrote: “Reflection on culture constitutes one of the most interesting traits of the Polish tradition in humanistic study [...] our cultural identity calls for constant reflection on culture, both in the western and global, and the local, Polish dimension.”¹ Such reflection is certainly present in the philosophy of Leszek Kołakowski.

Philosophy of culture as an independent philosophical field emerged from three earlier philosophical trends: philosophy of life, cultural criticism and Neo-Kantianism.² Kołakowski discusses all three, but does so in his own, unique way. He writes about humanity’s cultural experiences and entanglement in values, as well as the transcendental tropisms that characterize humans. In taking up everyday issues he reflects, analyses, and in effect leads his readers to question their earlier run-of-the-mill beliefs about them. Moreover, he does not make them feel they are manipulated as his reflections also appear to embrace his own beliefs. Beliefs he strives to illuminate by showing the ambivalent structure of cultural experience and philosophical thought. In Kołakowski’s concept philosophical thought is not autotelic but appears correlated with existential experience.

Leszek Kołakowski is neither a culture scholar nor a culturologist³ but a philosopher of culture. More precisely we could say he is a co-creator of anthropological culture philosophy. Although boundaries are difficult to set here (over the past century culture study evolved from the paradigm of neutrally-described cultural phenomena to interpretative description while culture philosophy is still in search of its own identity—whereby it also

³ Cf. A. Mencwel, Kulturologia polska XX wieku (20th Century Polish Culturology), http://www.kulturologia.uw.edu.pl. The author writes: “Culture studies offer a general and theoretical description of their subject-matter, which is treated objectively—i.e. in separation from the cognitive subject. Here culture ultimately becomes an objective correlate between cognitive categories and research processes. Culturology, on the other hand, pursues the essence of culture and concentrates on its diverse embodiments, which are approached subjectively/objectively, i.e. as the objectivization of the intentions and desires of concrete individual or collective human subjects. The humanistic factor is their inalienable characteristic”.
makes use of description and interpretation), we intuitively sense that the two differ. Although opinions as to what culture philosophy is may differ, to my mind the most adequate definition of Leszek Kołakowski’s philosophy is offered by anthropological philosophy of culture⁴.

First, anthropological philosophy of culture assumes that the basic elements of human existence are determined by culture. Humans and culture are two sides of one coin and one can not exist without the other. Humans can not be pried from their culture like beans from a pod. They can be destroyed, but only together with their culture. Secondly, anthropological philosophy of culture assumes that human existence is referential—in other words, the factual is not enough for us. We always strive to reach beyond the factual to seek that which is most primeval and most final. We strive to understand ourselves and the surrounding world, we seek and attempt to uncover the essence of life. Thirdly, philosophy of culture has a dynamic approach to culture as movement and effort towards self-awareness and concern for spiritual growth. Fourthly, philosophy of culture is axiologically sensitive and, fifthly, in consequence the culture philosopher ceases to be a mere researcher of culture and becomes its source. In our case the source is Leszek Kołakowski’s work as a philosopher of culture.

Variations of the source metaphor find application in many philosophical trends. A culture philosopher is a source insofar as he is rooted in culture and everyday life and brings to light—illuminates—that what it conceals. Kołakowski’s philosophical thought was not neutral but involved. He expressed it by selecting topics of import to individuals and communities. Kołakowski was a philosophy historian but his vision of the way history of philosophy should be pursued was identical with his vision of practicing philosophy. Perhaps this was why his lectures for students were so fascinating and drew such crowds despite the fact that—as he himself claimed—he did not like teaching.

Kołakowski did not lock himself in an ivory tower. His philosophy was easily accessible, he used everyday language and considered communication with non-philosophers important. In order to establish such communication and at the same time make room for fresh interpretations of his thought he frequently resorted to metaphors, some of which he authored himself (an example is the term “hump”, today understood as a metaphor for destroying identity and in the 1960s considered a metaphor for alienation⁵).

Kołakowski wrote about European and Polish culture in a different way than philosophers who usually dealt with these matters. As I said before, his chief concern was experience and his reflections focused on all that was experienced, “lived”. He uncovered, illuminated, brought to the surface, verbalized, analyzed and compared that which constituted the innermost of the soul. He did not produce concepts with the aim of using them to subdue

⁴ Cf. What Is Philosophy of Culture?
⁵ L. Kołakowski, 13 bajek z królestwa Lailonii dla dużych i małych [Tales from the Kingdom of Lailonia and the Key to Heaven], Czytelnik, Warszawa 1963.
reality (culture and humans). Although his entire work is imbued by metaphysical and axiological sensitivity, Kolakowski did not purport to create a metaphysical system. His philosophy was haunted by God and Satan, however he did not write like a theologian (despite the fact that he was sometimes thus described), much rather like someone who is beleaguered and experienced. This is why he was able to reveal those aspects of experience which are seldom addressed by theology, or even philosophy of religion. Kołakowski showed lability and undecidedness, inner and outer conflicts. He did not like psychoanalysis (we spoke about that), but in his work he actually psychoanalyzed culture.

Kołakowski’s style is clear, precise and approachable, he uses metaphors with restraint and only to highlight sense, neither does he construct special terminology. Nonetheless it is not easy to write about him. And more difficult still to explain why. The reason could be that his work is not only involved but involving—which stems from its source-based character.

This is well illustrated by the essay In Praise Of Inconsistence. As he often did, Kolakowski began the essay with a common-sense definition of consistence as conformance between conduct and thought, or general rules and their application. He also offered examples of consistent thought—among others Joseph de Maistre: “Joseph de Maistre knows what the world’s best Divine-ordained order is, he also knows what is most precious in this order and what should be subordinated to what. Subsequently, he demonstrates astounding consistence in adapting these general assumptions to all concrete matters... and goes on to write an executioner’s eulogy. ‘All greatness, all strength and all subordinations rests with the executioner: he is the dread and bond of human community. Deprive the world of this unfathomed factor and in that very moment, thrones will waver and society will perish. God, who is the creator of power, is also the creator of punishment’. In the next step Kolakowski “bowed down” before this excellent consistence example, but immediately offered a glimpse of the “other side”: “On the other hand we may note”—Kołakowski writes—“that humanity has managed to survive on this Earth only thanks to inconsistence... in other words absolute consistence is identical with practical fanaticism, inconsistence is the source of tolerance.”

Kołakowski’s frequently illuminated life by what can be defined as a “four-step method”. The starting-point (step one) was usually a generally-accepted belief (in this case that consistence is positive). Step two was finding an adequate philosophical-historical example illustrating the belief (Joseph de Maistre). In step three he praised the positives of the chosen example. In step four, however, the train of thought turned in the opposite direction and Kolakowski negated or depreciated the popular belief. Consequently, it aoppears that consistence is not always positive. This is so

7 Ibid., p. 155.
because Kołakowski dealt with the world of values and his philosophical quest lay in showing “that” and “how” this world was present in our everyday lives and thoughts. We can not separate ourselves from it and any claims to the opposite are quite illusory.

Such thought bases on the assumption that, contrary to the world of theoretical thought, the world of values is not a binary world. “In other words, that there exist values which exclude themselves without ceasing to be values (but there exist no truths which exclude themselves without ceasing to be truths)”\textsuperscript{8}. Hence, inconsistency expresses the contradictory character of the axiological world, or “diverse values are introduced into social life by antagonizing forces”\textsuperscript{9}. In effect, inconsistency becomes the denial or “delaying” of the ultimate choice between mutually-exclusive values. This is an extraordinary vision of the everyday world which reveals the axiological entanglements of the attitudes existing in it, which is something we are not always aware of. Kołakowski appears to be building a contemporary version of Aristotle’s Golden Centre as a guarantee of the right moral choices. However, the author himself provides an \textit{expressis verbis} answer to an unposed question: Aristotle’s genius “is alien to us as we live in a world of extremes”, which can not be reconciled by any means.

Is it, therefore, all the same what we choose and why? Is there no hierarchy and is “humanity’s survival on Earth” the only existing value? Humanity’s survival is certainly no small issue, however it fails to answer the question. Luckily Kołakowski applies his inconsistence theory… inconsistently. He concedes the occurrence of so-called \textit{elementary situations} in which, “all tactic ceases. These are human situations we always see in the same moral light regardless of the circumstances in which they occur”\textsuperscript{10}. In elementary situations the world of values becomes binary. In such situations, Kołakowski notes, one must behave consistently.

Fifteen years ago in 1994 I wrote: “For Kołakowski philosophy is not a profession but a calling, which in the simplest terms means that he is there for philosophy and not philosophy for him [...] that he did not choose philosophy but philosophy chose him to become his destiny. This is why he is haunted by questions that raise merely a mild interest in others, and why, when he speaks about philosophy, he speaks about struggle and suffering instead of creative zeal or contentment with a job well done.”\textsuperscript{11}

When I read Kołakowski’s philosophy of culture writings today I get the same impression, additionally strengthened by my conviction that they are very actual despite being published in a different historical context.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 160.
In 1994 I also quoted these 1960s words about Kołakowski by Andrzej Wat: “How this Marxism-Leninism trivially narrows down Kołakowski’s subtle and deep thoughts [...] why is he so stubbornly given to this reformed Marxism [...] is this not an escape from conversion, which will seize him anyway sooner or later.” We do not know if the prediction was right.

In 1962 Kołakowski published *Ethics Without a Moral Code*. At the time the essay wreaked havoc and probably still evokes strong reactions today. The text was considered destructive to values and an invitation to anarchy. Today I think this interpretation was the result of a crass misunderstanding, possibly connected with the rather narrow understanding of the term “experience” in those days. In the 1960s philosophy used the term experience mainly to describe aesthetic experience, while in *Ethics Without a Moral Code*, Kołakowski, although rarely using the word itself, wrote about moral experience. Kołakowski showed just how much dilemma and indecision appear when we take moral rules seriously. Misunderstood, he can be lightly accused of permissiveness, however this seems to be an absolutely inadequate interpretation of *Ethics Without a Moral Code*. It is precisely dilemma and indecision that accompany us in experiencing freedom and subjectivity.

Moral unease fails to appear only when “sovereign values can be dealt with in the case of every engaging choice”, and, because we always move within a context and relations and bonds, we experience a need to recognize, evaluate, and, ultimately, apply. We know ever since Aristotle, and also from our own experience, that the recognition and evaluation of a situation as well as the application of sovereign values are accompanies by insecurity and moral tension. Kołakowski shows this on the example of the sovereign value of involvement. If we have no reasons for our choice of involvement, it is really of no consequence what we involve ourselves for. All options are equally open and the moral tension felt in such cases is illusory. There is no need to recognize and evaluate, and involvement does not entail any responsibilities. “This way the concept of involvement, seemingly postulating maximum responsibility, transforms into a new means of avoiding true responsibility.” Likewise the responsibility concept itself: “The responsibility imperative truly bears down upon us only when we are at least aware that something or other is a value, and as such constitutes the object of responsibility.”

Rightly understood, how can the above words mean anything close to destroying values? Responsibility is responsibility for values. However, even this clear statement breeds unease when we want to be responsible. Because we know that values conflict, hence by choosing we “in a sense right and in a sense wrong”. Choice also entails resignation and we need to

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13 Ibid., p. 161.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p. 162.
be aware of this. We need to be aware of this, Kołakowski writes, because then we are tolerant towards other choices and the negative effects of choice are milder. Such awareness awareness also provides the right perspective with regard to differing choices in the future.

In this essay Kołakowski situates his reflections between extreme conservatism and nihilism. Both are attitudes entailing escape from freedom and responsibility for one’s choices. “Each one of us—Kolakowski writes—is a part of this world but none of us can be completely decomposed into the conditions in which we live nor indentify with any pre-existent reality. By recognizing the existing world as a correlate of our own existence and the object of responsibility, we attempt to describe this situation; we attempt the same by recognizing the irreducible character of moral decisions to which we are forced.”

More than a decade later and in another language, Kolakowski addressed the issue in the context of collective (national) identity in his essay The Polish Cause. Here, he shows how important public language is for national identity and how its degradation prevents the development of identity and subjectivity. Kołakowski calls this “sovietism” and describes it as a situation where: “nothing in public language is, nor can be, ‘real’ as all words have lost their primary meaning [...] so a cockroach can be called a nightingale and parsley a symphony, and dread and astonishment will accompany the adventurer who calls a cockroach a cockroach and parsley parsley”. Even if colloquial language remained undegraded, the degradation of public language would spell the death of collective, and also national, life as public language expresses and forms collective identity. Its deformation leads to the loss of the sense of being a subject of one’s own history. Sovietism in this form can not be “waited out”, just as national culture can not be “preserved” as you would preserve a hidden treasure chest. “National culture does not need preservation but active defense, and whoever claims not to know what this means is acting in bad faith.”

Another Kolakowski essay to create major waves (it still does) was The Priest and the Jester. Much has been said about this text, however some of the statements suggest the author’s intentions were misunderstood or that the reviewer failed to read it carefully. The subtitle is Reflections on the theological heritage of contemporary thought and it is the first ever text in Polish to state outright that philosophy has never quite freed itself from theology. Moreover, Kołakowski does not claim theology is the source of the knowledge philosophy bases upon. On the contrary, he states that theology and philosophy encounter the same “crucial mysteries” which we are unable to free ourselves from, the only difference between them being their

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16 Ibid., p. 187.
18 Ibid., p. 303.
19 L. Kolakowski, Kaplan i błazen [The Priest and the Jester], in: idem, Pochwala niekonsekwencji [In Praise of Inconsistence].
formulation. More still, according to Kołakowski theology “was never anything more than an anthropological projection on extra-human reality”\textsuperscript{21}.

Projected onto extra-human reality, such philosophical-anthropological questions became theological, and then again philosophical. They include:

a) the question about the possibility of eschatology, which in the secular sense investigates the possibility of eradicating the conflict between human essence and existence, and in the real-life sense seeks to answer whether our lives are exhausted by the “here and now” or whether we expect fulfillment of ultimate values.

b) the eschatology-close question about theodicy, which in the secular sense is a question about the rationality of history. As secular theodicy, traditional theodicy seeks to justify the world’s evil in the conviction that God is good; the difference is that secular theodicy refers to the “rationale” of history in an effort to find “a mental scheme for the world in which the evil we know or experience reveals its essence and value embroiled in history’s wise plans”\textsuperscript{22}, while in daily life we seek the essence of our suffering and consolation in the belief that this suffering has an aim, that “thanks to God or history nothing in human life goes to waste […]”. “Theodicy—Kołakowski sums up—“is a method of transforming facts into values. It signifies a decline in magical thinking, which is older than speculative theologies.”\textsuperscript{23}

c) the question about nature and grace, an issue which was extremely vital in times of Christianity’s major conflicts. In philosophy it appears as determinism and responsibility, we experience it as the desire for outside support for our existence and the simultaneous fear of dependence on outside forces and relinquishment of self-decision.

d) finally, the revelation issue, in other words: the issue of mystery relating to the existence of ultimate data and the subsequent question about the possibility of their articulation and comprehension. An example of secular revelation was Descartes’ \textit{cogito}, however, “a nostalgic yearning for revelation lives endlessly in the heart of philosophy”\textsuperscript{24}. Mystery addresses the issue of rationality’s limits and the discoursiveness of indivisible wholes. “All personalistic doctrines relating to the non-communicable character of the personality entail the transplantation of questions which theology asked of the Divine to the world of human queries; in its metaphysical variant personalism means the human world’s monadology has not attacked theology but has acquired its problems.”\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{21} L. Kołakowski, \textit{Kapłan i błazen}, p. 163.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 163.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 164.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 170.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 171.
Kołakowski points to many other issues expressed by theological and philosophical formulations and simultaneously expressed existentially. Those mentioned here merely illustrate his way of thinking and may be described as a “theological turn” in philosophy. This theological turn, however, is not tantamount to the French term “theological turn” in phenomenology as it does not entail movement of thought towards God but, quite to the contrary, towards man. In other words, a return of philosophical issues to their home in philosophical anthropology after a sojourn in theology. All these issues are antagonistic by nature—for or against eschatology, for or against seeking support in the absolute, etc. Of course they appear in various philosophical variant and are diversely explicated and argued. This—to use Kolakowski’s words—inner, chronic conflict of philosophy is for him the criterion that orders the history of philosophy. For ourselves we may add that it is what allows him to be a philosophy historian. “The antagonism between philosophy which preserves the absolute and philosophy which questions recognized absolutes appears to be an incurable antagonism, just as the existence of conservatism and radicalism in all walks of human life is incurable. This is the antagonism of priests and jesters, and in almost every historical era the philosophies of priests and jesters are the two most general forms of mental culture.”

In mentioning these “most general forms of mental culture” Kolakowski by no means appears to be neutral. His sympathies lie on the side of the jester, as it is he who symbolizes the movement of imagination in our stable world and the effort of reflection about the possible argumentations of opposing ideas. And not out of contrariness but mistrust of that which is stabilized. Kołakowski’s stance symbolizes negative caution towards all absolutes as his aim is to rally people around “elements that are hardest to combine: goodness devoid of universal indulgence, courage devoid of fanaticism, intelligence devoid of dejection, hope devoid of bigotry. All other fruit of philosophical thought are unimportant.”

Any presentation of Leszek Kołakowski as a philosopher of culture can not fail to mention his small book The Presence of Myth, in which he outlined a comprehensive vision of European culture. Kołakowski distinguished two main pillars—technological and mythological—which “do not fit together”. The vitality of culture is guaranteed by the presence of both, both also are imperialistic in character in that each strives to take control of culture as a whole. Were one to become dominant European culture would lose that, which is so characteristic for it—the delicate equilibrium between both. In effect, it would become a shariat culture. Restricting the imperialistic tendencies of both culture pillars is possible through the comprehending interpretation and caution of the philosophical mind.

Kołakowski distinguished European culture from other cultures. Frankly, he was Euro-centric. This Eurocentricism, however, did not manifest itself as

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26 Ibid., p. 178.
27 Ibid., p. 180.
conceit or complacency. On the contrary, Kołakowski gave the term Euro-centricism a different meaning than that allotted to it by political correctness in its criticism of Euro-centric attitudes.

Euro-centricism is “the effort of breaking through one’s own ethno-centric enclosetment.” This effort and the ability to question oneself constitutes the unique value of European culture. “In the end one can say that the uniqueness of European culture is preserved in its refusal to accept any finite identification and prevalence to exist in insecurity and anxiety.” “Insecurity”, “anxiety”, “infiniteness” and “never preserved uniqueness” are traits inherited from Europe’s Christian heritage.

In his 1980 essay *In Search of the Barbarian. The Illusions of a Cultural Universalism* Kołakowski wrote: “In fact I believe that Christian religiousness may, both with regard to its doctrinal aspect and its special sensitivity, be considered a seminary of European spirit.” This spirit gave birth to Enlightenment, which gradually moved away from its roots until it turned against them completely—in other words, it became anti-Christian. In its further stages however, Kołakowski notes, Enlightenment turned upon itself by evolving into moral nihilism. Already in this essay Kolakowski noticed the nucleus of a new movement equally visible in Christianity and Enlightenment—self-questioning.

To conclude this article I would like to point to a statement by Kołakowski published in 2000. Reflecting on United Europe and the problems, among others national-bound, with its constitution, he wrote: “Although not yet a super-state, United Europe lies in the interest of its parts and does not threaten their ethnical separateness insofar as this separateness is not indifferent to the parts themselves.” To prove that these are not just empty words he adds: “We need to teach history in such a way as to instruct young people to understand who they are, who they are as heirs of the past, both glorious and base. If we lose hold of our historical past as our property, as a part of ourselves, and, together with it the ability to answer the question about who we are, we will lose our non-utilitarian reasons to live; and will be threatened by spiritual chaos and emptiness.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Professor of philosophy, Warsaw University, Institute of Philosophy, Dep. Philosophy of Culture, Chair.

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. 21.
33 Ibid., p. 178.
34 Ibid.