LAUDATION

BY

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Your Magnificence, Mr. Dean, Dear Professor,

Our eminent Laureate hardly needs introducing to the here-gathered members of our University community, government representatives and delegates from other Warsaw academic schools. We all are well aware that professor Kołakowski is one of the most eminent personages in 20th-century Polish philosophy and humanities, a fact also mentioned by his honourable reviewers: professor Barbara Skarga, professor Jan Andrzej Kłoczowski and professor Krzysztof Michalski.

Let us mention here the most important and most prestigious of the many distinctions awarded to professor Kołakowski: first and foremost the John Kluge Prize, a unique humanities “Nobel Prize” awarded since recently by the US Congress Library whose first laureate he was. Also noteworthy are the coveted German Booksellers’ Peace Prize, a European Essay Award, an Italian Ninio Prize (awarded to the “masters of our times”), or a prize from the Polish-American Jurzykowski Foundation. On top of this professor Kołakowski is a member of numerous world-ranking institutions and academies, including the International Institute of Philosophy, the British Academy, the American Academy of Science and Art, Academia Scientiarum et Artium Europaea, and the Bavarian Academy of Sciences. Professor Kołakowski is a world-renowned scholar and an eminent authority in his field. His works, written in several languages and translated into more, today belong to the canon of contemporary philosophy, humanities and essayism. Among the renowned European and North American academic centres in which professor Kołakowski has lectured and worked are Berkeley University in California, Mc Gill University in Montreal, the University of Chicago, Yale University in New Haven, and, last but not least, Oxford University, where he settled down as a Senior Research Fellow at the prestigious All Souls’ College. In recognition of his outstanding work, professor Kołakowski has also been awarded honorary doctorates from numerous foreign—and, over the past fifteen years, also Polish—universities (in Poland he has received honoris causa Ph.Ds from the universities of Łódź, Gdańsk, Wrocław and Szczecin).

Today we join the broad and eminent circle of institutions which have had the honour of distinguishing professor Kołakowski. However, today’s occasion is not merely another in the long line of honours which over the past years have been bestowed on him in Poland and worldwide. In this case
Warsaw University is in a special position, being the only college that cannot grant Leszek Kołakowski the highest of all academic distinctions—an honorary doctorate—since it was here that, over half a century ago, he received his regular Ph.D. To have bred such an eminent scholar is doubtless a cause for pride—but also a severe restriction—on Kołakowski’s Alma Mater. As his mother school, Warsaw University cannot distinguish the professor with an honoris causa diploma, only ceremoniously “renew” his original Ph.D. This, however, is in itself no small honour as doctorates can be renewed only after fifty years. While naturally limiting the number of candidates, this rule also makes such a distinction a just reward for mature creativity and a worthy crowning of a lifetime’s achievements.

On December 29, 1953 the Council of Warsaw University’s Philosophical Faculty granted Leszek Kołakowski a doctorate in philosophy for a dissertation entitled, *Spinoza’s Teachings on the Liberation of Humanity*. His doctoral tutor was professor Adam Schaff, the dissertation was reviewed by professors Maria Ossowska and Tadeusz Kroński. Today’s ceremony of renewing professor Kołakowski’s doctorate is our way of expressing our heartfelt admiration for his work. Indeed, professor Kołakowski is in a sense “ours”, having spent at least a decade of the past 50 years here at Warsaw University. Far from settling in as just another staffer, he soon became a very active member of our academic community—and one of Warsaw University’s most popular lecturers. At the time he was on the staff of the Philosophy Faculty, where he quickly and brilliantly rose from assistant lecturer to a professorship, eventually taking over the History of Modern Philosophy Faculty, where, 40 years ago, I myself had the honour of making my first academic and teaching steps under his wings. I need not remind how greatly professor Kołakowski contributed to our faculty’s image in its golden years at the turn of the 1950s and 60s. Those who had the good fortune to study philosophy at Warsaw University at the time—and I see quite a few such persons among the professors, deans and Senators here with us tonight—will quite certainly never forget that excellent school of thought—a school in which professor Leszek Kołakowski was one of the foremost teachers.

The professor taught philosophy in the best of all possible ways—by consistently practicing it himself. His lectures and seminars always drew crowds—students as well as younger staffers, including quite a few from other faculties. They came not only to learn from his erudition, but also to participate in serious philosophical reflection about the condition of the human world. Leszek Kołakowski taught us not only how to study philosophy, but also—and perhaps most importantly—how to understand it. He knew how to inspire us with his deep love of the intellectual beauty inherent in great human thought—and how to feed our doubts and force us to critical reflection on seemingly obvious matters.

Leszek Kołakowski also showed himself to be a masterful writer (a talent even good teachers often lack), his numerous publications proving to be true intellectual milestones which further strengthened his position as a
philosophical authority. Those years saw the birth of his best-known works, today counted among the classics not only of the “Warsaw history of ideas school” which he co-founded and illustriously represented, but of Polish philosophy and human studies in general. Leszek Kołakowski’s writings are the works of a true scholar in the finest sense of the word, impressively combining a philosopher’s in-depth knowledge with the research zeal of a historian of ideas and culture theoretician.

Most mentionsworthy among Kołakowski’s works is the excellent monographic study, *The Individual and Infinity. Freedom and Antinomies in the Philosophy of Spinoza*. This 1958-published treatise crowned years of in-depth study of Spinoza, who was his first intellectual passion and doctoral subject. In the book, Kołakowski revealed the many levels of Spinoza’s philosophy and the conflict between its humanistic defense of the individual’s universal emancipation and simultaneous quest for intellectual union with a well-ordered, infinite Absolute. *The Individual and Infinity* not only opened new, broad horizons before Polish philosophy and social thought, but also set very high literary standards for authors. Kołakowski fully lived up to these standards in everything he wrote and published, including his translations and editing work on foreign material. Simultaneously to his Spinoza studies he published Polish translations of the philosopher’s works from Latin and Dutch. First to appear was the standard treatise *The Ethics* (in a re-edited translation by Ignacy Myślicki), followed in the 1960s by *Letters* and the important *Early Works* (translated and extensively commented by Kolakowski himself).

It was also Spinoza and his times that inspired Kołakowski’s interest in another of his major fields—17th-century philosophy and religious-moral culture. This too is the subject of the second major work written in his Warsaw University years—the 1965-published *Religious Awareness and Church Bonds*. This extensive volume, subtitled “a study of 17th-century non-confessional Christianity”, is doubtless one of Leszek Kołakowski’s most important and most interesting works. Its focus is on selected religious doctrines from the time of the so-called second reformation, which the author subjects to a penetrating and innovative analysis, once more proving his mastery and skillfulness as a historian of ideas. The book, however, is not purely historical, its main question—about the phenomenon of religion and religiousness, their essence, and their place in the human world—being in fact strictly philosophical. Basing his analysis on the frequent discord between personal encounters with the transcendental Absolute (religious awareness) and the collective institutionalized rites of religious communities (church bonds), Kołakowski developed an original and useful interpretation of religion, in which he reached far beyond his source material and contributed greatly to the development of modern-day religious and cultural philosophy theory.

Professor Kołakowski successfully tied in his studies of 17th-century philosophy and religion with his teaching work. Always discussed at his immensely popular and well-frequented 1960s lectures at the Philosophy
Faculty were the metaphysical, moral, and even theological aspects of the fundamental debate around faith, reason, nature, mercy, theodicy, evil, and human freedoms and responsibilities. In *17th-Century Philosophy*, an excellent anthology specially compiled for academic use, he aptly introduced generations of philosophy students to Christianity's paradoxes and dramatic turns at the outset of the modern era. His lectures and publications ranged from studies of the German and Dutch Reformation to Descartes, Pascal, France’s Jansenists, and the philosophies, religions and cultures of baroque Europe.

Simultaneously, however, Kołakowski devoted increasing time to another major trend in modern European philosophy: the intellectual and reason-based search for the philosophical essence, source and origin of human knowledge undertaken by diverse naturalistic-positivistic schools. This was also the subject of one of his best books, *Positivist Philosophy from Hume to the Vienna Circle*, (1966). Here Kołakowski combined a seasoned historian’s perceptiveness and an eminent philosopher’s novatory vision into a historical synthesis of the main trends and theories in positivistic philosophy from its medieval and early-modern roots (especially Hume), through 19th-century classics like Comte, Mill, Bernard, Renan and Spencer and the modernistic “second positivism” (empirical criticism, conventionalism, pragmatism), to the “logical positivism” of the Vienna Circle (in Poland also known as neopositivism). The book is rich in facts, which the author subjects to in-depth and critical analysis and truly hermeneutical interpretations worthy of none but the finest philosophical mind.

Professor Kołakowski’s theoretical and critical debate with the positivistic tradition constituted a part of his broader and more fundamental confrontation with the philosophical aspects of contemporary reality’s cognitive experiences and practical/ethical challenges. The main points in this confrontation are outlined in the 1967 *Toward a Marxist Humanism* (and *Marxism and Beyond*), the last book Kołakowski published in Poland. Amongst various essays and studies the book contained texts which deeply and lastingly influenced Polish philosophy and human sciences in the latter half of the 20th century, like *Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth, Cogito, Historical Materialism, Expressive Personality Interpretations, Non-Code Ethics*, and *Religious Symbols and Humanistic Culture*. The thoughts contained therein clearly led towards the all-embracing diagnosis of modern culture’s inner conflicts and tensions, which Kołakowski so aptly described in his work *The Presence of Myth* (written and sent to print in Warsaw in the mid-1960s but actually brought out by the Paris-based Literary Institute in 1972).

Kołakowski expounded and developed his culture diagnosis in his 70s and 80s writings, which included such universally-known classics as the three-volume *Main Currents in Marxism* (1976–78), books on Husserl (1975) and Bergson (1985), and the much-publicized works on the philosophical problems inherent in religion (*If There Is No God*, 1982) and metaphysics (*Metaphysical Horror*, 1988). This part of his work, however, saw light of day
at a considerable distance from Warsaw and Poland, during the years of professor Kołakowski’s exile, forced by the shameful March, 1968 decision to remove him and five other eminent professors from Warsaw University. This move, which gave the beginning to an unprecedented countrywide purge of the academic milieu, was authored and brutally executed by the then government, without the University’s consent and against its will. The whole of Warsaw University protested, most notably our faculty, which was among the victims of these repressions.

In effect, Leszek Kołakowski disappeared from our midsts for two decades. His university however, although itself in need of recovery from those years of dishonour and shame, did not forget what it owed to him, and itself. Leszek Kolakowski also remained in the grateful memory of Polish philosophy, science and culture. We read the works he published in the west, frequently in Polish translation in émigré periodicals, later in Polish underground materials, which, although illegal, were sprouting up all over the country.

I am sure many here remember that already in the mid-1980s students and university staff could purchase foreign or illicit editions of almost all Kolakowski titles in Warsaw University’s inner courtyard, where the infamous “March events” started in 1968. These texts were discussed in classes, lectures, seminars and open sessions in our Institute of Philosophy—and, as far as I know, in other academic schools in Poland. They also frequently provided material for MA and Ph.D. dissertations.

Therefore, when professor Kołakowski was allowed to return to Poland after 1989, Polish philosophy, science and culture were ready to give him a fitting welcome. The early 1990s saw not only the publication of his books by leading Polish publishers, but also the appearance of a broad selection of studies on his philosophy and lifework. Today there are well over two hundred titles on Kołakowski, with further works clamouring for print. Among them are short articles and essays as well as indepth studies and extensive monographies—and I am (somewhat selfishly but justifiably) proud to say that many recall the importance of Kołakowski’s Warsaw University years for his later work as scholar and teacher.

In this way, dear professor and “renewed” doctor, you have with your own example uncovered for us one of those unique paradoxes of human life, thought and deed in the world of culture and history which you have always pursued with such determination in your lectures and books. The human being as a subject of humanity’s eternal and restless search for philosophical and scientific answers can find true fulfilment only when his thoughts leave him to become a meaningful object for others. Hence, a true creator of culture must accept the fact that his work itself constitutes one of the many important products of culture, experienced and absorbed “objectively” by the outside world. And, although we do understand the existential and mental inconveniences this may at times mean for the author, we beg you, professor, to allow us to supplement our sincere congratulations with best
wishes of more long years of productive work—also in the name of Your now so “objectivized” presence in contemporary Polish philosophy and culture.