Argument for a Balzan Prize for Leszek Kołakowski

By

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Recipient of the 1998 Balzan Prize for History

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On 23 November, 1998, in the Quirinal Palace of Rome, I was granted the International Eugenio Balzan Prize; it was presented to me by the President of Italy. In the following years, like all laureates, I used the right to nominate candidates for the subsequent annual Balzan awards in different areas of knowledge.

In 1999, the award was to be given in recognition of accomplishments in Philosophy or Early Modern History (1500–1800). I believed that Leszek Kołakowski, a great scholar in the history of 17th century ideas is a great candidate for the distinction.

The letter—presented below—to the Balzan Foundation Prize Committee President, Professor Carlo Bo, is a rationale for the opinion. I later sent a copy to Kołakowski who, in his letter to me of 21 February, 2001, said this, “I am profoundly grateful to you for this extremely deep and friendly letter to Balzan Prize.”

My recommendation did not produce the desirable outcome, however. The 1999 prizes went to John Elliott (the UK) in 1500–1800 History and Paul Ricoeur (France) in Philosophy. Notably, it is not the Committee that decides the award—it is the opinions regarding the proposals it submits sent by the world’s major scholarly societies in a given field.

Reasons for the nomination of Leszek Kołakowski for the award of the 1999 Balzan Prize for Philosophy—or for History, 1500–1800.

Responding to the invitation from the chairman of the Balzan Foundation General Prize Committee, Senator Professor Carlo Bo, I have the honor to nominate Leszek Kołakowski (Oxford) for the award of the 1999 Balzan Prize for philosophy—or for history, 1500-1800. The reason of this double nomination is the need to turn attention to an important but somewhat neglected part of Kołakowski’s oeuvre: his life-long achievements as a philosophizing historian of ideas, i.e. a philosopher and historian at the same
time, specializing in European intellectual history of 1500–1800—particularly, in philosophy and religious ideas of the 17th century. This aspect of Kołakowski’s work is much less known than his writings as the leading Marxist-revisionist of the 1950’s, his monumental *Main Currents of Marxism*, and his leading role in the intellectual liberation of Central Europe, accompanied by his powerful and profound criticism of the leftist illusions of the Western intellectuals. I believe, however, that the due appreciation of Kołakowski’s ideas on the European intellectual history between the Reformation and the Enlightenment is absolutely necessary for a proper understanding of the main themes of his thought, especially his philosophy of religion (*Religion. If there is no God.* Oxford, 1982) and his philosophical analysis of the dilemmas of modernization (*Modernity on Endless Trial*, Chicago 1990). I am also convinced that Kołakowski’s philosophical interpretation of the early modern period in European intellectual history is an achievement which stands by itself, that Kołakowski deserves to be seen as one of the foremost intellectual historians of the second half of our century.

Kołakowski’s first major work in this field (available, unfortunately, only in Polish) was his early book on Spinoza—*Jednostka i nieskończoność. Wolność i antynomie wolności w filozofii Spinozy*, Warszawa 1958 [Individual and Infinity. Freedom and the Antinomies of Freedom in Spinoza’s Philosophy]. He described his methodological standpoint as an attempt to present philosophy as a “science of man”, defining his intentions thus: “To interpret classical problems of philosophy as problems of moral nature, to translate metaphysical, anthropological and epistemological questions into the language suitable for expressing moral problems, to reveal their hidden human content; in other words, to present the problem of God as a problem of man, the problem of heaven and earth as a problem of human freedom, the problem of nature as a problem concerning the value of human life, and the problem of human nature as the problem of inter-human relationships.”

The most elaborate presentation of Kołakowski’s methodological views is contained in his big book on the non-denominational Christianity of the seventeenth century: *Świadomość i więź kościelna*, Warsaw, 1965 (available in French under the title *Chretiens sans Eglise. La conscience religieuse et le lien confessionnel au XVIIe siecle*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969) The historiography of ideas, the author argued, must beware of the danger of “historical over exactitude—the danger of describing with equal care all aspects of the subject of study, all facts relevant to it, and thus eliminating all ideal types, all conceptual constructions. He proposed therefore a method which “may be called expressionist historiography; a method which organizes the empirical elements of the historical world by subordinating them to a central idea which manifests itself in a system of ideal constructions and through them confers meaning on each particular element of the emerging picture”.

Another important feature of Kołakowski’s methodology was his combination of historical hermeneutics phenomenological insight into the essence of the irreducible “primary phenomena”. He stressed that in order to
approach a given subject historically we must first know its essence, as revealed by eidetic insight. From the phenomenological point of view, he argued, each system of ideas represents, as it were, three different subjects of study: the unity of the personality of its author, the unity of his ideas as a historical phenomenon and the unity of his thought as a teleological structure. In the first case we must concentrate on the author's intentionality, in the second we should be concerned with the proper location of his views in the historical process, and in the third we should deal with the autonomous logic of his thinking. The aim of the historical study of ideas is to achieve an understanding of the human meaning of a given work, a meaning that can be found even in the texts which from a scientific or logical point of view seem completely nonsensical. To achieve such an understanding the historian must fulfill two requirements: he must be able so to identify himself with the thinkers of the past as to understand them from within, to see their perspective as open, while at the same time viewing them from historical distance, that is perceiving their perspective as historically closed. There is no adequate criterion of how much empathy and how much distance should be involved. We must reject the illusion that meaningful structures may be understood by reducing them to their historical determinants: we must also be aware that the meaning of a given fact is not its immanent quality, but depends on the place of this fact in a structure, and that structures of meaning, reconstructed by us, are always open, since they may always be changed by the addition of new facts produced by further historical development. Because of this our knowledge of the past always depends, and must depend, on the age in which we live, on our place in it and on the peculiarities of our cognitive perspective.

In his *Chretiens sans Eglise* Kolakowski has applied this methodology very consistently and with impressive results. He agrees with Rudolf Otto, Max Scheler and other phenomenologists that religious faith, the experience of the sacred, belongs to the category of irreducible primary phenomena, but insists that its different concrete manifestations could and should be explained historically. He defines the nature of his subject as nondenominational religious faith, i.e. one characterized by resistance to the organized, institutionally controlled forms of religious life. He singles out as a peculiarly important form of this type of religiosity, mysticism, a special kind of religious subjectivism that is subjective and individualist at the same time.

It is subjective in concentrating on the inner religious experience, which leads, explicitly or implicitly, to a denial of the need for organized Christianity; it is anti-individualist in its aim of direct union with the Absolute Being, the annihilation of the infinite individual self. Of course, for Kolakowski, all these concepts are ideal types rather than logical notions, ideal constructions in the light of which he presents the historical vicissitudes of different forms of non-denominational Christianity in seventeenth-century Europe. In his book he covers the different conflicts between religious consciousness and ecclesiastical bonds, the attempts to abolish any organized mediation between the individual soul and God, the struggle
against religious subjectivism within the existing Churches and, also, the wise policy of the Catholic counter-reformation—a policy which tried, quite successfully, to domesticate mysticism, to find a place for it within the Church and thus give it an outlet while, at the same time, keeping it under control.

It is easy to see numerous links between Chretiens sans Eglise and Kolakowski’s philosophical analyses of the irreducible irrational components of human spiritual life. I mean above all his three books: The Presence of Myth (1972), Religion (1982), and Metaphysical Horror (1988). The first of them claims that the source of the meaning-creating energy is the omnipresent mythopoeic layer of human existence; that even a belief in objective truth presupposes an act of faith and is in itself a sort of myth; that myths are necessary for a meaningful human existence because their disappearance would lead to universal nihilism. The second concentrates on the distinctively religious myths. It tries to demonstrate that Dostoevsky’s famous dictum, “If there is no God, everything is permissible”, is valid not only as a moral rule but also as an epistemological principle: without God, as an epistemological Absolute, the very concept of “truth” is illegitimate and epistemological nihilism (together with an unrestricted licentiousness, bound up with it) becomes empirically invincible. The third book deals with the inescapability of the metaphysical experience, i.e. the experience of the Absolute. It offers, in fact, a modern version of the old apophatic theology, characteristic of the neo-platonic tradition in Christianity; a theology which stressed the total inaccessibility and ineffability of God. This emphasis on apophatic theology is consistent with Kolakowski’s conviction that truth is an act of choice which cannot be rationally grounded; that claims “to know the Truth” are equally illegitimate in religion and in science.

In his Tanner Lecture on Human Values (1982), entitled “The Death of Utopia Reconsidered”, Kolakowski has applied these ideas to the problem of truth in political thought. He has shown that social and political utopias of modernity have their roots in the epistemological utopia of absolute certainty and may become a justification of totalitarian despotism. But the opposite of epistemological absolutism is equally dangerous: relativization of truth justifies moral nihilism, with all its fatal consequences for individual and social life. The only way to avoid these two dangers is to combine the search for the absolute with the consciousness of inescapable relativity’s; to believe in the absolute truth without claiming that it can be known, rationally grounded, and used as a blueprint for an ideal social order.

Kołakowski’s works on mythology, religion, metaphysics and utopianism can be seen as examples of a phenomenological inquiry, trying to define and analyze the essential features of the phenomena under investigation. They owe a lot to Kołakowski’s deep knowledge of the philosophical and religious thought of the early modern times, but they do not deal with a specific historical context. Very different is in this respect Kołakowski’s last book: God Owes Us Nothing. A Brief Remark on Pascal’s Religion and on the Spirit of Jansenism (1995). It is a philosophical and at the same time, a historical
The book deals with the “world-shaking controversy about grace in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (p. 47)—a controversy between Augustinianism, emphasizing human dependence on the divine grace, and Pelagianism, stressing the role of human freedom.

Jansenism represented the Augustinian side of the debate; in this respect it was closer to the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation than to the Catholic humanism of Erasmus. Jesuit Counter-Reformation, on the other hand, was a part of an ongoing process of deAugustinization of the Roman Church, i.e. the process of modernization, meaningfully linked to the Pelagian doctrine, and paving the way for the Enlightenment; in this respect the Jesuits were close to the so-called Second (or Radical) Reformation, representing “the embryonic spirit of the Enlightenment and the commonsense belief in free will” (p. 52). The ideological situation was therefore truly paradoxical—at least from the point of view of the conventional thinking on the subject. Jesuits, despite their extremely bad reputation among the philosophers of the Enlightenment, represented in fact the spirit of modernism, whereas Pascal—whose anti-Jesuitism was to become a part of the “liberal-anti-clerical Voltairian canon”—was in fact a spokesman of a reactionary Christian fundamentalism.

But this was not all. The great merit of Kołakowski’s book is to show that the ideological situation was even more complicated, and more “paradoxical”, than that. Despite his anti-modernism, Pascal was in many respects more modern than the Jesuits. He degraded the role of secular reason but, at the same time, defended secular science against ecclesiastical authoritarianism.

His attacks on the obsolete scholastic rationality in religious matters served the cause of a double emancipation: the emancipation of faith from reason, and of reason from faith. His profound pessimism about the human condition is a precious antidote against the dangerous spirit of political utopianism which (in Kołakowski’s view) was a necessary by-product of the secularization of Pelgianism. He was deeply anti-modern in his opposition to Cartesian rationalism and in his indefatigable struggle against the emerging Enlightenment. But, at the same time, “it is this anti-Enlightenment thrust that makes Pascal our contemporary” (p. 189).

We can see therefore that Kołakowski’s book on Pascal is directly linked to his philosophical examination of modernity, as presented in his Modernity on Endless Trial. The peculiarity of this book consists in its conscious refusal to propose any unambiguous solution to the problems under examination. Kołakowski openly states that his sympathies and antipathies are divided (p. X). His main conclusion is formulated as follows: “Thus, while it is true that the Pelgian mentality, especially once it had ‘secularized’ itself and assumed the form of utopian politics, is deservedly discredited nowadays, it
may well have played a liberating role in the history of modern Europe. It put into circulation a belief in human freedom conceived as an unconstrained ability to choose between good and evil; it made possible the habit of trusting in our spiritual prowess and our unlimited potential to better our lot, to create and to expand, to apply our curiosity to anything we can think of. If it brought disasters in our age, it also made possible the great achievements of modern European civilization in the arts, the sciences, and social institutions. And so, let us accept, in the Pascalian manner, ‘two contradictory truths’” (p. 184).

This conscious self-limitation—philosophical reflection on the antinomies of human thought and existence, without attempting to dismiss them, or to reconcile the opposites in a higher synthesis—is very typical of Kołakowski’s thought. His hermeneutical method can be described as dialectics without synthesis. This feature of his thought helps him to avoid dogmaticism and thus to successfully combine the role of a philosopher with that of an intellectual historian.

To sum up. I have tried to show that Kołakowski’s works on the intellectual history of the early-modern Europe are an organic part of his philosophy—especially of his penetrating philosophical analysis of the antinomies of modernization. The importance of this part of Kołakowski’s oeuvre has been relatively neglected and deserves greater appreciation.