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## Freedom, Equality, Truth

### The Antinomies of Cartesianism in the Philosophy of Leszek Kołakowski

**ABSTRACT:** The subject of this article are the Cartesian motifs in the thought of Leszek Kołakowski, one of the most important Polish philosophers of the 20th century. The author aims to show that the critical reflexion on the legitimacy and limits of the Cartesian search for knowledge based on the intuition of evidence and at the same time objectively true has organized not only philosophical, but also political thought of Kołakowski. He argues, that Leszek Kołakowski and the whole intellectual formation he belonged to, called the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas, interpreted Cartesianism as an attempt of establishing the integral, both philosophical and political, radicalism. The main thesis of this article is that Cartesianism was for Kołakowski and his colleagues, former Marxists, a radical philosophy not only of truth, but also of freedom. The question about the possibility of the unshakable, absolutely unquestionable foundations of knowledge, put by Kołakowski to Descartes and Husserl, is interpreted in the article as a part of his strategy of overcoming Marxism, understood as an ideology, that reduces human freedom to a mere epiphenomenon.

**KEYWORDS:** phenomenology • Marxism • radicalism • truth • freedom • Kołakowski

As the author of *Main Currents of Marxism*, in which he decidedly abandoned the “fighting Marxist” stance of his youthful years, Leszek Kołakowski was very disinclined to describe himself as a “philosopher”. He saw himself rather as a historian of philosophy or historian of ideas, hence finding Cartesian threads in his writings is no easy task. Unlike, for instance, some representatives of the phenomenological movement in philosophy, Kołakowski made no direct reference to Cartesianism in his own philosophical reflections. Of course his prolific writings on the history of philosophy also feature texts devoted to Descartes and his descendants, most notably Baruch and Spinoza<sup>1</sup>, but despite the indisputable philosophical im-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. L. Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność. Wolność i antynomie wolności w filozofii Spinozy* (*The Individual and Infinity: Freedom and Antinomies of Freedom in the*

port of his early study of the antinomies of freedom in Spinoza's philosophy, Kołakowski can hardly be counted among today's leading exponents or chroniclers of Cartesianism.

Nonetheless, as I will argue in the present paper, it is difficult to agree with the Reverend Józef Tischner, at once Catholic admirer and critical hermeneut when it came to Kołakowski, who claimed that Kołakowski's Cartesian interpretations did not reach beyond the "schoolbook level"<sup>2</sup>. As I will try to show, critical reflection on the validity and boundaries of the Cartesian quest for evidence-based knowledge that is at once objective and true stood behind not only Kołakowski's philosophical but also his political thought. In a 1975 lecture on the search for certitude in Husserlian phenomenology, Kołakowski revealed that he had been from the very beginning "strongly negatively dependent on Husserl"<sup>3</sup>, which allows the conclusion that he could have said the same about Descartes. The main question I ask in this paper is how this negative dependence is to be understood. In my attempt to answer it I will try to show that Kołakowski – and the intellectual formation to which he belonged known as the Warsaw School of History of Ideas – saw Cartesianism as an attempt at integral (philosophical and political) radicalism<sup>4</sup>. In my paper I will defend the thesis that for Kołakowski and many of his ex-Marxist colleagues Cartesianism was not only a radical philosophy of truth, but also a radical philosophy of freedom. I will interpret Kołakowski's question about the possibility of discovering the unshakable, absolutely unquestionable fundamentals of knowledge, which he put both to Husserl and Descartes, as part of his strategy to overcome Marxism, which he saw to be an ideology that reduced human freedom to a mere epiphenomenon.

*Philosophy of Spinoza*), PWN, Warsaw 1959. Kołakowski also made more or less direct reference to Descartes in parts of works like *Towards a Marxist Humanism*, Grove Press 1969 ("Cogito, historical materialism, the expressive interpretation of the personality"); *The Presence of Myth*, University of Chicago Press 1989 ("Myth in the epistemological question"); *Religion: If there is no God*, St. Augustine's Press 2001 ("The God of reasoners"); *Metaphysical Horror*, Basil Blackwell Ltd, Oxford 1988 ("Cartesian dreams", „Recycling the Cogito") or *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, St. Augustine's Press 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Tischner, *Kołakowski i Kartezjusz (Kołakowski and Descartes)*, [in:] *Obecność. Leszkowi Kołakowskiemu w 60 rocznicę urodzin (Presence. For Leszek Kołakowski on His 60th Birthday)*, „Aneks", London 1987, p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, St. Augustine's Press, South Bend, Indiana 2001, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> As also Józef Tischner observed, Kołakowski "relishes in paradoxes, contrasts, contradictions, speculations and calculations. One sometimes gets the impression that he transfers to philosophy something of the spirit of great literature, and also something of the spirit of great politics". Cf. J. Tischner, *Kołakowski i Kartezjusz*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

To close, I will comment on the meaning and limitations of Kołakowski's philosophical stand in the context of the conclusion of his Husserl lecture, in which he stated that the Cartesian attempt to reach the epistemological absolute had failed completely.

### Scientific evidence and party authority

In keeping with the paradoxical statement by the vicomte Luis de Bonald, there exist only two criteria for the truthfulness of cognition: the authority of evidence and the evidence of authority<sup>5</sup>. A French traditionalist critical of the Enlightenment philosophy which fuelled the political slogans of the Great Revolution, de Bonald considered reference to the authority of evidence, which was initiated by Descartes, as a sign of conceit, dogmatism and credulity with regard to human cognitive capabilities. Like Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre, also de Bonald saw revolutionary ideology as a symptom of political Cartesianism, for which the authority of evidence was a criterion determining both truthfulness of knowledge and freedom of political activity. Against the authority of evidence as a truth criterion de Bonald set the evidence of authority, practical wisdom institutionalised in the instructive function of the Church and personified by the Pope as the Great Interpreter of truth revealed in the Divine Word. For de Bonald, the evidence of authority as a criterion of not only the truths of faith but also all true cognition signified the evident fact that truth was attainable by man only when embodied in tradition. He considered its adequate mediation by language, superstition and community customs to surpass the cognitive abilities of the individual human mind.

The reason I call Leszek Kołakowski a representative of Polish Cartesianism in this paper is that overturning the de Bonald-formulated antinomy between authority of evidence and evidence of authority appears to be the driving force of his entire philosophical thought. Kołakowski's consciousness of being imprisoned in this antinomy may be seen as stemming from his own political experience. His philosophical path began with his enrollment in the Polish Workers' Party in his early student years (1945) and active participation in installing communist government in Poland. As a philosophy student and member of communist youth organisations, and later a young academic at Warsaw University, Kołakowski until 1956 engaged in ideological and propaganda warfare against non-Marxist philosophical schools. Still in 1956, in an essay titled, *Intellectuals and the Communist movement*, he

<sup>5</sup> L. de Bonald, *Recherches philosophiques sur les premiers objets des connaissances morales*, vol. 1, Le Clère, Paris 1838, p. 62.

asked about the conditions which would enable the communists to completely reconstruct all spheres of social life in Poland<sup>6</sup>.

In Józef Tischner's opinion the guiding principle of Kołakowski's philosophy was never "that or another dogmatically absorbed Marxist thesis, but a natural sensitivity to all humiliation of human dignity"<sup>7</sup>. Already in his early political writings Kołakowski criticised Marxism, then the official ideology of Poland's ruling party, from a radical position both in the philosophical and political sense. In the mentioned essay he explained his commitment to the struggle for proletarian rule with what for him was an obvious fact – namely that struggle's emancipatory import. He justified the role of intellectuals in the communist movement with the need to legitimise it theoretically, and wrote:

the scientific socialism theory could not have emerged from the automatic impact of class conflicts, it could not have been the product of 'class instinct' or of the working class itself: it required mastery of all existing knowledge about society, which is attainable only in the course of prolonged and specialised studies<sup>8</sup>.

As earlier Marx, Engels and Lenin, who could not have played their political roles if they had not possessed a comprehensive theoretical background, also those who in Kołakowski's day created the theory behind the political progress of the proletariat were not, as he put it, "merely 'helpers' in the communist movement, but a precondition for its existence"<sup>9</sup>.

Unlike many Polish intellectuals of that era, who perceived the communist party's ideological authority as something obvious, Kołakowski found it impossible – already in the mentioned article – to reconcile belief in the party's theoretical dominance with his commitment to the battle for human dignity. In describing the incompatibility of treating official Marxism as a political religion, he resorted to the antinomy categories formulated by de Bonald. In his essay he defended the authority of scientific evidence as the fundament of theoretical knowledge about society, and a necessary condition for the communist movement's success in its quest for social emancipa-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. L. Kołakowski, *Intelektualiści a ruch komunistyczny (Intellectuals and the communist movement)*, [in:] *idem, Pochwała niekonsekwencji. Pisma rozproszone z lat 1955–1968*, t. 2, s. 93.

<sup>7</sup> J. Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu (The Polish Form of Dialogue)*, p. 210. For more on Tischner's interpretation of Kołakowski's philosophy cf. K. Michalski, *Tischner i Kołakowski (Tischner and Kołakowski)*, [in:] *idem, Eseje o Bogu i śmierci (Essays About God and Death)*, Kurhaus Publishing, Warsaw 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. L. Kołakowski, *Intelektualiści a ruch komunistyczny*, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

tion from all the obvious mindlessness of authority – including the authority of the communist party. In the essay he focused his critique on violations of the freedom of scientific research and academic freedom, which in the Stalinist years with their personality cult had, in his view, taken on religious forms – complete with “revelation in the sphere of cognition, a system of magic and taboos, the existence of a caste of priests who monopolise the right to proclaim truths, a desire to absorb absolutely all forms of human life by ideology”<sup>10</sup>. Kołakowski concludes his critique of party dogmatism by stating that, “in the currently prevailing situation in Marxist theory, one could truly wish for Karl Marx’s resurrection”<sup>11</sup>.

The “Cartesian” argumentation Kołakowski applied in *Intellectuals and the Communist Movement* was a sign of his growing revisionism, or, as his philosophical stance could perhaps be better described, his “Marxist protestantism”. From the outset, the essay’s thesis about the primacy of theory over praxis carried both practical and theoretical import. Also in other 1950s articles Kołakowski countered the party’s, as he called it, “obsolete” Marxism with his “valid”, “updated” version<sup>12</sup>. On this ground, he wrote, “there is no reason to suppose that rational thought which operates a good technique will force the scholar to come into collision with the goals of the working class movement, for whose future he is co-responsible”<sup>13</sup>. In keeping with the valid conception of Marxism, Kołakowski rejected the idea of a scholar who was nothing but a scholar – “a scholar distilled and driven solely by scholarly reasoning”<sup>14</sup> – and stated that

communist intellectuals have both the duty and the right to carry responsibility for the ideological development of the revolutionary movement. However, they have neither the duty nor the right to adopt for this purpose any assumptions considered from the outset to be inaccessible to control and debate<sup>15</sup>.

However, by 1956 Leszek Kołakowski’s conclusion that “the interests of the communist movement do not stand in opposition to objective knowledge about the world”<sup>16</sup> appeared to be nothing but words. He wanted the party authorities who represented these interests (also in their own belief)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. L. Kołakowski, *Aktualne i nieaktualne pojęcie marksizmu (The Valid and Obsolete Conception of Marxism)*, [in:] *idem*, *Pochwała niekonsekwencji*, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–14.

<sup>13</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Intelektualiści a ruch komunistyczny*, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

to show more trust in the scientific milieu and its Marxist consciousness, and at the same time he himself increasingly refused to accept the party's authority either on the theoretical or the political plane. On October 21, 1966 Kołakowski criticised the government sharply while addressing a meeting of the Union of Socialist Youth at Warsaw University's history faculty, among others touching upon issues like freedom of criticism and freedom of gatherings<sup>17</sup>. His relegation from the party several days later and forced emigration in 1968 provided a practical resolution to the above-described antinomy. Its theoretical resolution was the 1976 publication of his best-known work, the three-volume *Main Currents of Marxism*, in which he outlined the history of Marxism from its dawn, through its evolution and right up to its decline.

### Descartes as a philosopher of freedom

Leszek Kołakowski made more direct reference to historical Cartesianism in his writings on the history of ideas. He made the transition from fighting (even if updated) Marxism to neutral, value-free historicism together with a group of Marxist philosophers later to become known as the "Warsaw School of the History of Ideas"<sup>18</sup>. This group, which among others included Tadeusz Kroński, Bronisław Baczko, Andrzej Walicki, Jerzy Szacki and Krzysztof Pomian, mainly strove to transform historical materialism into a kind of hermeneutics of culture. Using methodology based on German sociology of knowledge, existentialism and parts of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, they drew attention to the diversified historical determinants of cognition and the futility of all attempts to find one objective truth. Wary of censorship by the party, they did not criticise Marxism openly in their 1960s writings, resorting to an indirect critique in reflections about the antinomies of philosophies which had been of theoretical importance to Marx. Kroński focused on the philosophy of Hegel<sup>19</sup>, Baczko on Rousseau<sup>20</sup>, Walicki on Russian Slavophilism<sup>21</sup>, Szacki on the world visions of the French

<sup>17</sup> Cf. W. Chudoba, *Leszek Kołakowski. Kronika życia i dzieła (Leszek Kołakowski. A Chronicle of His Life and Work)*, Warsaw 2014, IFiS PAN Publishers, p. 214.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. R. Sitek, *Warszawska Szkoła Historii Idei. Między historią a teraźniejszością (The Warsaw School of the History of Ideas. Between History and the Present)*, Warsaw 2000, SCHOLAR Publishing House Ltd.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. T. Kroński, *Rozważania wokół Hegla (Reflections around Hegel)*, PWN, Warsaw 1960.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. B. Baczko, *Rousseau: Samotność i wspólnota (Rousseau: Loneliness and Community)*, PWN, Warsaw 1964.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. A. Walicki, *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii: struktura i przemiany rosyjskiego słowianofilstwa (In the Circles of Conservative Utopia: The Structure and Metamorphosis of Russian Slavophilism)*, PWN, Warsaw 1964.

counterrevolutionaries<sup>22</sup>, Pomian on the concept of history in medieval thought<sup>23</sup>, and Kołakowski in his 1958 book *The Individual and the Infinite* chose Spinoza's Cartesianism as his main theme.

Kołakowski called his own methodology in the history of ideas (shared to a large extent by other members of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas) expressionist historiography. From the very start he used it with a sensitivity for inner contradiction that is typical for historians of ideas. It was designed to accommodate the necessary reconciliation in scholarly praxis of two approaches which stood in contradiction to the object of study, and were known as presentism and contextualism<sup>24</sup>. In keeping with Kołakowski's methodological credo, the historiography of ideas could not limit itself merely to a detailed description of its subject. By "organising the empirical components of the historical world", Kołakowski wrote, expressionist historiography was to subordinate them to "some kind of central idea that would give meaning to each component separately, and manifest itself in a system of ideal constructs"<sup>25</sup>.

The expressionism Kołakowski brought into the history of ideas mainly came down to searching through a given philosophy for traces of what the searcher held for its central, organising idea. As Kołakowski put it,

like the work of a portraitist, work on the history of philosophical doctrines cannot aim to reproduce reality in a way that is completely adequate, free from personal contribution and a personal, pre-conceived artistic concept and style<sup>26</sup>.

Based on concrete historical experience and skeptical with regard to the possibility of determining the objective meaning of these doctrines over history, Kołakowski's history of ideas was, in his own words, to "reduce the inner contradictions and incompatibilities of individual thought structures

<sup>22</sup> Cf. J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy. Wizje świata francuskich antagonistów Wielkiej Rewolucji 1789–1815 (Counter-revolutionary Paradoxes: The World-views of the French Antagonists of the Great Revolution)*, PWN, Warsaw 1965.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. K. Pomian, *Przeszłość jako przedmiot wiary. Historia i filozofia w myśli średniowiecza (The Past as an Object of Faith)*, PWN, Warsaw 1968.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. J. Szacki, *Dylematy historiografii idei (Dilemmas of the Historiography of Ideas)*, [in:] *Presence. For Leszek Kołakowski...*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. L. Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna. Studia nad chrześcijaństwem bezwyznaniowym XVII wieku (Religious Awareness and Church Bonds. A Study of 17th-Century Non-Confessional Christianity)*, PWN Polish Scientific Publishers, Warsaw 1997, p. 253.

<sup>26</sup> *Idem, The Individual and Infinity...*, *op. cit.*, p. 415.

to the antinomic nature of the starting concepts with which they operate<sup>27</sup>. Thus, the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas philosophers' emphasis on the "ambiguities, dialectical contradictions and tensions" between elements of the historical philosophies they investigated<sup>28</sup> can signify a desire to also reduce the inner contradictions of their own historical condition. Their efforts to track down the "dialectical logic" of the historical phenomena they analysed in their writings – or, in Kołakowski's words, the "inner antinomy of the elements which in each case constituted them"<sup>29</sup> – can be understood to reflect their own experience of antinomy in their role of communist intellectuals.

Seen from this perspective, Kołakowski's book about the idea of freedom and its antinomies in the philosophy of Descartes' Dutch continuer and critic is impossible to read solely as a historical study. Despite its scholarly thoroughness and analytical incisiveness, its hidden aim was to seek the historical roots of what Kołakowski saw as the insurmountable antinomies of the "scientific socialism" idea. Kołakowski's other unvoiced intention was to reveal their political consequences, most of all in the mentioned primacy of the party's quasi-religious authority over research freedom. As he wrote in the preface to his book, its purpose was to

interpret classical philosophical issues as issues of a moral nature, translate the questions asked by metaphysics, anthropology and cognition theory into questions expressed in the language of human moral problems, strive towards the disclosure of their hidden humanistic content, present the issue of God as a human issue, the issue of earth and heaven as an issue of human freedom, the issue of nature as an issue of the human attitude towards the world, the issue of the soul as an issue of the value of life, the issue of human nature as an issue of inter-human relations<sup>30</sup>.

In *The Individual and Infinity* Kołakowski not only analysed Spinoza from this perspective, but also Descartes himself, viewing Cartesian rationalism as a radical philosophy of freedom whose historical context was the battle for the emancipation of thought waged by 17th-century European philosophy. Presenting Cartesian thought as the *causa proxima* of Spinoza's rationalism, Kołakowski proclaimed that all of Descartes' work took its be-

<sup>27</sup> *Idem, Religious Awareness and Church Bonds...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. A. Walicki, *Leszek Kołakowski i warszawska szkoła historii idei*, [in:] R. Sitek: *Warszawska Szkoła Historii Idei*, *op. cit.*, p. 241–242.

<sup>29</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Religious Awareness and Church Bonds...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Idem, The Individual and Infinity...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.



ginning “from an attempt to emancipate thought radically from the pressure of all authority”<sup>31</sup>. He reminded that it was precisely the Cartesian *cogito* conception’s radical contestation of the value of all sources of knowledge besides the mind of the cognising individual that brought Descartes’ philosophical writings onto the Church’s forbidden list – where they remained up to the time Kołakowski was working on his own book. As in the case of the communist party authorities in his own case,

that Descartes was arguing for the existence of God was not important for the Catholics. In their view, he opened the door to atheism because his argumentation assumed the secular mind’s right to resolve the issue on the strength of its own, in a sense personal, conclusions, because he legitimised a method which submitted the issue to judgement by independent thought. The resolution of the question itself was less important than the methods used for its resolution<sup>32</sup>.

Kołakowski saw Descartes’ defence of the autonomy of intuitive cognition primarily as the fulfilment of the inherent logic of scientific cognition. According to him this logic was the product of the evolution of the natural and mathematical sciences, and aimed to justify their objective importance philosophically. Nonetheless, in Kołakowski’s opinion Descartes’ emphasis on the primacy of intellectual cognition over cognition based only on sensual testimony also had a clear social and emancipatory import. Intellectual cognition was not only to

explain a certain contradiction between the view on the world that arises from the daily perceptions of untrained minds, and the results of scientific inquiry conducted with the help of a relatively highly abstract system of mathematical and physical categories<sup>33</sup>.

In Kołakowski’s view Descartes, and the entire intellectual school he belonged to, considered the cognition of necessity to be,

not only the scientifically most valuable kind of cognition, but also evidence of man’s intellectual capability, the affirmation of his autonomy and independence as a thinking being. [...] The criterion of certitude which Descartes found in the methods of the mathematical sciences also legitimised man’s intellectual autonomy<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

This approach to the emancipatory content in Cartesian thought was also propounded by other representatives of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas. Most notably Krzysztof Pomian, in a mid-1960s text on Descartes' concept of freedom, described his philosophy in similar terms as Kołakowski – as the expression of a world outlook formed by the cultural transformations in late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. In Pomian's belief, the questions about the relation between authority and reason, sensuality and ideas and experience and theory Descartes faced could be treated as special instances of “a much more general issue concerning the relation of the individual as a cognising subject to society and to history”<sup>35</sup>. The Cartesian idea of freedom was his main point of interest insofar as he sought for its answers to the question, “is or is not the individual as a cognising subject totally independent from society and history?”<sup>36</sup>.

In his article Krzysztof Pomian observed that according to Descartes, freedom was, “a perfectly fundamental fact”, which should be counted among the “first and most primal of the concepts which are inborn to us”<sup>37</sup>. The negation – even if only attempted – of all experience and theory to then continue reasoning as if they were false, was primarily to testify to this experience. It was precisely this primal experience of freedom for which, in Kołakowski's words, “there is no need to seek excuses”<sup>38</sup>, experience founded on human thought, that was to become for Descartes the founding-block of human autonomy, human independence from the outer world. Like Kołakowski, Pomian also pointed out that the cognitive absoluteness of the act of thought, which Descartes proclaimed against the scholastics, gave this act the right to also claim absoluteness for itself within the order of existence. As Kołakowski expressed it, Descartes' stance was determined by the experience that, “freedom is not enmeshed in the nets of divine grace right from the beginning, but can be established earlier, before we have heard anything about grace”<sup>39</sup>.

The fact that Kołakowski did not turn his main attention to the ontological antinomies of Cartesian dualism but the antinomies of freedom in Spinoza's monism stemmed from his conviction that only Spinoza had

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 207.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. K. Pomian, *Kartezjusz: wolność negatywna i nieskończoność nauki (Descartes: Negative Freedom and the Infinity of Science)*, [in:] M. Drużkowski, K. Sokół (eds), *Antynomie wolności (Antinomies of Freedom)*, Książka i Wiedza (publishers), p. 220, Warsaw 1966, p. 207.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Dwoje oczu Spinozy*, [in:] *Antynomie wolności, op. cit.*, s. 220. (Cf. *The Two Eyes of Spinoza and Other Essays on Philosophers*, St. Augustine's Press 2004).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

drawn political conclusions from the Cartesian struggle for autonomous thought. Kołakowski noted that already Cartesian freedom knows no restriction, and from the outset constitutes itself in its negativeness as an inalienable skill for man if he is to always supplement the divine *fiat* with a *fiat* of his own<sup>40</sup>. However, as he remarked in *The Individual and Infinity*, Descartes' rationalism, aimed against all cultivation of authority, constantly "hid its face behind a mask of conformist declarations without testing its method directly on the texts of Scriptures"<sup>41</sup>. In Kołakowski's opinion Cartesian methodology mainly answered the needs of scientific progress because it focused on reforming science, similarly to his own philosophy in the 1950s. Whereas what interested him most in Spinoza's thought was that it was Spinozian methodology, which, as Kołakowski wrote, had been "brought up to its philosophical consequences in a much more forcible and radical way", that first inspired reforms of morality and politics<sup>42</sup>.

### Freedom and truth

However, Kołakowski's interpretation of Cartesian thought revealed itself as strongly expressionist also in those writings in which he reconstructed the "textbook" antinomies of Cartesianism over history. In the 1962 essay "*Cogito*, Historical Materialism, and the Expressive Interpretation of Personality", he concluded that the main element defining this philosophy was the fact that "Descartes waged war against mystery"<sup>43</sup>. Here, Kołakowski presented the ontological duality of soul and body – the cognitive and corporeal substance – into which, according to Descartes' critics, Cartesianism was driven by accepting as its starting-point the intuition of *cogito* and its derivative *cogito ergo sum*, as the consequence of Descartes rejection, in the footsteps of the Oxford nominalists, of the difference between essence and phenomenon. By thus "blowing away" from the world like a cobweb the category of traditional metaphysics, for which the mystery of the world consisted in the existence of a real difference between the unknowable "thing" and its qualities and activities (which reveal themselves to our cognition), Descartes, Kołakowski wrote, also allowed us to "touch an incomparably more troublesome mys-

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> *Idem*, *The Individual and Infinity...*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>43</sup> *Idem*, „*Cogito*”, *materializm historyczny, ekspresyjna interpretacja osobowości* (“*Cogito*, *Historical Materialism, and the Expressive Interpretation of Personality*”), [in:] *idem*, *Kultura i fetysze*, PWN Polish Scientific Publishers, Warsaw 1967. (Cf. L. Kołakowski, *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, Grove Press 1969).

tery: the mystery of the subjective world, a world which constitutes itself only by being experienced<sup>44</sup>.

One can also speak about the expressive character of Kołakowski's interpretation of Descartes' philosophy in light of his emphasis on the "ambiguity" of Cartesianism itself, and the "duality of the criticism directed against it"<sup>45</sup>. Both in his early and later writings Kołakowski observed that from the very beginning one of the main points brought up by Descartes' critics was his "careless transition from 'I think' to 'I am a thinking substance (or thing)'"<sup>46</sup>. As he pointed out, the critique of this transition was twofold. Where Hobbes and Gassendi, Kołakowski wrote, argued that a thing that thought constituted in the *Cogito* as a pure act was not really a thing but remained a bare act of thought, the German idealists and phenomenologists complained that "a reified *Cogito* is not a real *Cogito* and loses its primal meaning, determined by the effort of understanding subjectivity without assuming substance"<sup>47</sup>.

For Kołakowski Cartesianism owed its contemporary validity to the fact that it was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that we became aware of a question which Descartes failed to ask himself directly: "the question about the possibility of reducing the subject to a certain kind of object, or about the total heterogeneity of the subjective world and the world of things"<sup>48</sup>. What Kołakowski called this question's "poisonous ambiguity" was to confront 20th-century thought with the fundamental issue of "whether the human individual can be at all defined and understood otherwise than from within, whether its existence is identical with the consciousness of this existence, or whether it can be described in a commonly understandable language?"<sup>49</sup>. Kołakowski considered Cartesian philosophy's entanglement in its inner antinomies (connected with the transformation of an act of pure self-knowledge into a thinking thing) to be the effect of its desire to give the discovery of the *Cogito* a "universal dimension"<sup>50</sup>. However, in touching (in his belief) the mystery of the world by an act of *Cogito*, in "assuming that there is a bottom-reality [...] and even that there is an experience whereby we touch it"<sup>51</sup>, Descartes did, in Kołakowski's view, put contemporary thought

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> *Idem*, *Metaphysical Horror*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> L. Kołakowski, "*Cogito...*", *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.

<sup>51</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

before the question about the translatability of this experience. The painful consciousness that “the unique quality of this experience, its uncontaminated freshness, its being the divine beginning, is fatefully lost when it is dressed in words”<sup>52</sup> became a “truly closed wall” before which he placed today’s philosophy.

Thus, both in “*Cogito*, Historical Materialism, and the Expressive Interpretation of Personality” and his other 1960s articles and essays, Kołakowski strongly distanced himself from Descartes’ attempt to radically emancipate thought from all authority by means of a “*Cogito*, wrecked by skeptics”<sup>53</sup>. Also in later collections of writings, from *The Presence of Myth* to *Metaphysical Horror*, he pointed to the “unending hiatus” between the compelling directness of the *Cogito* and all systemic interpretations of the world. He viewed this hiatus as “an embarrassing disability – by no means of Cartesianism, but generally all philosophical reflection which strives to integrate the subjective world and the world of things in a unified picture, and, starting out from either, never actually reaches the other”<sup>54</sup>. Therefore, Kołakowski’s “personal contributions” to unravelling the mystery of the subjective world in writings he published officially prior to his exile from Poland should rather be sought in his expressionist interpretations of the thought of young Marx. He revived this philosophy in protest against the adoption of “Marxism with a scientific orientation” as the party ideology (political religion), and used the categories of the anthropological “denaturalisation of the world” that took place within it to describe – together with Gramsci – the possibility of eradicating human alienation and emancipation”<sup>55</sup>.

The political import of using expressionist methodology to analyse Descartes’ philosophy was more aptly revealed by Krzysztof Pomian in his earlier-mentioned essay on the Cartesian idea of freedom, in which he asked about the ways in which relations between man and socio-historical authorities were to be defined on its ground, and also made note of the inner antinomies in Descartes’ approach. Although Pomian conceded that, in comparison with other philosophical doctrines of his day, Descartes had achieved “a maximum on the self-knowledge an individual living in the 17<sup>th</sup> century could have at its disposal”<sup>56</sup>, he saw these antinomies in the spheres

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>54</sup> L. Kołakowski, “*Cogito...*”, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. L. Kołakowski, *Karol Marks i klasyczna definicja prawdy* (*Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth*), [in:] *idem*, *Kultura i fetysze*, *op. cit.*, p. 79ff.

<sup>56</sup> K. Pomian, *Descartes: Negative Freedom...*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

of epistemology and ontology, as well as ethics. According to Pomian, the main antinomy of Cartesian thought and its search for “an infallible model of reasoning whose application would enable it to introduce order into the world”<sup>57</sup>, took place between the concepts of freedom and truth accepted on its basis.

According to Pomian’s reconstruction, on the strength of the experience of the individual, which “can negate and can choose: it is free”<sup>58</sup>, Descartes on one hand granted man the ability to exist unbound to any conduct norms and without accepting any values he did not choose himself, while on the other his situation was extremely troublesome precisely at the point in which he hoped to avert human eyes from works regarded as authoritative and turn them where he expected to find truth. Also Descartes, Pomian argued, did not see scientific cognition as something strictly individual, but it had to yield results that were binding for everyone everywhere and always. It had to be grounded in something that possessed the attribute of commonness. Thus, Pomian wrote,

the problem Descartes faced was how to reconcile the individual’s particularism with the universal legitimacy of the science it created, how to reconcile the unlimited freedom of the investigating person with the necessary, obligatory character of the truths it uncovered<sup>59</sup>.

In Pomian’s view Descartes’ specific position in 17th-century European philosophy consisted in his postulation of the total subjugation of freedom to truth, the will to reason. This elevation of scientific cognition to the highest possible rank entangled Descartes in ethical antinomies which were of special significance from Pomian’s point of view. From his perspective, the idea of reforming morality and politics which Kołakowski found in Spinoza’s thought was expressed in Cartesianism by the concept of a community of individuals, whose shared choice was to settle for universality and scientific cognition. For Pomian, the fundamental antinomy of the Cartesian freedom idea was that on one hand man, having subordinated his will to reason (following the will’s previous subordination of passion), “became dependent solely on himself, hence acquired a maximum on freedom”<sup>60</sup>, but on the other, membership in such a community of rational beings who unreservedly accept the “clear and explicit” data of intellectual intuition “incurs

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 217.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 218.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216.

a very extravagant price; because man must sacrifice to science that what is most divine in him: his freedom”<sup>61</sup>.

According to Pomian the antinomies of the Cartesian freedom concept, in which full liberation was tantamount to total subordination, resulted from the duality of what Descartes called reason. Cartesian “reason”, he observed, was on one hand that what all individuals found in themselves when they turned away from the world in methodical doubt: in this sense full subordination to reason was for Descartes an act of emancipation from all outer dependencies. On the other hand, Pomian said, he saw reason as something the individual found in itself and did not create, something whose content was given. In this sense, Descartes also saw full subordination to reason as resignation from freedom, acceptance of something that was imposed.

This dual understanding of reason – Pomian wrote – which Descartes was unaware of and which in his interpretation is at once something purely individual and something that transcends the individual, causes the enclosure of the will within the boundaries of the sphere of brightness to become simultaneously the individual’s liberation and its resignation from its own individuality. It is an achievement and a sacrifice, acceptance of a gift and an offering<sup>62</sup>.

Descartes’ attempt to reconcile the concepts of freedom and truth, Pomian wrote, only deepened the antinomies in his philosophy. This was because the Cartesian approach to the matter based on a definition of freedom that limited it in terms of content but not qualitatively, i.e. on the recognition of freedom as “unlimited freedom of negation”<sup>63</sup>. Pomian noted that it was this definition of freedom, which freed humans from all outer determinants and distinguished them as such from all objects subject to such determination, that brought into Cartesian thought the not only ethical but also ontological contradiction between two substances: thinking and spatial, a contradiction impossible to resolve without the simultaneous revision of the doctrine’s fundamental assumptions.

As Kołakowski remarked in passing in a text on Spinoza from the same period,

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*. Also Leszek Kołakowski wrote that, “Cartesian freedom knows no limits, and in its negativeness constitutes itself right from the beginning as an ability necessary for man [...] to always stand equal to the creator at times when he proceeds from non-differentiation to differentiation on the strength of self-defining creation”. Cf. L. Kołakowski, *The Two Eyes of Spinoza...*, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

if we are allowed, or even bound, to salvage our existence as experienced existence to form an incomparably compelling starting point for thought about being, then we will not only find it easy to imbue this epistemological source with ontic meaning, but we will simply not be able to do anything else<sup>64</sup>.

In Pomian's interpretation the recognition of individual freedom as negativity, which also determined the opposition between thinking and spatiality and particularity and universality, had thus led to a conflict which could not be resolved on its own ground. For Pomian this conflict manifested itself in

the ambivalence of the act of liberation and reason; ambivalence that is unavoidable as it results from the reason conception's function as a bridge spanning two gradually retreating edges of a depthless chasm: thinking and corporeality, individuality and science, freedom and necessity<sup>65</sup>.

Pomian himself gave an ambivalent answer to the leading question in his interpretation of Descartes – about the possibility of the individual's total independence from society and history, in his specific case the external authority of the communist party. Because from the position of the infinite freedom to “question, if only tentatively, all experience and theory” that Descartes had granted to man he saw such independence possible only as an act of formal negation. In his essay Pomian appeared to present the resolution of the antinomy between “thinking and corporeality”, “individuality and science” and “freedom and necessity” in which Cartesianism had enmeshed itself as the condition of not only formal but also “thematic” liberation from the self-evidence of the party's authority. As Kołakowski put it in the mentioned essay about Spinoza, on the ground of Cartesianism alone “freedom, hence negativity, which determines human existence, [...] remains a reward promised to those who suspend their judgement on the issue of the world's reality itself”<sup>66</sup>. As negative, this freedom was from their perspective doomed to remain an exclusively “inner” freedom, which could only be realised through religious conformism, a stance Descartes himself adhered

<sup>64</sup> L. Kołakowski, *The Two Eyes of Spinoza...*, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

<sup>65</sup> K. Pomian, *Descartes: Negative Freedom...*, *op. cit.*, p. 218. Leszek Kołakowski shared this view and wrote that “there are still no prospects for improvement of the Cartesian construct's fundamental discontinuity; how are we to reconstruct the corporeal world, when absolute initialness has been reserved for a movement in which experience distances itself only from itself to catch a fleeting glimpse of itself in bisecting reflection?”. Cf. L. Kołakowski, *The Two Eyes of Spinoza...*, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*.



to, and the political quietism it fostered, which was also displayed by “loyal” members of the party who recognised the obviousness of its rule.

### Truth and freedom

The way in which Leszek Kołakowski analysed Spinoza’s treatment of Cartesianism’s epistemological, ontological and ethical antinomies in *The Individual and Infinity* appealed to the intellectual and political sensitivities of other circles besides his own. Also other communism-disenchanted Polish intellectuals in the 1960s saw the inner antinomies of Cartesianism he described as a symptom of the “ambiguity, dialectical conflict and tension” which underlay this philosophy’s approach to society and politics. Best evidence of this was the fact that at the time Kołakowski’s book had the status of something like a pop icon. The authors of “The Old Gentlemen’s Cabaret”, a comedy revue shown on Poland’s then single TV channel, even dedicated a song to the work, which they titled “Mambo Spinoza”:

Spinoza – it’s no female name!  
 Spinoza – it’s no drug for sale!  
 Neither is it a bush or a flower  
 But a thinker with quite awesome power!

Although, as Kołakowski noted, not as much as a trace of Cartesian subjectivism was left to be seen in Spinoza’s rationalism, it nonetheless retained the essential substance of Cartesianism, which for Warsaw communist Kołakowski meant “trust in the self-sufficiency and autonomy of secular reason freed from the constraint of faith”<sup>67</sup>. The Cartesian thread here, according to Kołakowski, was that Spinoza also sought guarantees for this autonomy in specifically understood intuition, which he considered to be the most excellent cognitive method. The Dutch thinker’s analytical cognition theory and explorations of the immanent criteria of truth, on which he based one of the central ideas of his doctrine – the theory about the general intelligibility of the world and Spinozian determinism – were for Kołakowski insofar Cartesian as they attempted to overcome the relativistic and therefore irrationalistic consequences of Cartesian subjectivity. Where Descartes, having accepted intellectual evidence as a truth criterion, was unable to point to a method of distinguishing truly evident knowledge from knowledge which only appeared to be evident<sup>68</sup>, Spinozian epistemology

<sup>67</sup> L. Kołakowski, *The Individual and Infinity...*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>68</sup> “If Descartes also postulated a category of objective evidence understood as a property of a judgement and not the subject which appropriates the judgement, then he made the

and ontology was in Kołakowski view an attempt to answer the question he posed.

Thus, in his comparison of the Cartesian and Spinozian philosophical doctrines Kołakowski also underscored the differences in the way they pursued the “main tendencies of their logic”. According to him the two doctrines differed in “the truth criterion they postulated, the method by which they legitimised *a priori* knowledge metaphysically, the radicalism of their application to revealed knowledge, their social motivation”<sup>69</sup>. Unlike Descartes’ methodology, Kołakowski said, Spinoza’s method could not be regarded simply as a tool in the battle for the liberation of the natural sciences. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge he adopted in his book, its driving force appeared to be the struggle for the freedom and autonomy of thought understood as a moral postulate which was to serve “the democratisation of collective life”<sup>70</sup>. As Kołakowski wrote, “*emendatio intellectus* is a component of the moral reform Spinoza strove after in keeping with the desires of the Dutch republicans, but with whose programme he certainly outgrew the aspirations of the radical bourgeoisie circles of his day”<sup>71</sup>.

In Kołakowski’s opinion another component of this moral reform was Spinoza’s truth criterion, which he had constructed differently than Descartes. Kołakowski recognised Spinozian rationalism – as he did Cartesianism – as an element of the new intellectual climate emerging among the enlightened bourgeoisie, but, as he wrote, “its ultimate propagator was not the utopian imagination of the individual”. Spinoza’s rationalism, Kołakowski argued, was determined by “the social interests of a class, whose needs were at a certain point identical with the direction of historical change, which was also taking place in the relatively independent sphere of morality”<sup>72</sup>. Unlike the Cartesian criterion of evidence, which was ultimately only “felt” by the individual beyond social control, the essence of Spinoza’s morally-motivated rationalism lay, according to Kołakowski, in its recognition of the analytical nature of truth as the truth criterion. An “unfailing token of certitude, publicly provable in the discursive effort of constructing a definition and a conceptual analysis”, this criterion was to Kołakowski an element of the Spinozian programme of de-alienating man not only intellectually, but also politically<sup>73</sup>.

postulate into an empty declaration by failing to indicate a method by which thus-evident judgements could be distinguished”. *Ibidem*, p. 46.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*.

Kołodkowski sought the key to Spinoza's thought – which, as he wrote in one of his later works, aimed towards a “comprehensive interpretation of the world”<sup>74</sup> – in the problem of the “part and the whole”. And insofar as he saw one of Spinozianism's most authentic singularities in “the opposition between the world seen as a whole, or the only substance, and the world composed of parts, or the entirety of individual *modi*”<sup>75</sup>, he considered this problem to involve “a question about man's relation to the world and man's relation to man”<sup>76</sup>. Having made the antinomies of the Spinozian idea of human freedom and emancipation his guiding theme, Kołodkowski presented them as the consequence of Spinoza's approach to the matter. In his opinion they revealed themselves most strongly at the time when Spinoza had made “the final step in the process of autonomising the human being by transferring to man as a political being the conclusions from his analysis of man as a metaphysical being”<sup>77</sup>. Because, as Kołodkowski wrote, the point at which philosophical abstraction began to meet everyday life revealed an essential – and the most comprehensive – difficulty for Spinozian philosophy: “the conflict between the theory of human nature and the elitary character of moral doctrine; the conflict between the quest to construct a universal anthropology and the quest to liberate the exceptional individual from the laws of this anthropology; the conflict between human essence and concrete existence, between an *a priori* construct and experience”<sup>78</sup>.

Kołodkowski gave a detailed analysis of the political meaning of the antinomies in which man as a political being was enmeshed in on the ground of Spinozian thought in a 1966 essay entitled *The Two Eyes of Spinoza*. In this article, published in a volume also containing texts on the history of the freedom idea in European philosophy from Plato to Marx by other members of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas, Kołodkowski presented the antinomies as a legacy of Cartesian dualism. As in his book, in *The Two Eyes of Spinoza* he portrayed Cartesianism as the “negative source” of Spinozian thought, contaminated by a “fundamental discontinuity” which in his opinion showed no prospects for improvement<sup>79</sup>. In his essay Kołodkowski stated that Cartesianism

<sup>74</sup> L. Kołodkowski, *Karol Marks i klasyczna definicja prawdy (Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth)*, [in:] *idem, Kultura i fetysze, op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 61.

<sup>76</sup> *Idem, The Individual and Infinity...*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 388.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 390–391.

<sup>79</sup> *Idem, Dwoje oczu Spinozy (The Two Eyes of Spinoza)*, [in:] *Antynomie wolności, op. cit.*, p. 220.

split philosophies into those which began to spin their thread from thought about the experienced and did not return to the world otherwise than through evidential carelessness, and those which, starting out from being itself constituted without anyone's cognitive assistance, are unable to break through to subjectivity and leave human existence on the level of all things, or assign to it reality other than material only by arbitrary decree<sup>80</sup>.

In effect, Kołakowski pointed out, the problem with Spinoza's metaphysics was reversed in relation to Cartesianism. While the latter, as he put it, "was to rebuild the world by accepting experienced thought as a raw *datum*", the former "constituted absolute, unique existence, divine substance, as the initial stuff of thought definitionally anchored in ontological evidence, and then had to struggle in vain with the act of self-knowledge when it wanted to fit it into the metaphysical diagram"<sup>81</sup>.

Because of the futility of these attempts, Kołakowski believed Spinoza's "holistic" metaphysics to be only seemingly monistic. In his view its main inconsistency lay in the coexistence of two conflicting tendencies in describing the freedom concept on its ground.

Monistic doctrines – Kołakowski wrote – are able to salvage the idea of negative freedom in their constructs only with the greatest difficulty [...]. Indeed, faith in freedom understood as a negative quality of the subject is faith in absolute initialness, in perfect originality, in the primal spontaneity of at least some acts of the self-knowing subject. This faith assumes that when we ask about the reasons behind our free decisions, we will always arrive at a point where the question breaks off irrevocably, where the ultimate reason for wanting is wanting itself and nothing else<sup>82</sup>.

Kołakowski indicated that only one absolute, primal being, one divine substance, constituted upon Spinoza's ontological evidence as the content of his thought and simultaneously as a subject whose actions are attributed with the said ability to avoid determination, could be regarded as the absolute beginning on the ground of Spinozian monism: a new and unpredictable act of self-creation. In Kołakowski's interpretation the problem Spinoza faced was the fact that "there were as many absolutes as there were subjects aware of themselves and capable of making choices", and that in effect "every point

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 219.

of subjectivity in the universe sees the collapse of the unity of the divine absolute or the absolute of faith”<sup>83</sup>.

Kołakowski considered the antinomy inscribed into the freedom idea on the ground of Spinozian philosophy to be a consequence of this ontological antinomy. As he remarked, Spinoza defined freedom on one hand as a certain kind of abstraction, as only the epiphenomenon of absolute divine substance. Kołakowski wrote:

If at all possible, freedom in Spinoza’s understanding is not any quality of human nature, and most of all it is not the ability of unconditioned spontaneity, in other words the so-called free will; the will is a theoretical abstract: there are only individual acts of wanting, and these are inevitably determined by the entirety of the situation in which they take place<sup>84</sup>.

From this monistic position he also observed that,

neither can freedom be the natural right of man, to be revindicated in the name of superior values, because there exist no rights different from the force with which all people are able to impose their desires on situations<sup>85</sup>.

In outlining this side of the Spinozian freedom conception, according to which freedom was nothing but a kind of “perceived necessity”, Kołakowski appeared to be reconstructing that part of the conception which after World War II found acclaim among the political elites of countries ruled by so-called real socialism. If we are free, he wrote, then only “in unsolicited agreement with the eternal and unchanging order of indifferent and aimlessly proceeding nature”<sup>86</sup>. For Kołakowski, this freedom was in some degree negative freedom in the Cartesian sense: “independence from superstition, from anger, grief and vain despair, from fear of death and the threat of hell”. He also saw it as in some extent positive: “the luck of conscious participation in the eternal essence of the highest being, with which we are united by the effort of final intuition and intellectual love of the cosmic order”. However, he observed,

the price for such freedom is the renouncement of not only external goods, but also personal self-affirmation – simply one’s personality.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 228.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*.

Theoretically attainable by everyone, it can in fact only be the share of a chosen few<sup>87</sup>.

On the other hand, Kołakowski noted, Spinoza, especially in his political writings, described freedom in a seemingly integral, radical, Cartesian way. Like Descartes, Spinoza did not see freedom as hopelessly entangled in the nets of divine grace or the unchanging order of nature. As negative, it also appeared to him to have no boundaries. In his essay Kołakowski focused on Spinoza as a fighting theoretician of the Dutch republican party and defender of tolerance and political freedom, and pointed out that the possibility of this different perception of the truth idea was rooted in the nature of the absolute divine substance he described. According to Spinoza, Kołakowski remarked, “this kind of divine existence indeed did not allow for absolute being to be ‘free’ in the sense in which non-differentiation is, in common belief, attributed to human activity”. Nonetheless, Kołakowski observed, God in Spinozian philosophy was “free” insofar as he was “in none of his actions forced or coerced into anything by situations or dictates external to him”. For Spinoza, Kołakowski wrote, divine freedom in this sense belonged “in a natural way to his position of absolute creator”<sup>88</sup>.

Spinoza’s silent and doctrinally unwarranted acceptance that the freedom of absolute being can be an attribute of not only divine but also human existence was precisely why Kołakowski considered him to be looking at the world with two eyes. As he wrote in *The Two Eyes of Spinoza*, Spinoza saw the world differently through each eye: “there can be no real accord between the totally interiorised freedom of a “cartesianising” mystic and the positive freedom that reaffirms the personality in its self-preservational drive”<sup>89</sup>. As he concluded, “these are two facets of Spinozian thought – one casting a sidelong glance towards the all-absorbing might of the absolute, the other focused on the world of finite things, which are observed with a scientist’s rationalist dispassion”<sup>90</sup>.

Kołakowski’s treatment of the antinomies of freedom in Spinoza’s thought can be seen to reflect the philosophical and political dilemma he himself faced several years prior to his emigration from Poland. As a historian of ideas, he pointed out that the duality and inner antinomy of the Spinozian doctrine yielded rich fruit in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and indirectly attributed Spinoza’s influence on Marx and Marxist ideology in Poland to

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 221.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 228.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 228–229.

the specifics of his doctrine's reception in Germany<sup>91</sup>. Kołakowski wrote that the German reception of Spinoza's philosophy, which he presented as pantheistic, or – also without stating it outright – authoritarian, “chose for itself from the philosopher the motive of the whole and the part, the hope for ultimate reconciliation with the absolute through the mystical renouncement of personal self-affirmation”<sup>92</sup>. The originality of Kołakowski's own reception of Spinoza's antinomic truth conception lay in that he recognised the possibility of its opposite influence.

As a Marxist revisionist, or Marxist “Protestant”, Kołakowski distinguished between the Spinozian legacy in German idealism and Spinozianism's “French”, somewhat radical reception, which, as he wrote, “strengthened republican freethought trends, popularised freedom-oriented rhetoric, repeatedly and happily launched forays against the clergy and the church”<sup>93</sup>. In his text, Kołakowski perhaps best expressed his own philosophical standpoint by his desire to salvage both of Spinoza's approaches to freedom. As he said,

the optics of a political radical and the optics of a metaphysicist trying to come to terms with infinite being – two vantage points so apart, that it is truly audacious to accuse philosophy in this respect of inconsistency and not having a comprehensive vision of the world: as if anyone over history had ever managed to lead to the reconciliation of this observational duality, directed both at being and at the object<sup>94</sup>.

Kołakowski's philosophical solidarity with Spinoza, with whom he shared the belief that “the metaphysical eye does not converge with the scientific and political eye”, should doubtless be seen as the reverse side of his political solidarity with the Dutch thinker. In his essay he indicated, that, as in the case of his philosophy, two conflicting threads also existed side by side in Spinoza's political doctrine. Kołakowski also saw two opposing threads in the Spinozian freedom conception viewed as the situation of the individual in relation to social installations, each of which sought its own resolution.

<sup>91</sup> In *Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth* Kołakowski openly stated that, from the point of view of historical tradition, Marx's reflections on “man's practical activity as the factor which determined his conduct as a cognitive being” resembled “certain ideas contained in Spinoza's doctrine”. As he added, however, it was “needless to note that that this strange ‘line’ is a purely conceptual construct and not historical in the strict sense of the term”. Cf. L. Kołakowski, *Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>92</sup> L. Kołakowski, *The Two Eyes of Spinoza...*, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem*.

The political antinomy Kołakowski believed Spinoza's philosophy to be entangled in reflected the conflict between these opposing tendencies, a conflict which also influenced the philosopher's own political views. The words,

the rivalry between two inconsistent tendencies reveals itself here as ceaseless fluctuation between sympathy for the disinherited and contempt for the dark mob with its incalculable reactions; between a desire for broadest tolerance and the need to preserve a stable oligarchy of rational people ungiven to fanaticism or doctrinairism<sup>95</sup>,

seem to apply in equal measure to Spinoza and Kołakowski himself.

### The Other as my equal

Thus, despite their strong anchoring in the era they grew out of, neither Pomian nor Kołakowski treated Descartes' and Spinoza's radical attempts to gain independence from all external authority as facts of a purely historical import. As every philosophy which, as Pomian wrote, "tackled issues which deeply moved people", Cartesian philosophy in his (and Kołakowski's) view contained "a universal element which encouraged its severance from history and treatment as if made by contemporary man"<sup>96</sup>. Pomian himself saw the possibility of renewing the Cartesian question about the "relation between the particularisms of the individual and the universality of science, between the freedom of the inquiring person and the obligatory character of the truths it attained" in Husserl's phenomenology. In the conclusion of his interpretation of Descartes, he stated that in his era it was primarily the *Cartesian Meditations* author who saw "in Cartesianism not a philosophy of the past but an inspiration source"<sup>97</sup>. Thus, Pomian's text can be said to suggest that in communist Poland it was precisely the "expressionistic" interpretation of phenomenology that gave a chance for a theoretical, not only negative but also positive, "qualitative" emancipation from the thoughtless self-evidence

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 228. In Józef Tischner's interpretation of his political stance, Leszek Kołakowski, „was sensitive to human dignity, but not to what was happening to it in Poland. He failed to notice the concreteness of plebeian faith, and had no share in the world outlook of the simple peasant or worker, who knelt in front of an altar on Sunday and by no means felt less human or self-worthy for it. He did not need to believe himself to notice and sense all that, all it required was that he live a Polish life. Kołakowski lived in Poland, but saw it from high above, from a distance". J. Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu*, *op. cit.*, p. 212. For a polemic with Tischner in the matter cf. K. Michalski, *Tischner i Kołakowski*, *op. cit.*, p. 111–124.

<sup>96</sup> K. Pomian, *Descartes: Negative Freedom and the Infinity of Science*, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*.



of the communist party's authority. As he wrote in the closing words of his paper about such emancipation possibly abolishing the ambivalence of an act of liberation and, simultaneously, reason, "only a true act of creation allows to resolve the problems and overcome the antinomies with which thought alone is never able to come to terms with completely"<sup>98</sup>.

Ten years later Kołakowski, already an exile in England, took up this suggestion in his mini-study *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*. In three lectures, he offered an interpretation of the phenomenology idea in which he analysed the goals Husserl set for it, the means he resorted to, and the results that were achieved. Husserl's "endless endeavour", Kołakowski wrote, was to find an answer to the same question which tormented Descartes: "how to discover the unshakable, the absolutely unquestionable foundation of knowledge; how to refute arguments of skeptics, of relativists"<sup>99</sup>. Kołakowski showed the differences in the methodology each adopted to answer this question, but conceded that their findings were similar.

It would be fair to say – Kołakowski wrote – that the destiny of Husserl's project was similar to that of Descartes: His *pars destruens* turned out to be stronger and more convincing than his belief to have discovered an original well of certitude. This seems to be the common lot of philosophers<sup>100</sup>.

In his inquiries into how Cartesian antinomies came to manifest themselves in phenomenology, Kołakowski concluded that the key to Husserl's philosophy lay not so much in "the motive of whole and part", as in the certitude idea itself. As in his earlier writings, in which he outlined this conception as an attempt to attain "consciousness that would only be perfect transparency in relation to its content"<sup>101</sup>, here too he stated that Husserl „took up the Cartesian distinction"<sup>102</sup>. Kołakowski considered Husserl a Cartesian<sup>103</sup> insofar as he asked about "what may be doubted and what may not", and assumed as his task to "destroy apparent certitudes in order to gain "genuine" ones; to cast doubt on everything, in order to free oneself from doubting"<sup>104</sup>. Also Cartesian, in Kołakowski's view, were the antinomies

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>99</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

<sup>101</sup> *Idem*, *Obecność mitu (The Presence of Myth)*, Prószyński i S-ka Publisher, Warsaw 2005, p. 29.

<sup>102</sup> *Idem*, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. *idem*, *Metaphysical Horror*, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>104</sup> *Idem*, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

Husserl was entrapped in. As he expressed it in *Metaphysical Horror*, the philosophical faith Husserl revived, which, “was supposed, once again, to guide us towards the epistemological eschaton” enabled us only to “reach the cognitive Absolute by emptying it of reality”<sup>105</sup>.

Kořakowski saw Husserl’s main merit in that he distilled all the venom contained in Descartes’ question from Cartesian thought. He considered the sense of phenomenology to lie in the radicalisation of the question, which was to entail the liberation of reason from the dictate of not only religious and political authority, but also the authority of science itself. The certitude Husserl sought, Kořakowski wrote, was not – as in pragmatism and positivism – such as is only “practically satisfying”: his quest for certitude was “a pursuit of truth as distinct from the pursuit of technically reliable knowledge”<sup>106</sup>. In Kořakowski’s opinion Husserl’s criticism of scientific objectivism and psychologism in the theory of knowledge strove to bring down the evident certitude of the belief of the science of his day in the “renunciation of ‘truth’ and ‘certitude’ in the traditional sense”<sup>107</sup>, in their metaphysical understanding, for truth as a probability. As he wrote, “Husserl was sure that psychologism ended in skepticism and relativism, that it made science impossible, and that it devastated the entire intellectual legacy of mankind”<sup>108</sup>.

In his discourse Kořakowski observed that the ground for Husserl’s critique of the psychologistic and pragmatistic interpretations of the essence of scientific knowledge had already been cleared by Descartes. Fundamental here, Kořakowski said, was the Cartesian distinction between the subjective feeling of evidence and the objective evidence of truth, and between “moral” (pragmatic) and metaphysical certitude. Both, Kořakowski wrote, turned out to be of little help in bringing Descartes closer to the cognitive Absolute. In the case of the first distinction Kořakowski saw Descartes caught up in a vicious circle because – as already the first *Meditations* critics observed – he “made use of the criterion of evidence in order to prove the existence of God, and then he used God to validate the criterion of evidence”<sup>109</sup>. Also the second distinction between the “practical reliability” and “apodictical unshakability” of judgment assumed “not only the act of cogito but the whole chain of reasoning leading to the divine Founder of Being”<sup>110</sup>. Still, Kořakowski remarked, Husserl was right that it was “useful to go back to

<sup>105</sup> *Idem, Metaphysical Horror, op. cit.*, pp. 60–61.

<sup>106</sup> *Idem, Husserl and the Search for Certitude, op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

Descartes”, as his distinction between moral and metaphysical certitude revealed that

once we gave up the idea of an apodictically certain (and not analytical) truth, we did not need, and we were not capable of building, any concept of truth at all; once we are unable to say how the world is bound to be, we are unable to say how it is, either<sup>111</sup>.

Against this impossibility Husserl’s idea of pure logic and “pure phenomenology” as a method of describing the necessary structures of the world was, according to Kołakowski, convincing in its criticism of faith in the “objectivity” and “coming closer to the truth” of scientific knowledge. Although Kołakowski believed that Husserl, like Descartes, had failed to make a clear distinction between psychological and objective certitude, he saw his merit in radicalising the discourse between empiricism and rationalism (or “transcendentalism”) that had been underway in philosophy since *Discourse on the Method*.

As Kołakowski admitted in other writings, in which he was more critical of the Cartesian reification of *cogito*, the German idealists and Neo-Kantianists did seek ways to ground the autonomy of reason and “metaphysical truth” in transcendental consciousness<sup>112</sup>. Nonetheless, he wrote, “after Leibniz, Husserl’s philosophy was the strongest argument in favour of the statement that from the empiricist point of view the concept of truth is useless, and so is the concept of science as the search for truth”<sup>113</sup>. Phenomenology as such, Kołakowski said, also formulated the strongest argumentation against all forms of scientism, also the kind that “scientific Marxism” attempted to be. At all events, as he wrote in *Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth*, it laid bare the total baselessness of Marx’s thesis that

<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>112</sup> In his article *The Scopal and Functional Understanding of Philosophy* Leszek Kołakowski distinguished “four main proposals regarding the place of philosophy in the entirety of cognitive activities”: scientific, transcendental, traditional and functional. About the transcendental proposal he wrote: “whereas the first proposal [scientific] attempts to assign to philosophy [...] its own research field to thus place it in the hierarchy of scholarly specialisation and simultaneously demand from it all commonly binding scholarly rigours, the transcendental proposal strives to characterise philosophical thought not so much through a separate scope as through a specific method; this method not only equals the research rigours of other fields in precision and reliability but surpasses them, as it demands putting a question mark on assumptions which in other fields of thought must be accepted *a priori* as evident”. L. Kołakowski, *Zakresowe i funkcjonalne rozumienie filozofii (The Scopal and Functional Understanding of Philosophy)*, [in:] *idem, Kultura i fetysze, op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>113</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude, op. cit.*, p. 28.

“human cognition, while incapable of absolute and ultimate mastery of its object, comes close to it in constant and progressing evolution”<sup>114</sup>.

Thus on one hand Kołakowski saw the essence of his “negative dependence” on Husserl in his acceptance of the critical findings of the Husserlian search for certitude. “I believe – he declared – “that whoever consistently rejects the transcendentalist idea is bound to reject not only the ‘absolute truth’ but the truth *tout court*, not only the certitude as something already gained but the certitude as a hope as well”<sup>115</sup>. On the other, however, he claimed to be negatively influenced by Husserl and was critical about Husserl’s faith in the possibility of discovering the primal source of certitude. Where in Kołakowski’s belief a transcendentalist like Husserl forced the empiricist to “renounce the concept of truth” in the name of cohesion, the empiricist – as he claimed after Hobbes and Gassendi – “compels the transcendentalist to confess that in order to save the belief in Reason, he is in duty bound to admit a kingdom of beings (or quasibeings) he cannot justify”<sup>116</sup>.

Kołakowski’s main object in this study was not Husserl as such, who – as he himself admitted – appeared in it only as “a pretext for discussing the question of certainty”<sup>117</sup>, one nonetheless feels tempted to seek after a possible deeper sense behind this negative dependence. In making the certitude concept the key to the phenomenology idea, in focusing on certitude’s phenomenological forays into “pure consciousness” (i.e. the partial particularism of the individual), Kołakowski did not lose sight of its relation to the whole, which for Descartes and Spinoza, but also Husserl himself, was the universal character of science. Alongside the problem of the “bridge” between consciousness and the world, which could not be resolved either by Cartesianism or phenomenology, Kołakowski in his study saw the main argument for the futility of Husserl’s search for certitude in its incommunicability.

Certainly – Kołakowski wrote – all contents are incommunicable. But validity in human knowledge is granted only to what is communicable in language (at least in science), and the experience of certitude in Husserl’s sense appears as incommunicable as a mystical experience<sup>118</sup>.

<sup>114</sup> *Idem, Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth*, [in:] *idem, Kultura i fetysze*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>115</sup> *Idem, Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, *op. cit.*, pp. 28–29.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 26.

Thus, the true “expressionism” of Kołakowski’s interpretation of Husserl’s philosophy appeared to manifest itself in its confrontation with Descartes’ opening statement in *Discourse on the Method*, that “the power of judging aright and of distinguishing truth from error [...] is by nature equal in all men”<sup>119</sup>. Because Kołakowski noticed the basic antinomy of the phenomenology conception in the incompatibility of Husserl’s two slogans – “back to the things themselves” and “philosophy should be a rigorous science”. In Kołakowski’s belief it was impossible to simultaneously fulfil the two quite separate desires for immediacy and “being scientific” on the ground of phenomenology. According to Kołakowski, insofar as Husserl believed the phenomenological method enabled him to reach “the things themselves” as direct objects of intellectual intuition, he could not simultaneously maintain that the certitude he thought to have discovered was “universally valid – valid for any rational being and accessible to everybody”<sup>120</sup>.

Kołakowski argued that the return “back to the things themselves” and the necessary relations between them, in which the ideal structure of the world uncovered by phenomenology was to be grounded, was, according to Husserl, possible because of the radicalisation of Cartesianism’s methodical doubting. Kołakowski believed this radicalisation accompanied the suspension, in an act of reduction, of the transcendental evident certitude of faith in the existence of not just the world, but also the substantial ego itself, as *res cogitans*. To Husserl, Kołakowski pointed out, the doubtlessness of metaphysical certitude could be attributed in this way only to the world as a phenomenon of “transcendental” consciousness, which, as “not in this world”, was to be its unshakable fundament, but not so much in a reified form as in intentional reference to it. From the position of phenomenology, which radicalised the Cartesian method, the ego, Kołakowski said, not only was no substance, but was “actual only as directed toward something”<sup>121</sup>. Because “the Ego is known only as the ‘substratum’ of acts”, Kołakowski pointed out, consciousness and the world, “Ego and object together have no other name, which encompasses them both, than transcendental consciousness”<sup>122</sup>.

In his study Kołakowski posed a number of commonly known “school-book” objections against this transcendental reduction which was to enable Husserl to return back to “the things”. In the earlier footsteps of Etienne Gilson and other Thomists, among them the Catholic Husserl critic Quentin

<sup>119</sup>R. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, PROJECT GUTENBERG-tm etext, Project Gutenberg, Illinois Benedictine College, p. 5.

<sup>120</sup>L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>121</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 68.

<sup>122</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 69.

Laurer, he pointed to its not only methodic but also inevitably ontological, “dogmatically idealistic” character. Kołakowski considered it doubtful whether it “uncovered a new unquestionable sphere of being”<sup>123</sup>, and argued that with the reduction of the world to an “achievement” of transcendental consciousness “the ‘provisory’ brackets imposed on the problem of existence become an undestructible wall”<sup>124</sup>. Kołakowski built on these doubts in the later *Metaphysical Horror*, where he remarked that

it is not at all clear what has been saved by Husserl from the ego and what is ego-ist in this relic; neither do we know what is conscious in the transcendently reduced consciousness [...]. Ego seems to be no more than an empty recipient of derealised phenomena or a sheer movement of intention, an act without actor<sup>125</sup>.

Kołakowski also pointed his “schoolbook” criticism against the eidetic reduction idea. Husserl’s belief that he had discovered in it a reliable method of bringing out the invariable elements of experiencing the world and the basis for describing the world as it at had to be was for Kołakowski a sign of the same “intellectual conceit” which in the eyes of French traditionalist Luis de Bonald underlay Cartesian faith in the authority of evidence. Kołakowski conceded that many of Husserl’s comments about our perception and imagination grasping something universal appeared well-grounded, but he held this grounding for illusory, because the object of phenomenology’s description of the world were not, as Husserl believed, universal values which the phenomenologist discovered directly in the world, but rather the linguistically-mediated content he put into it. “It seems hardly possible, as Husserl appears to believe, that we could go back to the intellectual innocence of a newborn baby and still remain phenomenologists”, wrote Kołakowski.

Once we decide to start analyzing the ‘essence’ of something, we have always to deal with the sedimentation of secular experiences of mankind and these experiences, though historically explainable, do not carry any logical necessity<sup>126</sup>.

Kołakowski saw the “darkest” side of Husserl’s philosophy in his belief in the possibility of a universal community of intellectually and morally autonomous egos, or, in the worlds of the *Cartesian Meditations*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>125</sup> *Idem*, *Metaphysical Horror*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>126</sup> *Idem*, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

author himself, an intersubjective transcendental community<sup>127</sup>. According to Kołakowski, it was precisely this philosophy's inability to validate on its own grounds the experience of an alter ego equal to me in rationality that made it impossible to speak about phenomenology as a universally valid "rigorous science". He treated Husserl's answer to the question how other people capable of recognising the metaphysical truths uncovered by eidetic reduction as equally obligatory could exist in light of the world's reduction to an intended phenomenon of transcendental awareness as "another example of the logical hopelessness of all philosophical endeavours which start from subjectivity and try to restore the path toward the common world"<sup>128</sup>. Insofar as Husserl believed that by suspending faith in the reality of the world and the ego itself he "opened the way toward certitude in the sense of knowledge that is entirely independent of our status as biologically, culturally, and historically determined beings"<sup>129</sup>, Kołakowski argued, he must have considered as absurd not only the conception of "things", but also of other "in themselves" equalling him in the ability to distinguish between truth and human falsehood.

Thus, in Kołakowski's eyes not only Descartes' but also Husserl's radical attempt at liberation from all external authority and the subjective sense of their evidence had its price. As he wrote, "it is plausible to suspect, on the basis of the development of the European philosophy from Descartes onward, that if we start with *Cogito*, we can reconstruct the world only as somehow correlated with subjectivity, unless we use some logically spurious devices like Descartes' divine veracity or Leibniz' pre-established harmony"<sup>130</sup>. The price for Husserl's strivings to salvage the concept of truth, whose purpose was the discovery the unshakable, absolutely certain course of cognition without resort to these means, was, in Kołakowski's opinion, the necessity to concede that the final content of certitude is incommunicable<sup>131</sup>. Thus, Husserl's transcendentalism, based on consciousness which is not in the world and exists independently of human psychology, biology and history, was for Kołakowski "mystical rationalism": a transcendental polytheistic project which defied common sense and in which "to gain such an independence amounts to gaining the position of Gods"<sup>132</sup>.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, transl. Dorion Cairns, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague 1982.

<sup>128</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, *op. cit.*, s. 79.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 81.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 82.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 83.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 81.

It seems, however, that what also had its price was expressionist historiographer Kołakowski's skepticism towards the Cartesian quest for certitude. By revealing the "religious background" of Descartes' and Husserl's efforts to grasp the evidence of metaphysical truth in an act of intuition, by recognising these efforts as the expression of "a desire to live in a world out of which contingency is banned, where sense (and this means purpose) is given to everything"<sup>133</sup>, Kołakowski also sentenced his own thought to submission to the evidence of authority, whose recognition (or rejection) "cannot really justify itself and remains in the end an arbitrary decision"<sup>134</sup>. In his exile-written study he presented his faith in the values of "our human culture", about which he wrote that "its richness lies in this mutual incompatibility of its elements", and that it was sustained "by a conflict of values rather than their harmony", as his own choice. However, insofar as for Kołakowski the freedom of this choice remained a strictly negative freedom, which, he said, not only equalled his rationality, but in which also "the freedom of the other is not a fact to be conclusively drawn from any valid description"<sup>135</sup>, it is difficult to say what underlay his faith in its being "ours".



According to Józef Tischner, who followed this ambiguity, decisive in Kołakowski's schematic "schoolbook" approach to Cartesian philosophy was his one-sided and essentially positivist interpretation of Descartes' argument about divine truthfulness. Kołakowski, Tischner said, who primarily saw the epistemological meaning of Fyodor Dostoyevski's remark that "if there is no God, everything is permitted" – i.e. the idea that "the use of the term 'truth', and the belief that 'truth' can be justifiably stated about our knowledge, is valid only upon the assumption of the absolute Mind"<sup>136</sup> – had failed to bring to the surface all that Descartes' proposal contained<sup>137</sup>.

In Tischner's opinion Kołakowski failed to notice that the reasoning of the *Meditations* author, according to which confidence in our cognitive powers rested on divine truthfulness, stemmed from a tradition still familiar with the idea, forgotten by contemporary science, that the character of thought was dialogical and not only objective. Tischner pointed out that in referring

<sup>133</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85.

<sup>135</sup> *Idem*, *Obecność mitu (The Presence of Myth)*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>136</sup> *Idem*, *Bóg rezonerów (The God of Reasoners)*, [in:] *idem*, *Jeśli Boga nie ma*, "Aneks" Publisher, London 1987, s. 55 (cf. L. Kołakowski, *Religion: If There Is No God*, St. Augustine's Press 2001).

<sup>137</sup> J. Tischner, *Kołakowski i Kartezjusz*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.



to the idea of God as an infinitely perfect being Cartesian philosophy did not proceed from one “property” of being to another, but, like Plato’s and St. Augustine’s “metaphysics of light”, stated that the mainstay of truth was the concept of good. “Descartes’ metaphysics – Tischner explained – attempts to put good above being and make it a measure of being. As a measure of being, good is also a measure of cognition, as in order for the cognition of truth to be possible at all there must be the possibility of exchanging thoughts with the Truthful One”<sup>138</sup>.

From Kołakowski’s point of view this argumentation appears unjustified insofar as in his Husserl study he admitted himself that Descartes “was probably right in stating that this was only thanks to divine omniscience and to trust in His veracity that the foundation of certitude could be discovered”<sup>139</sup>. Kołakowski agreed that “nothing [is] certain unless we believe in the beneficent will of God, which prevents the devil from leading us systematically into error”<sup>140</sup>. However, in keeping with the standpoint he already professed in *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, he said that “the spiritual structure within which this ‘desire for truth’ appears independently of its applications and possible usefulness for material or social technology is homologous with the spiritual structure of myth”<sup>141</sup>. Thus, the justification of the validity of this desire by the argument that “the epistemological absolute is indeed impossible without the ontological absolute, which combines the quality of being a self-supporting ground of the world with perfect wisdom and perfect goodness”<sup>142</sup>, was to him “as good” as any other justification.

There were, however, also some more “Cartesian” motives behind Kołakowski’s reluctance to concede to Tischner’s “agathology” – which Tischner himself claimed was also conclusive with regard to the Cartesian *philosophia prima* project – creating the possibility of resolving the antinomies in which he believed all modern thought to be caught. Although in his *Philosophy of Drama* Tischner accompanied his acceptance of the “axiomatic” character of good with the observation that it was not a pre-assumed “axiom of the mind” which could not be doubted, and wrote that, “if it really is to be good, good cannot be contrived by reason but must be experienced”<sup>143</sup>, Kołakowski could not accept his claim that for Descartes,

<sup>138</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.

<sup>139</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>141</sup> *Idem*, *Prawda i prawdomówność jako wartości kultury (Truth and Truthfulness as Values of Culture)*, [in:] *idem*, *Kultura i fetysze*, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>142</sup> *Idem*, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, *op. cit.*, s. 37.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. J. Tischner, *Filozofia dramatu (The Philosophy of Drama)*, Paris 1990, p. 91.

“the truthful God is closer to us in our thoughts than we are to ourselves”<sup>144</sup>, because from his point of view only a chosen few experienced this closeness in immediate and irrefutable intuition. As Tischner himself said, “No one has ever seen God, but He has faithful witnesses thanks to whom a bond with God is possible”<sup>145</sup>. In his insistence on the authority of evidence in this respect – in a silent protest against the rapidly rising evidence of these witnesses’ authority in Poland – Kołakowski was (and remained) a “Cartesian”.



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<sup>144</sup>J. Tischner, *Kołakowski i Kartezjusz*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>145</sup>*Ibidem*.