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Evolution of Polish Marxist Thought on the Example of the Philosophy of Leszek Kołakowski

ABSTRACT: The task of interpreting Karl Marx's thought has been taken up by a number of contemporary Polish philosophers. Their interpretations have been variously modified on different planes. However, the modification proposed by Leszek Kołakowski is the only one to have presented two diametrically different ways of approaching Marxism. The present paper traces the evolution of Kołakowski's views on. It explores the motives underlying the evolution process. The concluding section proposes a theoretical perspective that accounts for the outlined motives.

KEYWORDS: Leszek Kołakowski • Karol Marks • religion • absolute • freedom • communism • metaphysics

A mortal should think mortal thoughts,
not immortal thoughts.

Epicarmos

1. Marxism as the “wind of great hope”

The 1950s was a period marked by high interest in the interpretation and development of the Marxist thought among many Polish philosophers. The faith in Marxism and its constructive impact on the process of constructing a new and desirable social order was so intense that at times it verged on fundamentalism. The attitude is clearly reflected in the early works by Leszek Kołakowski. The fundamentalist mindset means that the “believer” always stands on a firm ground defined by the approval for the advocated tenets on the one hand, and indisputable criticism on the other.

1.1 Critique of religion

As Marx in his early works¹, Kołakowski directs his critique against the Catholic religion as a form of culture which serves as an instrumental vehicle of shaping the social consciousness. Kołakowski puts forth two main arguments against religion. One of them has a historiosophical basis, and involves a critique against Catholic historians who are held responsible for the monopolization of the European philosophical culture during the Middle Ages. Marxist philosophical historiography must

expose the falsity of theories which view the entire European philosophical thought of the feudal period as a uniform stream of orthodoxy; highlight the seeds of materialism and rationalism germinating in that thought, and the processes supporting the liberation of science from the pressure of theology and religion; and uncover medieval progressive, anti-feudalist and anti-ecclesiastical movements which blazed the trail for the future development of the materialist and atheist philosophy of modern times².

Another major task facing the Marxist philosophical historiography, Kołakowski argues, is to overcome the “false and reactionary tendency” which narrows down the entire body of knowledge contributed by medieval philosophical studies to the culture of Western countries which remained under a profound influence of the Roman Catholic Church. One should not belittle or, worse still, ignore the substantial and valuable contribution made to philosophy by Oriental thinkers who are often – unjustifiably – regarded solely as imitators of creative Western thought³.

The other, much graver, charge levelled by Kołakowski against the Catholic religion is grounded in a moral perspective. The Roman Catholic Church is subject to the downright accusation that “throughout nearly all of its history, it has been a stumbling block to mental progress, a hotbed of ignorance, a vehicle of intellectual and moral barbarization, a tool of mental and social oppression of humans”. Any progress that was achieved in the Middle Ages, Kołakowski adds, happened “in defiance of the Church and in the face of its ruthless opposition”⁴.

¹ Marx asserts that “the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism”. K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction*, [in:] K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works*, Warszawa 1962, vol. 1, p. 457.

² L. Kołakowski, *Wykłady o filozofii średniowiecznej [Lectures on Medieval Philosophy]*, Warszawa 1956, p. 6.

³ Compare *ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 131–132.

In order to delve more deeply into the notion of morality, Kołakowski contrasts Catholicism with humanism. The philosopher argues that the classification of a moral doctrine as humanist hinges on its compliance with six fundamental criteria⁵: 1) Does it acknowledge that man is the proper source of moral evaluations, values and orders? 2) Does it acknowledge that broadly understood human matters are the superior criterion of moral evaluation? 3) Does it acknowledge that man is the proper and superior object of the conduct which is amenable to a moral evaluation at all? 4) Does it acknowledge that man is capable of attaining moral excellence or at least elevating it to a very high level through his own effort? 5) Does it acknowledge that the value achieved by man, and human dignity, have their origin in man himself? 6) Does it acknowledge that man represents the highest value or, using Kant's words, man for morality is an end in itself?

Positive answers to all the questions listed, Kołakowski asserts, can be recognized as a necessary – though insufficient – precondition for humanist morality. Kołakowski believes that such morality can only be constructed within the framework of secular theories of morality. “The sense of the historically construed notion of humanism has always, since the very beginning of its history, been anti-religious, secular and earthly”⁶. The Catholic doctrine, however, will provide negative answers to all the six questions because “it is not man, but God, who is the source of moral evaluations and orders. [...] For the Catholic doctrine, the object of moral conduct is not man but God, and it is a sin to do anything with respect to man as an end in himself”⁷.

An important category used by Kołakowski to depreciate the Catholic doctrine is the notion of authority. The concept is a key constituent of communal existence. It allows the acceptance of certain truths without a need for

⁵ Compare L. Kołakowski, *Katolicyzm i humanizm [Catholicism and Humanism]*, [in:] L. Kołakowski, *Światopogląd i życie codzienne [Ideology and Everyday Life]*, Warszawa 1956, pp. 143–144.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 144–145. Kołakowski does not deny that there are certain standards governing communal life which have been in existence in multiple normative systems – including a number of Christian writings – for many centuries. Since the dawn of history, both religious and secular doctrines have praised humility and condemned vanity, valued courage and despised cowardice. They have also told children to take on the burden of care for their infirm parents, and ordered community members to keep to their promises, and refrain from harassing the vulnerable. Such rules, Kołakowski asserts, are not associated specifically with the Christian spirit. They can be found in doctrines formulated by Socrates, Epicurus and Buddha – and in customs practised by many primitive peoples. The fact that some moral obligations are shared by many cultures does not stem from them being innate. They are in place, Kołakowski stresses, as a “precondition for the existence of communal life in its very diverse forms”. *Ibidem*, p. 150.

their constant verification and confirmation. Nevertheless, as Kołakowski highlights, there are two cases in which “faith in authorities becomes an intolerable and abominable degradation of man, and tyranny over the human mind”⁸. This happens when people are expected to trust that an authority is, in the literal sense, the ultimate criterion of the truth – even though experience contradicts this claim; and when people are demanded to believe solely on the basis of the authority in truths which are essentially non-verifiable in any other way. Both cases, Kołakowski claims, characterize the Catholic doctrine.

The religious authority depraves and degrades the human mind not because it represents an authority, but because it orders people to believe in non-verifiable and uncontrollable truths, and because it excludes *a priori* the possibility of applying any methods that could potentially prove the authority wrong. [...] However, the debasement of the mind is even deeper. The Catholic doctrine assumes that there are elements of the revelation which people are obliged to recognize as truths despite the fact that it is essentially impossible to grasp their sense. Catholicism thus requires people to embrace certain beliefs whose meaning is inaccessible to mortals⁹.

Kołakowski invokes multiple examples which, in his view, clearly point to the degradation of the mind within the Catholic doctrine. He frequently refers to works by Thomas Aquinas. For example, he notes that

the aim of the Thomistic philosophy is to create metaphysical justifications for the postulate of absolute obedience to the Church and, through it, to the regime sanctified by the Church. Thomism seeks to establish the role and the value of people in the world in a manner that makes them subordinate to the Church: the Church is like a cashier through whose agency human beings pay off their debts owed to the Almighty. The sole thing that needs to be done then is debiting people’s metaphysical accounts with amounts which could never be paid off, and which, consequently, turn people into compliant slaves to the invisible creator and his visible agents¹⁰.

An advocate of humanism, Kołakowski sternly opposes the subordination of man to the divine will. The philosopher places an emphasis on the human mind and its cognitive faculties.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 153.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 153–154.

¹⁰ L. Kołakowski, *O tak zwanym realizmie tomistycznym* [On the So-Called Thomistic Realism], [in:] *Idem, Szkice z filozofii katolickiej* [Sketches on Catholic Philosophy], Warszawa 1955, p. 73. Also see p. 117.

When Kołakowski discusses the Catholic religion in his works published in 1955–1957, he tends to somewhat uncritically seek arguments justifying Marx's tenet that

religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness¹¹.

The author of *Catholicism and Humanism* states outright that, „Catholicism practised on a social scale, accounted for in its moral function, is usually a system of magical means of calming consciences and absolving from moral responsibility rather than a catalyst of social progress – even within the scope of elementary everyday morality. Everything thus leads to the view that the situation conforms to the requirements of institutional Catholicism, i.e. the Church”¹². Kołakowski perceives Thomism as a doctrine which uproots man from the historical process of human evolution and embeds him into the holy history which is no longer dependent on human effort and in which an individual human being is no longer a subject.

1.2. Nature as a “product of man entangled in history”

Kołakowski's critique of religion is levelled from the reformist perspective. The philosopher assumes that it is possible to reform social life by means of the Marxist philosophy which takes man, who is entangled in history, as its point of reference. The conscious subject of human history is the socially shaped human being. Contrary to Pascal's wager, the meaning of a person's life is only referred to the finite world. The finite world abounds in situations which render people powerless. They are inevitable. Furthermore, they are not amenable to alteration and, therefore, they must be accepted. For example, people cannot choose to live at a different time in history than the one in which they are born – or make the dead come back to life. However “the meaning of life is greater when fewer situations are considered inevitable and, at the same time, when unquestionable inevitabilities are more resolutely affirmed”¹³.

¹¹ K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction*, p. 458.

¹² L. Kołakowski, *Katolicyzm i humanizm...*, p. 158.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 156.

When accepting the latter, however, one should not too rashly accept anything as inevitable. It is crucial to know that people operate both in the domain of things which are inevitable and things which are modifiable and adjustable. Kołakowski argues that one of the chief motives giving sense to endeavours undertaken by an individual human being is to make history rational, i.e. explain it on the basis of sources documenting the current state, and interpret it in the categories of future states. Hence communism, as a future state

lived in the individual consciousness and assimilated not simply as one of many constituents of individual existence, but as an integral component which thoroughly transforms the chemistry of personality, and imbues life with the most intensive sense of meaningfulness there is. The communist consciousness represents not only a rationalization of human history but, above that, an obligation to participate in its transitions – and responsibility for its progression. [...] The communist consciousness becomes the consciousness of active coexistence with history. It is the human consciousness *par excellence* because it makes life meaningful not through robust and direct assimilation similar to that exemplified by termites living in their mounds – crucially, termites do not ponder about the meaning of life – but through assimilation mediated by reflection, gained via intellectual effort which restores the connection with life through its understanding¹⁴.

It follows that despite being subject to specific inevitabilities, human life still has a certain degree of “malleability” which renders possible the humanization of the world. The world thus acquires a human dimension, and exists as a product moulded by people who are entangled in history.

A manifestation of Kołakowski’s deep conviction about the possibility of interpreting Marxism in a way that sees nature not as a reality that is independent of human beings but as a human product is Marx’s series of notes *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts from 1844*¹⁵. Aside from the general theory of human alienation, the *Manuscripts* contain an epistemological reflection that is very relevant to the Marxist thought. A point of departure for that reflection is the idea of *humanized nature*. Kołakowski directly asks the question: “in what sense can nature, of which man – in Marx’s framework – is undeniably a product, be interpreted as an alienation of man or an alienated man: in other words – in what sense can a part of nature

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 193–195.

¹⁵ K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, [in:] K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works...*, vol. 1, p. 628.

regard it as its own part?"¹⁶. An answer to this question is supposed to be yielded by the concept in which man as a cognitive being is only a part of complete man, i.e. a being that realizes itself throughout history as a species.

Marx, Kołakowski points out, defines cognition in functional terms. Cognition is thought to be a derivative of the process in which man gradually internalizes the outside world, i.e. organizes the raw material of nature for the purpose of satisfying his needs. People do not explore the outside world on the basis of disinterested data of their consciousness. No contemplative consciousness is ever possible. This is because consciousness arises out of practical needs. Cognition is just a means which can make such practical needs fulfilled. It only becomes possible when nature is approached as something that puts up resistance and hinders the fulfilment of human needs. A prerequisite for cognition is the

realization of convergence between the conscious man and the external resistance which he encounters: this very relationship is the only object which can be intellectually mastered by man, with the stipulation that it is fundamentally futile to expect that man, through making himself independent of both components of this relationship, will be able to cognize pure self, i.e. himself as an autonomous consciousness; or pure externality, i.e. existence in itself which is not given to anyone, though it is given and reflected in the imaginary contemplative consciousness¹⁷.

Therefore, consciousness emerges when man – while seeking to fulfil his practical needs – is confronted with opposition from nature. The opposition then becomes a problem requiring resolution. The world of things is not given “moulded” according to any natural classification immanently embedded in it. Quite the opposite, it undergoes constant changes because of the human need to practically control the natural environment. The classification of the world of things arising in this way is a result of practical reason which is inseparable from theoretical reason. Perpetuating the distinction between the two types of reason makes no sense. In his interpretations of Marx’s early works, Kołakowski underscores the fundamental difference between Marxism and cognitive realism coming from the Aristotelian tradition. The latter states that the species and genera into which sciences divide reality are only copies of the species and genera of that reality. It is these copies that are reflected in human consciousness.

¹⁶ L. Kołakowski, *Karol Marks i klasyczna definicja prawdy* [Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth], [in:] *idem, Kultura i fetysze* [Culture and Fetishes], Warszawa 1967, p. 50.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

Humanized nature does not know substantial forms which are inherent to it or given in advance, before they arise as a result of work of human (hence social) consciousness on the intellectual organization of matter, the work being necessary for the practical organization of that matter. When people have a sufficient amount of free time to take up the effort of epistemological reflection, the main outcomes of their work are already there, and have been there for a long time: it is the biological apparatus of human cognition¹⁸.

It follows that all reflection on things experienced by man is a consequence of man's need to adapt to the world of things and to modify it by useful transformations.

Although Kołakowski warns to avoid in Marx's epistemology those Kantian inspirations which are associated with cognitive agnosticism, he also admits that both German philosophers share the tenet that an object cannot be cognized otherwise than through the cognizing subject. Kołakowski adds that the "subject" in Marxism can only be understood as social subject¹⁹, while "objects" are not – contrary to Kant – put in opposition to the metaphysical world about which we know only two things: that it exists and that it is different from the material world because it is liberated from spatial and temporal determinations. The world according to Marx cannot be other than material because only in this form it is capable of offering resistance to human effort²⁰.

In Marx's philosophy, Kołakowski affirms, man replaces God the Creator – though not in the sense of Augustinian or Thomistic God who creates the world out of nothingness but rather God as it is presented by Averroists: as an organizer of the world from already existing matter. The substitution of God the Creator with man, however, does not lead to positive atheism which assumes that there is no God. Marx's theory of cognition stipulating that the world is shaped by man abolishes God, at the same time abolishing atheism. God's agency is then no longer needed, invalidating the frequently asked question of whether the world was created by someone from outside the world.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 54. Kołakowski calls attention to essential differences existing between the epistemology proposed by Marx and that formulated by Engels and Lenin who maintained that human cognition consists of an increasingly detailed copying of the world that is external to that cognition. Lenin stated outright that impressions copy objects of the external world. See W. I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Warszawa 1949, chapter 2. Marx's epistemology is in some points convergent with a current in the sociology of knowledge which is referred to as constructivism or post-constructivism. Since the 1980s, the current has largely dominated philosophical and sociological reflection on cognition.

¹⁹ That is, a subject that remains associated with a number of variable components of history: historical times, social classes or political settings.

²⁰ Compare L. Kołakowski, *Karol Marks i klasyczna definicja prawdy*, pp. 58–59.

“Discovering the world as a product of man is, in its essence, an act of a *quasi-cogito* which does not require justification by any further rationales because it is not a theoretical thesis but a state of social consciousness reinforcing its own autonomy; once achieved, freedom requires no validation: it can defend itself from threats, but finding rationales is a task of those who jeopardize it”²¹.

In his analysis of Marx’s *Manuscripts*, Kołakowski points out that the text contains a concept of epistemology that is not philosophically barren, and seems worthy of philosophical continuation. Such continuation, however, should be free from the theory of alienation commonly invoked by Marxists – because of Marx’s utopian-sounding thesis viewing communism as a social system which, through the positive elimination of private ownership, automatically entails the abolition of human alienation in general²².

The concept of man’s practical actions as a foundation of human cognitive faculties, which arises from Marx’s early studies is, in a sense, close to the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, Kołakowski claims. One of the core assumptions of Spinozism is the opposition between the world held to consist of one substance and the world consisting of parts. In actual reality, only the former is a concrete entity in the proper sense. In contrast, elements of the latter world represent abstract fictions which are construed in order to fulfil the needs of daily life. The very idea of nature as an entity comprising multiple individual elements which are artificially abstracted from the whole for the purpose of satisfying man’s practical needs and enabling man to control nature is, Kołakowski stipulates, a fundamental thesis of Marx’s epistemology. The author of *Manuscripts* explains human cognition as a function of the continuous dialogue taking place between human needs and objects of nature that render it possible to fulfil these needs. The dialogue, which is referred to as labour, creates both the humankind and the external world²³. This is why one can state that “in all the universe man cannot find a well so deep that, leaning over it, he does not discover at the bottom his own face”²⁴. It thus follows that the anthropological – or rather anthropocentric – perspective becomes an integral constituent of every attempt to interpret all objects existing in the world²⁵.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

²² Compare *ibidem*, pp. 79–80. Also see K. Marx, *Manuscripts...*, p. 577.

²³ The definition of labour proposed by Marx is marked by an almost Promethean faith in the power of man – the creator who is capable of mastering nature. Compare K. Marx, *Capital*, pp. 205–206, [in:] K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 23, pp. 205–206.

²⁴ L. Kołakowski, *Kultura i fetysze [Culture and Fetishes]...*, p. 80.

²⁵ Kołakowski emphasizes that his interpretation of Marx’s epistemology is fundamentally consistent with the interpretation proposed by Antonio Gramsci. Crucially, both interpretations were developed independently of each other. Another important note is that

2. Marxism as a caricature of classical philosophy

That eternal and infinite being we call
God or nature acts by the same necessity
as that by which it exists.

Spinoza

Kołakowski draws attention to the restricted scope of the analogy between Marxism and Spinozism. He highlights that the basic thought underlying Spinoza's doctrine is expressed in the statement that aside from practical determinants of intellectual labour there also exists knowledge which, using Kantian terms, makes it possible to penetrate into reality itself. Spinoza assumes the existence of a metaphysical world. The philosopher argues that there is a world which pre-exists "in itself" and which one "would like to grasp in the hopeless effort to overcome oneself as a human"²⁶. For Marx, however, recognizing the existence of such a world is an internally contradictory thought. Marxist metaphysics is plainly impossible. The world discussed by the author of *Manuscripts* is a world co-created by humans, a world marked by a "constant interference between the needs of the social man and the natural environment as a potential source of their fulfilment"²⁷. For Marx, things exist insofar as they can be utilized in the process of satisfying practical needs. This is what makes Marx a metaphysical antirealist. Spinoza, on the other hand, must be seen as a metaphysical realist. Following a meticulous reading of the works by both philosophers Kołakowski gradually departs from metaphysical antirealism towards metaphysical realism.

Kołakowski's early texts devoted to Marxism focused to a major extent on analyzing the social practice of people viewed as beings who are conscious about the fulfilment of obligations stemming from their co-participation in communal life. In the capitalist system, these obligations lead – mostly due to the alienation of labour – to the reification of man's personal life. What people are, Kołakowski invokes Marx's tenet, depends "on the material conditions of their production"²⁸. Consequently, consciousness "can never be anything other than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life process"²⁹. Personality is not given to man in a primary act of self-knowledge

the Italian philosopher formulated his interpretation of Marxism with the omission of *Manuscripts* which were Kołakowski's main source of reference. Compare A. Gramsci, *Pisma wybrane*, Warszawa 1961, vol. 1, pp. 126–127, 131–132, 133, 151.

²⁶ L. Kołakowski, *Karol Marks i klasyczna definicja prawdy*, p. 64.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

²⁸ K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, [in:] K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works...*, vol. 3, p. 22.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

which remains independent of social determinants affecting the individual. Man's personality as a social fact takes shape in acts of interhuman communication and only then, thanks to them, becomes a fact of self-knowledge for itself³⁰. However, the social nature of individuality does not mean that the individual is fully moulded by situations that are external to it, and its consciousness comes down to being just a secondary product of such situations. The essence of the social nature of individuality is rather about creating such conditions for mutual relations between individuals that will not be external to the individual but, instead, will be absorbed by the individual as constituents of his individuality. The conditions are enslaving the individual and reduce him to communal averageness for as long as "social life is only realized in reified forms, private life remains a private self-sufficiency"³¹. In the conditions of class society

the communal relationship into which the individuals of a class entered, and which was determined by their common interests over against a third party, was always a community to which these individuals belonged only as average individuals, only insofar as they lived within the conditions of existence of their class – a relationship in which they participated not as individuals but as members of a class. With the community of revolutionary proletarians, on the other hand, who take their conditions of existence and those of all members of society under their control, it is just the reverse; it is as individuals that the individuals participate in it³².

Kołodkowski claims that communism as a classless society for Marx should represent liberation from the superiority of things which reduces personal action through the division of labour. Marx postulated that the division of labour should be abolished, whereupon comprehensively developing individuals would absorb their own life conditions. This, ultimately, would lead to social development becoming an expression of proper harmony between the individual's essence and existence. Kołodkowski, however, dismisses such postulates as entirely utopian, making an outright statement that "the division of labour and specialization not only fail to exhibit any inclination to decline but in fact they reinforce their dominance in the most compelling and imperative forms"³³.

³⁰ Compare L. Kołodkowski, „Cogito”, *materializm historyczny, ekspresyjna interpretacja osobowości* [in:] L. Kołodkowski, *Kultura i fetysze...*, pp. 111–113.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

³² K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology...*, pp. 83–84.

³³ L. Kołodkowski, „Cogito”, *materializm historyczny, ekspresyjna interpretacja osobowości...*, p. 115.

Through the juxtaposition of Marx and Spinoza, Kołakowski brings into focus a number of ideas that are shared by both thinkers. They are, Kołakowski writes, mostly related to the problem of man's freedom as an understood necessity³⁴. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between the positions advanced by the German and Dutch philosophers. The former considers the topic of man's freedom from the viewpoint of practical needs, while the latter focuses his attention on the needs of the spiritual kind. According to Marx, the evolution of human history is determined by necessary social and historical laws. The laws, particularly two of them, determine the transformation from one social system to another. One of them is concerned with the correspondence between the productive relations and the nature of productive forces, which means that the factor controlling social development is the way of gaining means of living, i.e. the manner of producing material goods. The second law, in turn, highlights the conformity between the manner of production (material base) and the state of social consciousness (superstructure). For the author of the *Manuscripts* human knowledge – just like desires, values, perceptions, i.e. all the content of consciousness – is a product of man's social and historical existence. In other words, people cannot liberate themselves from situations in which they are the object of their practical actions. Referring to Hegel, Marx identifies the sense of history with the history's final state in which man achieves full freedom, e.g. reconciliation of being with existence, with the abolition of all randomness of human existence. What is regarded as randomness in pre-communist social systems – and falsely referred to as freedom – is but a manifestation of the power of reified forces over man. The eradication of these reifying forces removes the randomness of human existence. "Man's absolute being will realize itself entirely in the actual being, through which the latter will cease to be an accidental being and in its individuality will realize the common being of humanity, and in its freedom – historical necessity"³⁵. Marx in his historiosophical system asserts that Hegel must be turned upside down because by viewing humanity as a manifestation of the development of absolute spirit he proved incapable of reconstructing either a complete man or a man who is vested with actual unity.

The author of *Capital* thus equates man's freedom with the possibility of the society getting control over the natural and social conditions of its own

³⁴ Compare L. Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność. Wolność i antynomie wolności w filozofii Spinozy* [*Individual and Infinity: Freedom and Antinomies of Freedom in the Philosophy of Spinoza*], Warszawa 20012, ed. II, p. 216.

³⁵ L. Kołakowski, *Główne nurty marksizmu* [*Main Currents of Marxism*], Warszawa 1989, vol. 1, p. 340.

existence, i.e. with the possibility of building a classless communist society which, through the abolition of ownership, will eliminate the alienation of labour. In contrast, Spinoza proposes a concept of man's freedom in which – contrary to Marx – freedom is a

product of helplessness towards life. Here, the distinction between the soul and the body, which are independent of each other, means – differently than in Descartes' philosophy – that man knows his external fate but, despite knowing, is unable to change it by using that knowledge; that our desires have no power over our lives, and by the same token what we think does not influence what happens to us; that it is essentially human, and most genuinely worthy of man, to look bravely at the unfolding of his fate – something he is not meant to rule³⁶.

Just like Marx restricts the problem of freedom to the finite empirical world, Spinoza undeniably goes beyond that world. The Spinozian concept of freedom is an expression of faith in the possibility of attempting to “root man in something that lies wholly beyond all finite being and yet is not transcendent to man but rather constitutes man's own nature; it represents the rooting in himself as free, hence identical to infinity, in infinity which, to man, is the only homeland”³⁷.

After reading Spinoza, Kołakowski revised both the fundamental tenets of his own philosophy and his approach to Marx's philosophical framework. In order to illustrate that change, I will address several key aspects included in the Dutch thinker's philosophical system. Kołakowski explores Spinozism chiefly as a moral doctrine and, from this perspective, considers its key assumptions regarding metaphysics, anthropology and the theory of cognition. An outcome of these considerations is a doctrine, sketched in *Ethics*, which presents Spinoza's thought as “all pursuit of happiness through cognizing the absolute – on the stipulation that the absolute can also be equated with nature”³⁸. The pursuit starts with an analysis of possibilities for acquiring knowledge of the world. Rather than improving the technical faculties of natural sciences, the pursued knowledge is expected to cure the reason, i.e. the knowledge about the union between the soul and the entire nature. Spinoza distinguishes four ways by which reason can be cured. The first one encompasses cognition that is acquired uncritically from others by hearsay or authority. The second way relates to experimental cognition: based on enumerative induction, one can infer that if certain objects within

³⁶ *Idem, Jednostka i nieskończoność*, p. 217.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 425.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 422.

a given set possess a certain property, then all the objects belonging to that set are endowed with that property. Both these types of knowledge, however, are shaky, tentative and uncertain. Being derived from incidental contacts with nature, they only refer to selected aspects (attributes) of objects rather than to their essence. The third type of cognition is based on reason (*ratio*) and comprises the determination of a cause from its effect – or deductive reasoning, i.e. deriving the particular from the general. Finally, the fourth – the most perfect – type of knowledge relies on intuition. Spinoza frames it in a more Cartesian than mystical perspective. Intuition gets to the essence of the thing, capturing its root cause. What is recognized as essential properties of a given thing in the order of existence constitutes the definition of that thing in the order of cognition: hence Spinoza's statement that the nature (or essence) of things is the same as its definition. Intuitive cognition is interpretable in this manner as intellectual cognition by definition. For example, the sum of interior angles of a triangle can be derived on the basis of its definition. Cognition by means of definition is thus equivalent to analytical cognition whose truthfulness is determined on the basis of knowledge of the content of concepts which it comprises³⁹.

Analyzing Spinoza's tenet that intuition is the superior type of cognition allowing insight into the definition of a given thing (i.e. its idea), Kołakowski asks about the point of departure for such cognition – considering that it does not have a source in experience and is not an empty game of words but actually corresponds to reality? The author of *Ethics* provides an answer to that question in the form of an ontological proof for the existence of God. The proof demonstrates that

nature cannot have an external cause existing beyond it, and that it exists through the power of his own being: the ontological proof for God's existence thus shows that nature cannot have a creator, and that the creation of the world is a logical impossibility which, if accepted, would contradict the very idea of nature. In this way, the proof turns into its antithesis: an ontological proof for God's non-existence⁴⁰.

³⁹ Compare *ibidem*, s. 37–42. Tadeusz Buksiński makes a clear distinction between two concepts of reason which are present in the Western philosophical tradition. Buksiński writes about reason which is interpreted on the one hand as “logos”, “ratio”, “common sense” – and on the other as “nous”, “intellectus”, “intellect”. Considerably simplified, the former relates to discursive reason producing factual sciences, while the latter – as in the intuition formulated in the philosophy of Spinoza – allows exact understanding and reaching the essence of things, i.e. knowing the truth. See T. Buksiński, *Dwa rozumy filozofii* [*Two Reasons of Philosophy*], [in:] *Rozum i racjonalność* [*Reason and Rationality*], T. Buksiński (ed.), Poznań 1997, pp. 131–202.

⁴⁰ L. Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność...*, p. 55.

This quasi-ontological proof is directly linked by Spinoza to the concept of a cause pertaining to cause itself (*causa sui*). He perceives it as something that is “identical to the concept of that which can be cognized through itself, and hence that which can be subjected to an ontological proof – or the thing whose existence is amenable to the formulation of an analytical judgement”⁴¹. The concept of *causa sui* does not mean that a certain thing exists because it has – by itself – brought itself into existence. It means that a certain thing does not have a cause, which is a not a statement of any fact but rather a statement of a logical necessity and, at the same time, an ontological assumption about the necessity of the world’s existence and the impossibility of the world’s creation. Accepting the cause of itself, Spinoza establishes – by virtue of logical necessity – both the existence of substance and its singularity⁴². The knowledge of substance-nature-God as an infinite absolute is thus gained by means of intuition which, being intellectual cognition by definition, gets to the essence of that which is contained in the definition. In contrast, sensory cognition only stipulates the existence of finite things that are given in experience.

As Kołakowski points out, intuition in Spinoza’s philosophy, however, has two distinct faces. Not only does it represent the analytical cognition of things by their definitions, but it is also a “comprehensive perception of nature through a certain *modus* constituted by a cognizing man”⁴³. Intuition leads people to knowledge about the unity connecting the soul with the entire nature. The character of the unity, however, is not such that the soul is a specific part of nature but that it is ontologically identical with nature. The identity is the “primary and proper manner of human existence obscured by the conditions of daily human life”⁴⁴. The emancipation of man is a process seeking to reveal these conditions. Furthermore, the process requires the resolution of four antinomies of freedom. The first of them focuses on the tension between the soul and the body, the second points to the conflict between the reason and passions, the third brings into view the antagonism of man’s objective and subjective goals, while the fourth is concerned with the contradiction in the principle of political and mental freedom. The antinomies cannot be overcome within the framework of Spinozism – mainly because of the assumption that as soon as man becomes liberated from the supernatural world, he is also liberated from history and, through this, is unable to realize any idea of progress. Yet the ahistoricism of Spinoza’s doctrine

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² Compare *ibidem*, pp. 55–57.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 152.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 153.

does not rule out the possibility of self-improvement of the human being. A self-improving individual

is searching – in various domains of that individual’s thinking and life – for the absolute which is known to exist, to be given, to have been attained by others, the ultimate goal being to achieve it for oneself. [...] Humans are beings that, on a par with all other beings, are guided by the pursuit to achieve their own benefit and self-preservation, the specifically human feature being the fact that the main real benefit – either realized or unrealized – lies in the good of the soul, i.e. in knowing and managing one’s affects. True emancipation is thus transposed into the sphere of thinking⁴⁵.

Interpreting Spinoza’s philosophy, Kołakowski emphasizes that the doctrine, analyzed in its entirety, turns out to be entangled in internal conflicts from which it is unable to disentangle itself. The quality, however, is also present in all other great philosophical systems. Each of them, examined separately, may be taken to testify to the failure of reason. On the other hand, however, it must be noted that

no products of mental labour are final, and what appears to be tied up by an unresolvable internal contradiction at the same time turns out to be a starting point for further historical development, and is capable of sustaining the power of dynamic inspiration in creating new trials in which contradictions embedded in old viewpoints are overcome by new perspectives, simultaneously giving rise to new contradictions. [...] Seen in this rhythm of its existence, philosophy is an eternal bread growing in the field of failure⁴⁶.

Spinoza’s tenet that philosophy should be regarded as an independent thought, liberated from the rule of all authorities, which from the viewpoint of the unremitting conflict between the finiteness of individual existence and the infinite eternal nature asks about “the place on which human earth is located” has become a key thread visible throughout Kołakowski’s subsequent works. In his book *If There is No God...*, the thread is addressed from the point of view of the opposition between religious faith and knowledge. An analysis of both domains shows both their mutual relationships and the fact that neither of them is a product of the other, even though both convey the need for creating a design of an orderly world, i.e. a world ruled by explainable laws. Kołakowski states that attempts to give an ambiguous response to the question: “is the spectre of God disturbing our vision of things or, quite the

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 394–395.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 398.

opposite, the world is hiding Him from our vision?” leads to the error of *petitio principii* because each of these two perceptions of the world – religious and scientific – having its own rules of legitimacy refuses to accept the criteria of the other even though they are both based on assumption-free knowledge⁴⁷. In this context, reducing reason to an area delimited by particular sciences which are focused on the finite phenomena of the empirical world becomes highly doubtful. Kołakowski believes that something can be rescued from the “impersonal dance of atoms”. That something, he writes, should be “human dignity, a mere ability to realize – without a sense of dread – one’s freedom and create sense by a pure act of will, with a full consciousness that it represents creation rather than discovery of sense in nature or in history”⁴⁸. Understanding that dignity becomes possible when, as Hegel postulates, man is aware that there is a higher being than himself: the Absolute. In contrast, when man attributes the superior dignity to himself, he gives testimony to the lack of respect for himself. Kołakowski states plainly that the absence of God

turns man into ruin in that it obliterates the sense of everything that is habitually thought to represent the essence of humanity: the pursuit of truth, the distinction between good and evil, the claim to dignity and the belief that we are creating something that will withstand the indifferent damage inflicted by time⁴⁹.

Kołakowski delves more deeply into the problem of the Absolute in *Horror Metaphysicus*. In the study, Kołakowski defends classically practised philosophy, arguing that the widespread tendency for the scientization of philosophy should not wipe out its proper core, i.e. metaphysics. The philosopher brings into focus the fact that by asking questions about the truth, being and non-being, good and evil, self and the universe, the finite and the infinite, metaphysics has been an indelible component of culture for thousands of years. Searching for the ultimate foundation and exploring the truth are valid endeavours only when, Kołakowski points out, one assumes that the Absolute exists⁵⁰. No truths – be it in the realm of empirical or mathematical sciences – can ever be certain and indisputable forever, unless they are an element of the whole truth. This is because one can never be sure about the potential influence of the whole truth on the character

⁴⁷ Compare L. Kołakowski, *Jeśli Boga nie ma. O Bogu, diable, grzechu i innych zmartwie- niach tak zwanej filozofii religii* [*Religion: If There Is No God... on God, the Devil, Sin and Other Worries of the So-Called Philosophy of Religion*], Kraków 1988, p. 229.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 230.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 234–235.

⁵⁰ L. Kołakowski, *Horror metaphysicus* [*Horror Metaphysicus*], Warszawa 1990, p. 42.

of each individual part-truth. Furthermore, part-truths are not certain and indisputable by themselves – instead, they require the adoption of certain assumptions because assumption-free knowledge is known to ultimately lead either to vicious circle or *petitio principii*⁵¹.

Naturally, Kołakowski is aware of the fact that the Absolute is unknowable. He agrees with the view that human cognition is always partial and limited to finite objects of the empirical world⁵². On the other hand, he stresses very strongly that the pursuit to get to know the whole – i.e. the Absolute – is a trait that distinguishes humans from all the other living beings. The question about the Absolute is so inspiring that it cannot be abandoned just because we are unable to answer it here and now.

Kołakowski's late studies show that on the whole Marxism can be viewed as a caricature of classical philosophy. The author of *Individual and Infinity* considers metaphysics to be the legitimate “nucleus” of philosophical reflection. In contrast, Marx never posed any metaphysical questions. In his early works, he explicitly dismissed such questions, regarding nature as a continuation of man, his “practical organ”. In Marx's system of thought, man obviously does not create nature, and nature is not man's objective reflection because the content of human knowledge is not about nature itself but about human contact with nature. A valid object of knowledge is practice. Man can never be free from the situational and practical character of the acquisition of knowledge, while knowledge is pursued so that it can contribute to man's transformations of nature for his practical needs. Similarly to nature and the knowledge of nature which are perceived in Marx's studies through the prism of human practical needs, the same view is applied to all forms of human consciousness. None of them is autonomous, hence it is not possible for the Marx's man to look at himself from a viewpoint that would be free from the situation of being an object of practical human life⁵³.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 43–44.

⁵² While exploring the distinction between the light and the heavy, and between the accidental and the necessary, Kołakowski stresses that both pairs have their basis in experience. Normally, only the former of the oppositions is regarded as empirical, whereas the latter is rejected as speculative. This is due to purely pragmatic reasons and has its foundations in a hidden normative premise limiting the idea of experience solely to what is – or might be – useful in the operation of objects. “It is an ideological premise and finds justification in the utilitarian attitude towards life, not in eternal rules of rationality. The attitude, to which we owe human science and technology, demands standards that are supposed to serve the delimitation of utilizable experience, i.e. such that is useful in the operation of things, and its separation from that part of experience which lends itself to no such applications”. *Ibidem*, pp. 27–28.

⁵³ Compare L. Kołakowski, *Główne nurty marksizmu...*, vol. 1, p. 338.

Marx coined the term of “scientific socialism” for his philosophical doctrine, not only because of his appreciation for science but, primarily, the utopian belief that human knowledge and human will are going to merge into a perfect unity and become indistinguishable. This, as a consequence, should mean that goal-setting acts and cognitive/practical measures aimed at achieving these goals will become equivalent⁵⁴. This utopian belief is expressed directly in the 11th thesis on Feuerbach.

3. Conclusions

In his early studies, Kołakowski thought very highly of Marx’s body of work, and admired his ideas. In the course of time, however, Kołakowski’s views gradually inclined towards very strong criticism of the Marxist system of thought. I see the main cause of this fundamental change in the Polish philosopher’s attitude to the issue of spirituality. Before reading Spinoza, Kołakowski definitely rejected all aspects related to that topic. The sole focus, as in Marx’s studies, on what is capable of achieving a concordance between the interests of the individual and the interests of the human species in general. Crucially, the interests referred to above are purely material. They are a product of social and historical existence of man.


After authoring *Individual and Infinity* Kołakowski begins to gradually depart from the world of material interests and veer towards the world of ideas, standards and spiritual values. He is inclined to accept the thought that it is the latter world that plays a much more prominent role in the development of individuals and whole societies. Key reference points of our culture (truth, rationality, morality or freedom) should not, Kołakowski asserts, be analyzed with a focus on the possibilities of satisfying only practical human needs. The fulfilment of these needs is naturally important, but restricted exclusively to the feeling of physical security. It does not, however, apply to spiritual security which is concerned with

trust towards life. That attitude requires the belief that there is a long-standing and real – rather than invented provisionally to satisfy current needs – difference between good and evil, and between truth and falsehood. As soon as that distinction is lost or undermined, human culture loses its foothold and forfeits a weapon which could be used to put up resistance to the nihilistic conviction that anything can be considered good or evil as long as we decide that, we being each and every one of us⁵⁵.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, vol. 3, p. 1206.

⁵⁵ L. Kołakowski, *Rozpad komunizmu jako wydarzenie filozoficzne [The Collapse of Communism as a Philosophical Event]*, “Etyka” 1994, issue 27, p. 67.

Kołakowski passes the blame for the disintegration of traditional Western values to communism. However, he is also critical towards liberalism⁵⁶. The philosopher believes that liberalism, a system based on relativism, releases people from any obligation and duty. In Kołakowski's opinion, contemporary liberal thought by focusing on the floating reality departs from classical philosophy, and only creates different philosophical modes such as poststructuralism or postmodernism.

Summing up, a comparison of Kołakowski's early and late studies reveals a very prominent shift in his position on Marxism. The evolution progresses from full acceptance to radical criticism. In both cases, the Polish philosopher centres his attention on analyzing man from the position of relationships existing between the individual and the infinite. Marx outlines a vision of man deprived of any metaphysical sensitivity. All the contents of man's consciousness are only a product of man's social and historical existence. Until the mid-1950's, Kołakowski embraced this vision of man, but in the later period he changed it radically. He recognized that metaphysical sensitivity is a permanent dimension of culture. Also, it is largely responsible for the feeling that we are all a part of a whole which ties us up and confines – a whole that becomes a platform for understanding past, present and future generations, enabling individuals to cooperate and giving them a chance for setting up a community. 

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⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 67–68.