Tadeusz Kotarbiński: Socrates of Warsaw

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Abstract. Tadeusz Kotarbiński was one of the main representatives of the Lvov-Warsaw School. The paper presents his life and didactic activity, as well as the list of his main works and the greatest achievements in philosophy. Kotarbiński supported concretism, radical realism, and the directive of semantic reism. He created praxiology — the theory of effective action. He advocated the system of ethics independent of particular worldview (religious worldview including). Kotarbiński influenced, e.g., Stanisław Leśniewski's ideas of ontology (*scil.* his original logic of names) and of mereology (*scil.* his original theory of collectives).

> The legacy of our millennial past
> includes treasures mixed with rubble.
>
> *Our and your Chopin* (Kotarbiński [10, p.391])

1. Life

Tadeusz Kotarbiński was born on March 31, 1886 in Warsaw; he died there on October 3, 1981. In the Kotarbiński family there were many artists: a grandfather of Tadeusz's uncle, Wilhelm, his father, Miłosz, and his brother, Mieczysław – were painters; his uncle, Józef, was an outstanding actor; his mother, Ewa née Koskowska, practiced music.

Even in his school years, in Warsaw, Kotarbiński listened to lectures on philosophy – including the lectures of Stanisław Brzozowski and Adam Mahrburg. In the years 1907-1912, he studied at the University of Lvov with Kazimierz Twardowski (philosophy) – and with Twardowski's most senior disciples: Jan Łukasiewicz (logic)

and Władysław Witwicki (psychology), as well as with Stanisław Witkowski (classical philology). After receiving his doctorate in 1912 – on the basis of the dissertation *Utilitarianism in the ethics of Mill and Spencer* [1] – he was a teacher of Latin and Greek in Mikołaj Rej Warsaw Grammar School.

After Poland regained independence in 1918 he was appointed lecturer in philosophy at the University of Warsaw; one year later he became an associate professor, and in 1929 – a full professor at this university. He taught there until his retirement in 1961 – including from 1939-1944, when the university had to go underground, and in the first years of the communist regime, which, in 1951, deprived him of the chair of philosophy, leaving him only the less «ideological» chair of logic.

In the years 1945-1949, as the rector, he led the organization of the University of Łódź.

Throughout all his life, he took an active part in the philosophical world: in 1915, he belonged to the founding members of the Institute of Philosophy; then he was the president of the Warsaw Philosophical Society (1917-1939) and the Polish Philosophical Society (until 1977). He was a member of the Warsaw Scientific Society (1921-1951) and the Polish Academy of Sciences (1946-1951) until their termination by the communists. He was also a member of the Polish Academy of Sciences since its inception (1952). He received many awards, attained many honors (he was a doctor *honoris causa* of seven universities, a foreign member of five academies, and many scientific societies), was much respected (e.g. in the years 1957-1968 he was a president of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and in the years 1960-1963 – a chairman of the *Institut International de Philosophie*) – maybe the most in the postwar period, when the authorities sought to capitalize on his former left-wing sympathies and atheistic and materialistic (but not «dialectical») worldview. Kotarbiński was distinguished in different ways by the authorities, but this did not go hand in hand with his real impact on the main direction of scientific life in the country; but his great intellect and personal integrity and the reliability of the scientific work positively affected the team of disposable «apparatchiks» who had implanted in Poland the «only right» philosophy from the East.

2. Writings

The first book of Kotarbiński was *Practical sketches* [2], in which the main ideas of praxiology appeared. His *Elements of the theory of knowledge, formal logic and methodology of sciences* [3] was a foundation of education for several generations of Polish intelligentsia. The textbook *Logic for lawyers* [4] was studied by many of future Polish lawyers. *Lectures on the history of logic* [7] and *Logic in Poland* [9] constituted an important contribution to the history of logic in general. *Treaty on good work* [5] initiated praxiology as an independent scientific discipline. *Meditations on fair life* [11] gave a summary of his ethical views.

In 1990, the first volume of his *Works* [13] was published. The number of Kotarbiński's works is close to half a thousand.

3. Views

3.1. Semiotics and methodology

In logic, he dealt creatively mainly with semiotics and methodology.

The central problem of semiotics – the problem of sense – he solved in such a way, that he recognized as making sense all and only sentences not containing onomatoids, or those translatable to such sentences. In the first case, he spoke of basic (literal) sense, and in the second – of a sense of briefly-substituted sense. Onomatoids – or apparent names – he opposed to genuine names, i.e. names of concretes, or precisely speaking – of things, and ultimately – bodies.

He was a supporter of semantic reism, i.e. of the directive to use only language whose sentences are meaningful in the sense explained above. He believed that, in philosophy in particular, using such language – reistic language – protects us against idle disputes, especially ontological ones, consisting e.g. in hypostazing or or treating sentences avoiding (reistic) sense or used only in the brief-substitute sense – as sentences saying something about existing objects. Problems, which are objects of such disputes, turn out to be badly formulated.

He accepted the classical conception of truth: a given sentence is true, when it is just as it says. He rejected the nihilistic idea, hence the idea that sentences predicting the truthfulness of a given sentence are synonymous with this sentence itself. He believed that this is so only if the word "true" is used verbally, i.e. if the sentence with truthfulness assigned to it (e.g. the sentence claiming that a is P), is indicated by putting it in quotation marks (and therefore by using the expression "a is P"). If, however, the word "truth" is really used, i.e. if the sentence with truthfulness assigned to it is indicated in another way (e.g. by using the expression "the first sentence of this paragraph"), the "truthfulness" can no longer be thus eliminated.

He initially combined the classical conception of truth with logical indeterminism, i.e. with rejecting the principle of the excluded middle, if it would have to proclaim that every statement is either true or false. Although all truths are perpetual, not all of them – are eternal. Truth is perpetual, i.e. if a sentence is now true, it will remain true forever. But there are sentences that are not eternally true, and so being true now, were not always true before. Not being also false, they were undefined in the past. If a sentence is undefined, then it is possible that this sentence or its negation is true. If it is defined, then it is true or false. In turn, if it is true, then it is necessary, and if it is false, it is impossible.

Of the methodological issues – he dealt with, among others, analysis of the reasoning process, which eventually was considered by him as "justifying thinking". Among reasoning, he distinguished – on the one hand – deductive reasoning (i.e. inferring and proving), in which logical consequences are (fully) justified by

accepted reason, and reductive reasoning (i.e. testing and explaining), in which
logical reasons are justified (only in part) by accepted consequences. On the other
hand – he divided reasoning into progressive reasonings (i.e. inferring and testing),
i.e. those in which consequences of given reasons are sought, and regressive reason-
ings (i.e. explaining and proving), i.e. those in which reasons of given consequences
are sought.

He indicated a new base of classification of the sciences into the theoretical
and the practical. He thought, namely, that both theoretical and practical sciences
aim to establish true and justified sentences about the objects of a certain domain,
in particular, to establish laws of this domain. Generally, he advocated for criticism,
i.e. the postulate of recognizing only sentences justified due to our knowledge.
He distinguished practical and theoretical sciences on the ground that practical
sciences fixed some truth in order to provide a description of the procedure leading
to the formation of certain things, and that in these sciences, handling actions (e.g.
experiments) outweigh intellectual actions.

Although Kotarbiński was certainly one of the most eminent Polish philoso-
phers of the twentieth century, he initially proposed to eliminate the word "philos-
ophy" because it refers to any well-separated areas of knowledge. Not convincing
anyone to abandon this word, he began to introduce at least some conceptual order
here. He considered four concepts of philosophy to be the most important ones:
practicing philosophy can be identified either with creating a metaphysical world-
view, or searching for practical self-knowledge, or indicating an ethical pattern, or
building a theory of knowledge. The first understanding of philosophy coincided
with what he called the "great philosophy", and more specifically to creating large
systems; and the last one – with what he called the "little philosophy", i.e. with
philosophical analysis. He himself basically practiced philosophical analysis, but
he thought that philosophy does not end on analysis: after conducting analysis, it
comes time to create a system.

3.2. Epistemology and ontology

In the theory of knowledge, Kotarbiński claimed presentationism, called by him
"radical realism". The world is directly knowable: objects of knowledge are given to
us directly and not through sensual data (contents). He combined presentationism
with objectivism: the world exists independently of whether it is or is not known.

He was an empiricist – considering experience to be the ultimate base of
knowledge. His empiricism was of an extraspectionistic character. The basis of
knowledge is external experience: sentences about introspection are reducible to
sentences about extraspection. He proposed that sentences of the type "A ex-
periences that p" be paraphrased using literally reistic sentences of the type "A
experiences like this: p". These sentences are literally reistic as the onomatoid "that
p" disappears from them: 'A' is a genuine name of an «experiencing body», and
'p' is a description of how – not what – A experiences (e.g. seeing something).
An introspective sentence can provide, among other things, knowledge about how
other people experience – not me alone. And a sentence claiming that someone

different from us experiences in such-and-such way, can by understood by us only as an abbreviation of the sentence "A experiences as I do, when I would experience like this: p". This is therefore the imitationistic conception of introspection. Experiencing here is made independent of the existence of the experienced object: we do not have to accept the existence of that p, or some sensory data, in order to experience like someone who experiences in the manner described by the phrase 'p'.

In theory of objects, Kotarbiński advocated a certain version of nominalism, namely – concretism. According to nominalism, there is exactly one ontological category: the category of individuals. Concretism rolls this out: these individuals are identical with concretes. In other words: every object is a thing. Yet another way: there are only concretes – there are no abstracts. In particular, there are no general objects, i.e. no universals. He argued as follows. Something that would be a universal object (e.g. a man in general) with respect to some individual objects (here: to men) should have all and only properties common to these objects. Suppose that a certain property (e.g. being the author of *The Spirit King*) is the specificity of one of these objects (here: Juliusz Słowacki). According to the (ontological) law of the excluded middle, our universal has this specificity or it does not. It can not, however, have this specificity, because the specificity is not common property of individual objects that fall under this universal. It can not also not have this specificity, because then the universal would have the property of not having this specificity, and this again is not a common property of these objects, because does not reside in this specified object.

Kotarbiński's concretism had a reistic interpretation: every concrete is a thing. The reistic thesis – that there are only things – has become one of the most famous of his views. Ontological reism, in turn, had in Kotarbiński a form of somatism: every thing is a body. So there are only bodies. They are objects being spatio-temporally extended and inert. If we agree, in turn, that the totality of bodies – the collection of all of them – is matter, then somatism is a kind of materialism, because the totality of bodies is also a body.

Initially, materialism was combined with indeterminism, or, strictly speaking, with antipredeterminism. He was an opponent of the thesis that what took place at a certain time was strictly determined by what had happened earlier. It seemed to him that if this were so, as predeterminists proclaim, it would be impossible to act really creatively. Later he departed from this view and concluded that – according to determinism – each event is determined by a set of earlier facts, making together a sufficient condition of this event. He identified the cause of the event with an important component of this condition – i.e. such a component, without which the other components of the team no longer constituted a sufficient condition of a given event.

3.3. Praxiology and ethics

It is surprising that Kotarbiński, being a reist, devoted so much time to the analysis of action, i.e. to something that did not exist from the point of view of the reistic

doctrine, not being a thing. In addition, he analyzed actions by no means in reistic terms. What is more, praxiology – the theory of effective action – is usually tied with the name of Kotarbiński as with reism, and he is rightly regarded as one of main creators of it.

What underlies praxiology is practical realism, i.e. the postulate of sanity in action: reckoning with reality when taking any action – with what was, what is, and what can be.

The most important component of praxiology – as the theory of effective action – is a set of practical directives, i.e. tangible normative sentences of the form: "To achieve this-and-this in such-and-such time, it is good to do that-and-that". The phrase "it is good" is understood in these directives either as a sufficient condition (which is a synonym for "it is enough"), or as a necessary condition (which is synonymous with "it should be"). And to do something – is the same as – to take a sequence of simple actions, involving deliberate and free (i.e. having its source in free impulse) pressure applied to something, causing the creation of something.

Assume that the practical directive specifies that a condition for achieving a given thing in certain circumstances is to do some other thing. The theoretical basis for such a directive is the belief of an overlapping causal link between the occurrence of both of these things. Causing an intended thing requires using specific materials and tools, that is – in general – a specific technical base. On the other hand, doing a thing, which is a condition of causing an intended thing, is a string of deliberate (intentional) actions.

Praxiology provides a theory of the organization of such activities. They are assessed in terms of effectiveness – possibly of varying degrees. An action is effective when it leads to the intended effect; an action blocking this effect is a counter-effective one. Other activities are – from this point of view – ineffective (or in-counter-effective).

A praxiological estimation of actions applies also to their rationality. An action is factually rational when it has a true theoretical basis; it is methodologically rational, when its theoretical base is sufficiently justified.

The efficiency of actions and the rationality of both types are – as we can see – mutually independent.

We should not mix norms (e.g. "Do not do this-and-this!") with normative sentences. Normative statements, regardless of whether they are of the type which has been already mentioned – that is factual – or emotional (of the type "Doing this-and-this is a good/bad thing"), are declarative sentences, so they assessed in terms of truthfulness and validity. While norm – assessed in terms of validity – are devoid of logical value. We do not ask whether they are true or false, but only whether they are or are not valid.

Kotarbiński advocated (meta)ethical absolutism: in spite of the volatility of norms, there are absolute moral criteria which make it possible to decide which norms are valid and which – are not. Ethics is independent of a particular world-view – including a religious worldview. Kotarbiński himself was an atheist, but he

distinguished atheism, i.e. the refutation of the existence of God, from blasphemy, i.e. offending the feelings of believers – and certainly he was not a blasphemer.

Justification of moral criteria is provided by elementary moral intuitions, which have their source in conscience, assessing whether human behavior is "venerable" (i.e. morally good), or – "shameful" (morally wrong).

Kotarbiński's chief ethical norm was: Behave as a brave, trustworthy (or responsible) guardian behaves! Be courageous, sacrificial, right and cornered in the fight against the existing evil and prevent evil greater than the existing one from coming to be! This norm also had its freer version – in the form of four recommendations: (1) like doing something, (2) love someone, (3) don't be a scondrel, and (4) live seriously.

4. Resonance

4.1. Origin

The roots of semantic reism lie in what Kotarbiński heard from the mouth of one of his teachers – Witwicki – and what he himself reported:

> [Witwicki] called for the things themselves, demanding that all abstract ideas should be supported by concretes, any generalization should be illustrated with examples and that these examples should be expressiveliving [6, p. 81].

A program closer to semantic reism was proclaimed at the time in the Vienna Circle: this was the program of physicalism – especially in the version of Rudolf Carnap. Physicalists conditioned the meaningfulness of sentences on their translatability to a certain distinguished language: the language of things (just like Carnap) or the language of impressions (as with some others neopositivists). There was here, however, an important difference: from the point of view of neopositivism, the thesis of ontological resim must be considered as lacking empirical sense, and so, briefly speaking, as senseless.

In the classification of reasoning, he initially followed Łukasiewicz, but ultimately he accepted understanding of "deduction" and "reduction" offered by Rev. Jan Salamucha.

The direct source of ontological views was logical: namely the calculus of names developed by Stanisław Leśniewski and called by him "ontology."

The function of the impetus for interest in praxiology was probably fulfilled by Brzozowski's philosophy of working, as well as the analysis of acts and products carried out by Twardowski; without a doubt also, the organizing and pedagogical activity of the latter – activity of rare regularity – became for Kotarbiński a practical verification of his conception of efficient activity. Anticipations of independent ethics can be found in Władysław Biegański.

4.2. Criticism

At first, Kotarbiński's logical indeterminism became an object of criticism. Leśniewski convinced him that relativizing the truthfulness to time is inadmissible. The sentences of the form "The sentences "Something is such-and-such" is true in such-and-such time" are meaningful when they can be translated into sentences of the form "The sentence "Something is such-and-such in such-and-such time" is true".

However, destructive criticism touched, above all, Kotarbiński's ontological views. After the Second World War, this came from the side of communist doctrinaires, who came to the (legitimate!) conclusion that reism was not identical with their ideology. But many years before, reism had undergone substantive criticism.

Firstly, it was indicated that reism had significant internal drawbacks.

Thus, Kotarbiński's arguments against abstracts was proved inconclusive. Marian Borowski and Roman Ingarden pointed out that Kotarbiński based the argument against general objects on the mistaken assumption that universals have the same properties (or properties of the same order) as properties which are possessed by individual object falling under these universals.

And Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz showed that reism is an analytical thesis. It can be expressed namely by the statement "Each object is a thing", and this statement is meaningful in reistic language, when the name "object" is a genuine name, that is – is a name of things. Ajdukiewicz noted also that reists, in their own language, can not express the belief in the nonexistence of abstracts, because the sentence of the form "There are no abstracts" can not be considered as a meaningful sentence, even as a sentence in a briefly-substituted sense. The case was put on a knife edge by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, pointing out that since reism is a convention, it might as well take the view that, e.g., there are only properties or – refuted by reists – contents (sense data).

Secondly, it turned out that reism is not an adequate ontology due to mathematical and physical theories. One of the consequences of adopting the reistic thesis is recognizing as "objectless" a large part of mathematics – including the part of set theory based on the concept of an infinite set. This is because the last concept is in fact a lack of reistic interpretation: no statement of those sets can be translated into an equivalent statement about things.

Klemens Szaniawski and Zdzisław Augustynek raised further the objection that reism – and in any case somatism – comes into conflict with modern physics, which considers not only bodies (corpuscles) real, but also fields (waves). Meanwhile, fields – from the point of view of reism – are abstracts, so they are hypostases.

Already Ajdukiewicz's and Ingarden's criticism caused Kotarbiński to abandon ontological reism for semantic reism – in its liberal version, i.e. not refusing the meaningfulness of unrealistic sentences, but recommending only «as far as possible» avoiding such sentences.

4.3. Continuation

The formulation of the classical conception of truth, made by Kotarbiński, was a reference point of the semantic definition of truth given by Alfred Tarski [1933]. Considerations on absolutism in regard to truthfulness contributed indirectly to Łukasiewicz discovering three-valued logic: he attributed the third value – beyond truthfulness and falsity – just to indeterminate sentences.

Marian Przełęcki came to the conclusion that semantic reism can be defended, provided we find it to be a terminological convention concerning the term "meaningfulness" or a criterion of a minimum ontological commitment of theories.

An interesting attempt to rescue semantic reism was taken by Bogusław Wolniewicz. He suggested that reistic briefly-surrogate senses can be assigned not only to sentences directly translatable to reistic sentences with literal meaning, but also to sentences belonging to any theory for which it is possible to give a set of relevant axioms in reistic language.

Psychologizing imitationism, i.e. supporting the reduction of introspection to extraspection in structural psychology, was postulated by Zbigniew Jordan.

Modification of the original version of ontological reism was made by Janina Kotarbińska. According to her, two meanings of the word "to exist" should be distinguished: the primary and the basic. In the primary meaning – only objects designated by names (apparent names included) exist; in the basic meaning – only things exist. As a result of this distinction, acceptance of the view that every sentence of the form "This-and-this object is that-and-that" implies the existence of this-and-this object but does not force the acceptance of the view that this object exists in the primary meaning of the word "to exist" (i.e. as a thing).

On the other hand, Czesław Lejewski tried to defend the original thesis of ontological reism against charges of tautologicality – considering that, contrary to Ajdukiewicz, the sentence "Each object is a thing" is not an analytical sentence, because the name "object" has a different (poorer) connotation than the name "thing".

It was also attempted to «put into practice» some ideas of praxiology – the slogan of good work, in particular. If these attempts did not bring the expected results, it was probably because the attempts fell on the deaf ears of the statist economy, subordinated entirely to dogmatic ideology.

5. Pupils

As a teacher, Kotarbiński taught, first of all, responsibility for words. As a debater he was a master of what might be called the "idealizing recapitulation". He could so interpret someone else's statement – even a statement of his opponent – that it became BOTH clearer and more justified than in its original form.

Kotarbiński was the second great teacher within the Lvov-Warsaw School: in Warsaw he played the role which was played in Lvov by Twardowski. The list of

his pupils starts with such eminent scholars as Maria and Stanisław Ossowskis –
and ends with: Pelc, Tadeusz Pszczołowski, Szaniawski and Przełęcki.

6. Summary

Karol Irzykowski called him "Socrates of Warsaw" – and this name characterizes
Kotarbiński's personality in the most brief way. In logic – his postulate of de-
hipostazing scientific language made history. In metaphysics – his reism was the
most original, but only his imitationistic theory of introspection survived in its
original version.

In axiology – the slogan of reliable guardianship turned out to be the most
catchy.

Tadeusz Kotarbiński's works mentioned in the paper

[1] Utylitaryzm w etyce Milla i Spencera [Utilitarianism in the ethic of Mill and
Spencer] (1912). Cf. [8, vol. I, pp. 215–330]

[2] Szkice praktyczne. Zagadnienia z filozofii czynu [Practical skeches. Problems
form the philosophy of act] (1913). Cf. [8, vol. I, pp. 13–168]

[3] Gnosiology. The scientific approach to the theory of knowledge. Pergamon
Press, Oxford (1966). Original version in Polish (1929)

[4] Kurs logiki dla prawników [Logic for lawyers]. Gebethner i Wolff, Warszawa
(1951)

[5] Traktat o dobrej robocie. Ossolineum (1955). English translation: Praxiology.
An introduction to the sciences of efficient action. PWN – Pergamon Press,
Warszawa – Oxford (1965)

[6] Nauczyciele sztuki nauczania [Teachers of the art of teaching] (1956). Cf. [12,
pp. 73–83]

[7] Wykłady z dziejów logiki [Lectures on history of logic]. Ossolineum, Łódź
(1957). French translation: Leçons sur l'histoire de la logique. Presses Univer-
sitaires de France, Paris (1964)

[8] Wybór pism [Selected writings]. Vol. I. Myśli o działaniu [Thoughts on acting].
Vol. II. Myśli o myśleniu [Thoughts on thinking]. PWN, Warszawa (1957)

[9] La logique en Pologne. Son originalité et les influences étrangères. Angelo
Signorelli Editore, Roma (1959)

[10] Nasz i wasz Szopen [Our and your Chopin] (1960). Cf. [12, pp. 391–395]

[11] Medytacje o życiu godziwym [Meditations on fair life]. Wiedza Powszechna,
Warszawa (1966)

[12] Studia z zakresu filozofii, etyki i nauk społecznych [Studies of the domain of
philosophy, ethics and social sciences]. Ossolineum, Wrocław (1970)

[13] Dzieła wszystkie [Works]. Vol. I-VI. Ossolineum, Wrocław (1990-2003)

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