Izydora Dąmbska: the first lady of the twentieth-century Polish philosophy

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Abstract. Izydora Dąmbska was one of the most creative women-representatives of the Lvov-Warsaw School. The paper presents her extraordinary personality, life, as well as the list of her main works and the greatest scientific achievements. The main area of her interest was the logic of natural language, methodology and the history of Greek semiotics. She gave meticulous analysis of the relation between conventionalism on one hand, and relativism, scepticism and agnosticism on the other. In semiotics, she proposed new approach to the problem of empty names and material implication, of the correct definition of truth, as well as of pragmatic functions of silence and namelessness. In methodology, her reconstruction of the notion of scientific laws is of great importance.

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The main thing is to remain in harmony with ourselves
and with the truth,
not caring about the rest..

Letter to Maria Obercowa. January 19, 1951 (Dąmbska [5])

1. Personality

She was an aristocrat by birth as well as an aristocrat of the spirit and intellect. During World War 2 – a soldier of the Polish Underground Army; after the War, she adamantly defended the highest human values and did not enter into any compromise with the communist regime which was ruling Poland. Being the last assistant of Kazimierz Twardowski, the founder of the Lvov-Warsaw School, at the same time, she was one of prominent representatives of the School.

Her philosophical interests were very vast, and her philosophical oeuvre was very rich and creative. This oeuvre included long monographs as well as small – but deep – analytical miniatures.

Concepts of sign, truth and understanding were the main subjects of her research in semiotics. In ontology, she analyzed both historical theses (irrationalism, conventionalism, relativism, skepticism and agnosticism, determinism and indeterminism) and purely theoretical problems (like forms and the value of instrumental cognition). In methodology, she was occupied by the question of the logical status of scientific laws and of the nature of reasoning by analogy. In light of her origin and attitude to life, it is not surprising that she devoted a lot of her attention to the axiological problem of freedom.

Her work in theoretical philosophy was underpinned by a thorough knowledge of the history of philosophy – especially ancient Greek philosophy.

Dąmbska's method of philosophizing reflected trends prevailing in the Lvov-Warsaw School: she never limited the domain of analysed problems in advance; she was very careful in expressing her opinions and very critical, especially with respect to her own writings.

She accepted – together with the other representatives of the Lvov-Warsaw School – the old principle: *initium doctrinae est consideration nominis*. She accepted this in theory – and successfully applied it in practice.

2. Life

She was born on January 3, 1904, in Lvov – and died on June 18, 1983, in Cracow.

Dąmbska studied philosophy at the University of Lvov under Kazimierz Twardowski's guidance (1922-1927); then she was his assistant (1926-1930). Dąmbska complemented her studies in Austria, Germany and France (1930-1931). During the German and later the Russian occupation of Lvov, she was a lecturer of the secret Polish university. After World War 2, threatened with arrest by the Soviet secret service, she moved to Gdańsk. In 1946, Dąmbska received her habilitation at the University of Warsaw, presenting the dissertation *Irrationalism and the scientific cognition* [4]. From the years 1950-1956, and again from 1964 on, she was removed from the university by the communist regime due to political reasons. But she continuously – up to her death – led her *privatissimum* in Cracow.

She maintained close contacts with outstanding representatives of the Lvov-Warsaw School (especially with Władysław Witwicki and Tadeusz Czeżowski) but also with great philosophers from outside of the School, like Henryk Elzenberg and Roman Ingarden – as well as with a great Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert.

3. Work

The work of Dąmbska contains many original publications, translations of philosophical texts and a huge number of notes on Polish publications in the *Bibliographie de la Philosophie*.

The most important of her books are: *La théorie du jugement de M. Edmond Goblot* [1], *On laws in science* [2], *Outline of the history of Greek philosophy* [3], *Irrationalism and the scientific cognition* [4], *French skepticism of the 16th and 17th centuries* [6], *Two studies from the theory of scientific cognition* [7], *Instruments and object of cognition: from the theory of instrumental cognition. On linguistic philosophy* [8], *Two studies on Plato* [9], *Conventions and conventionalism* [10].

Her selected writings are collected in her *Znaki i myśli. Wybór pism z semiotyki, teorii nauki i historii filozofii.* (*Signs and thoughts. Selected writings in semiotics, epistemology and the history of philosophy*) [11]. Recently, a volume of English translations of her important work was published under the title *Knowledge, language and silence* [14].

4. The Lvov-Warsaw School versus neopositivism and linguistic philosophy

Dąmbska's philosophical research, which may be called "semiotic-logical analysis", is carried out in the spirit of Twardowski's school. She characterized the scholar spirit of this school in such a way:

> Despite the fact that representatives of the Lvov-Warsaw School understood the scope of philosophy differently, they however agreed to postulate that research should fulfil some definite conditions characteristic for scientific cognition. The most important postulate, consequently realized by members of the School in their works, ordered the application in philosophical research of the method of semantic analysis and logical discourse by appreciating the role of broadly understood intuition in the process of discovering statements; the postulate of clarity, precision and logical correctness in formulating issues, theses and arguments and in defining concepts; finely – the postulate of criticism and antidogmatism in estimation of theoretical assumptions [13, p. 29].

Dąmbska's attitude towards the programs of other currents of analytical movement – like neopositivism and linguistic philosophy – was ambivalent.

She accepted some views of the representatives of the Vienna Circle and the Oxford School, but some their views were rejected by her – like the Carnapian opinion that a system of knowledge is finally reducible to "what is empirically given" or the radical opinion of post-Wittgensteinian philosophers that semiotic analysis is the only method of scientific research in philosophy and, in consequence, that all the main questions of philosophy are incorrectly posed, i.e. are pseudoproblems.

It seems that what unites all these currents of analytic movement is anti-irrationalism. That is why Dąmbska paid considerable attention to the phenomenon of irrationalism.

According to Dąmbska, we should distinguish four main versions of irrationalism: metaphysical, epistemological, logical and psychological.

Metaphysical irrationalism is an opinion that irrationality is an essential property of reality itself; in consequence, using a rational conceptual apparatus to describe such a reality is a kind of deformation; paradoxically, the rational attitude to the irrational reality consists in . . . delighted silence. Epistemological irrationalism consists in accepting irrational cognitive methods – like intuition, contemplation, empathy *etc.* – which are to guarantee the scientific status of logically irrational sentences. It is interesting to note that epistemological irrationalists consider these methods reliable – in opposition to traditional rational methods, i.e. experience and reasoning based on it. In turn, it is considered logically irrational for users of a given language. For all the sentences of this language which are either contradictory to laws known to these users, or essentially irresolvable; it is clear that when somebody does not know a certain law, his acceptance of sentences contradictory in fact to this unknown law could not be irrational. Finally, a person who believes in logically irrational sentences – or is ready to use irrational methods of cognition – is psychologically irrational.

According to Dąmbska, there is room for neither epistemological, logical, metaphysical nor psychological irrationalism in science. Science should be rational, i.e. it should use only rational or intersubjective methods of research.

5. Metaphysics

5.1. Ontology

Among ontological questions, the controversies concerning determinism-indeterminism and causalism-acausalism were of special importance for Dąmbska.

In these controversies, she was in favor of determinism and causalism. Accepting the first, she appealed to the fact, that practicing science is rational only on the ground of deterministic hypothesis. Accepting the second, she pointed out that the rule of limited measurability (of the speed and location of physical bodies), supposed in quantum physics, does not speak against the hypothesis of causalism – as some philosophers think; the source of their mistake is confusion of indeterminism with indeterminacy, and the principle of causality with the rule of predictability.

5.2. Epistemology

In the domain of epistemology, two problems especially occupied Dąmbska: the problem of instrumental cognition and the problem of the relation between conventionalism on one hand, and relativism, scepticism and agnosticism on the other.

The problem which arises in face of instrumental cognition, consists in the question of how instruments of such a cognition or – as Dąmbska named them –

"cognitive operators" impact the other four elements of cognitive situation, i.e.: the subject of cognition, the process of cognition, the object of cognition and the result of cognition (*scil.* picture of cognized object). As it turns out, instruments affects all these factors, modifying them, and vice versa. Traditional epistemology was not conscious of these complicated interrelations.

In Dąmbska's day, there was a widespread belief that conventionalism was dangerous because of its relativistic, sceptic and agnostic consequences. In light of Dąmbska's meticulous analysis, this belief was based on terminological misunderstandings. Let us note that we have two versions of conventionalism: extreme and moderate. Extreme conventionalism is the view that all scientific laws are conventions (in particular: they are arbitrary definitions) and as such they are not empirically verifiable. Moderate conventionalism simply states that conventions are present in various areas of human life and in various domains of culture. According to Dąmbska, extreme conventionalism is obviously false, whereas moderate conventionalism is obviously true, but both of them imply neither relativism and scepticism nor agnosticism. For instance: relativism assumes that reality itself is contradictory – and conventionalism assumes only that there are different, sometimes contradictory, pictures of reality; scepticism assumes that norms and definitions are accepted purely conventionally – and conventionalism assumes at most that they are accepted with respect to their semantic function in the system of a given theory; agnosticism (considered by Dąmbska to be a radicalized version of scepticism) assumes that the classical conception of truth is binding – and conventionalism accept the classical conception of truth.

6. Semiotics

6.1. Logical and grammatical categories

Dąmbska conducted deep criticism of the traditional (grammatical) categorizations of the parts of speech, showing that in fact, it had serious shortcomings.

Here are two examples.

Firstly, she rejected the view that so-called empty names (e.g. "a parca") feature a lack of designata, while proper names (e.g. "Casimir') feature a lack of connotation. According to Dąmbska, all names signify something: possible objects of thought namely; only such an approach is compatible with the common conviction that some sentences containing empty names are true (like e.g. "Morta is a parca"), whereas some of them are false (like e.g. "Morta is a siren"). On the other hand, all names have connotation, proper names included, anyway taken contextually, when their connotation is identical with the connotation of an appropriate description of the individual signified by the proper name (whereas proper names taken acontextually remain variables).

Secondly, she stood in opposition to the idea that logical implications can be considered adequate interpretations of conditional propositions of natural language of the type "If p, then q"; according to Dąmbska the meaning of natural conditionals

is the judgement that between what is stated in the antecedent 'p' and what is stated in the consequent 'q', there is a relation of sufficient conditioning. She also proposed a certain modification of Twardowski's conception of the meaning of the conditional proposition in *casus realis* of the type "If it is the case that p, then q". Twardowski identified this meaning with the meaning of the complex of three judgments: (a) a judgement stating the conditioning between 'p' and 'q'; (b) a judgement stating the occurrence of the condition and (c) a judgement stating the occurrence of the conditioned thing. According to Dąmbska, there is only (a) because only (a) is explicitly expressed in this kind of proposition. The remaining two components mentioned by Twardowski – namely (b) and (c) – are what is expressed in this kind of proposition only implicitly.

6.2. Truth relativized to language

Dąmbska noted that definitions of truth are rooted in "conceptions of language for which the predicate "is true" is defined. She analysed in this respect three conceptions of language which were in circulation in the 20^{th} century: the correspondent (Tarski, Carnap), the operational (late Wittgenstein) and the immanent (Ajdukiewicz). In the first conception, language is treated as a system of signs which refer to a certain objective domain. In the second conception, language is a form of biological and cultural behaviour of a person. In the third conception – language is considered to be a set of signs and directives of creating signs and transforming one sign into another.

Dąmbska shows that definitions of "truth" given in the frame of these conceptions are relativized to them. The classical definition of truth harmonizes with the correspondence conception of language (accepted, by the way, by Dąmbska). She formulates it as follows: An affirmative sentence is true when the state of affairs corresponding to this sentence occurs; a negative sentence is true when a state of affairs corresponding to it does not occur. On the basis of the operational conception, a pragmatic definition of truth is natural. Immanent conception is a basis of the syntactic definition.

According to Dąmbska – all these concepts are derivative with respect to the concept of truthfulness as something that is a feature of judgements in the logical sense (or the logical content of sentences) and what is correlated with some ontical categories – first of all with the concept of existence.

6.3. Understanding

The expression "to understand" occurs, i.a., in contexts such as "A understands that p" and "A understands X". The context of the second type has several meanings – to understand X is the same as: to know what X means, to know what X expresses, to know what X's structure is, and in the end – to know what idea is realized by X. Dąmbska was convinced that, in all these cases, understanding: (a) concerns objects connected with man's spiritual life; (b) consists in becoming aware of relations which indicate the meanings of these objects, but (c) this becoming aware is repeatable.

Dąmbska was convinced that conditions (a)-(c) may be considered as essential conditions of understanding. With respect to condition (b) – understanding is a fallible cognitive act.

6.4. Silence and namelessness

Dąmbska's analysis of the semiotic functions of silence has a multidimensional character.

Silence is either a simple lack of speech (not-speaking) or refraining from speaking (signitive silence). Signitive silence analysed as a mark is either a symptom or a signal. Considered as a communicative element of natural language, it is – leaving aside expressive functions – a kind of indexical expression. Besides semantic functions, it performs pragmatic ones, *i.a.* is a means of a fight or a way of striving for perfection.

In her semiotic-psychological-cultural research on the concept of namelessness, Dąmbska starts from the ascertainment that, on the one hand, we hold our name in high esteem and, on the other hand, sometimes we pretend to become nameless. Getting rid of a name, changing or hiding it (namelessness) are not indifferent from the psychological point of view (among motives of namelessness there are fear and a need of play) as well as from a sociological point of view (namelessness in action is, first of all, a way of fighting).

7. Methodology

7.1. Justification

To justify a sentence 'p' is to show that if fulfils sufficient conditions to accept (state, know, suppose, expect) that p.

Justification may by direct or indirect (*scil.* by reasoning).

7.1.1. Direct justification. A sentence is justified directly if we accept it on the basis our own experiences. Scientific claims should be intersubjectively justified. But, how could we know that the experience of someone else is the same or at least similar to ours – in the face of the same facts?

According to Dąmbska we do not have to know this in order to do science. A hypothesis that other people's experiences are the same or similar to our experience is not – contrary to appearances – a premise of scientific claims, but at the most a metascientific hypothesis. The belief in the similarity of the content of human perception has a similar status as the belief that scientists as such are not liars.

Moreover, if this hypothesis said that scientific theses are theses about intersubjective objects, these objects would not be impressions as such but some relations between impressions. These relations can be intersubjectively cognized. This is certified by the fact that normal people in similar circumstances usually accept the same sentences.

7.1.2. Indirect justification. Among types of indirect justification, Dąmbska was especially interested in reasoning by analogy.

Dąmbska understood analogy to be "a structural similarity of some sets or systems, *i.e.* a similarity of relations holding between elements of these sets of parts of these systems, and between the properties determined by these relations".

Reasoning by analogy may take one of two forms:

(a) $[(A : B) :: (C : D)] \Rightarrow [(B : A) :: (D : C)]$.
This is a scheme of, for instance, the following reasoning: If God is for people what a father is for children, then people are for God what children are for a father. Here, the conclusion follows from the premise. This reasoning is deducible (and infallible) and applied for instance in mathematics.

(b) $[(A/B : C/D)) \wedge F(C/D)] \Rightarrow F(A/B)$.
This is a scheme of, for instance, the following reasoning: If God is for people what a father is for children, and a father is the children's just judge, then God is a just judge for people. Here, the conclusion often does not follow from the premises and the premises do not follow from conclusions.

The existence of reasoning of type (b) certifies the fact that the traditional division of processes of reasoning into deductive (in which a conclusion follows from premises) and reductive (in which premises follows from the conclusion) is inadequate.

Reasoning by analogy was considered by Dąmbska to be binding (and *eo ipso* infallible), when the analogy occurring in them is essential, *i.e.* when the relation "fulfils the conditions which satisfy the same rule or the same law".

Reasoning by analogy often has an insightful character and may serve as a justification of sentences about the future. The last point is based on the assumption of the isomorphism or homomorphism of future events with respect to already given ones.

Appreciating the cognitive value of reasoning by analogy and noting its insightful character, Dąmbska at the same time emphasized the danger connected with making use of analogies in which one element may not be cognized by the rational method in science. Such analogies and reasoning based on them are – according to Dąmbska – irrational.

7.2. Scientific laws

There is no science without laws.

Dąmbska considered scientific laws to be general implications: (a) in which ranges of variables are open classes (infinite or such that we may not decide whether they are finite); (b) concerning a constant connection between phenomena; (c) without any absolute time determination; (d) being an element of a certain science, (c) empirically verified.

Such a concept of law has applications in axiomatized formal disciplines in which theses are tautologies. Here, axioms and some of their consequences – namely those which are of a special importance, for instance, those which are applied in

the reasoning of other disciplines or in daily life, or which can simplify these kinds of reasoning – are called "laws". Criteria of this importance are too vague to distinguish laws so understood from a set of tautologies.

This concept has – according to Dąmbska – applications in both the natural and human sciences, especially in history. The peculiarity of history does not consist in the fact that it is an idiographic science (or that it describes individual facts) in opposition to natural sciences which are nomological (or which formulate laws). History differs from natural sciences with respect to the level of complication of the examined facts, which are relatively simple in the case of natural sciences but are very complicated combinations of many phenomena – physical, psychical and sociological ones – in the case of history.

7.3. Truthfulness of scientific laws

Some scientists claim that truthfulness is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition of scientific claims – in particular regarding physical laws. According to some of them – this is because these laws are in fact arbitrary definitions or their analytical consequences. According to others, laws are only provisory hypotheses, relativized to the changing state of knowledge; if they are approximate hypotheses – they are simply false.

Dąmbska refuted this point of view. Laws of physics would not have any logical value if they could be interpreted as functions whose degree of approximation is undefined (the range of the unknown may be bigger or smaller); but usually in such laws it is (at least provisionally) defined in certain orders. They are not, in Dąmbska's opinion, propositional functions. Even if in physics there are laws in which both antecedent and consequent are false, we may only conclude that such laws are not verifiable. Unverifiability is not the same as falsity.

According to Dąmbska – truthfulness is not a necessary condition of being a law. This is of course classically understood truthfulness – not verifiability (since false sentences may also be verified).

Another thing is that we sometimes simply do not know whether a given law is true. We are inclined to believe in those sentences which are probable.

8. Axiology

In the domain of axiology – Dąmbska accepted absolutism and objectivism.

As opposed to the axiological nihilists, she believed that values exist in reality and are not only purely intentional or fictional objects. As opposed to the relativists – she was convinced that the changeability of conventions "does not testify to the relativism of values, but that they be differently understood" or "that means of realizing them may be chosen differently." As opposed to subjectivists, who wanted to see the source of values in "causative subjects", she wrote:

> The base of establishing [...] the [ethical rules of legal laws] of decisions [...] is created usually by some judgements on values

> which pretend to be objectively justified; and decision is a choice of a certain norm which – according to the opinion of the decision maker – states an obligation to ways of conduct which aim at realizing or preserving these values [10, p. 114].

8.1. Man and the world of values

The world of man is the world of values. Dąmbska wrote:

> Each of our conscious actions is directed by a desire to realize values giving sense to this action [10, p. 31].

Among sentences which concern the world of values as it is broadly understood – Dąmbska distinguished, i.a., norms, evaluations and axiological sentences sensu stricto.

We have already mentioned norms above. Evaluations and axiological sentences sensu stricto form a subclass of axiological sentences sensu largo. Evaluations – are sentences stating that some objects are valuable (*scil.* that they possess value). Axiological sentences sensu stricto are sentences which state what values are and what kinds of them exist.

Among these types of sentences – Dąmbska formulated mostly normative and evaluative sentences. However, she usually supplemented them with axiological sentences *sensu stricto*.

We read in Dąmbska:

> A peculiar feature of metaphysical investigation in the Lvov-Warsaw School is emphasized which is given to axiological moments: moral values which are assumed and produced by making philosophy and to its peculiar ethos, which shapes the life of philosopher [13, p. 29].

There is no doubt that Dąmbska herself had undertaken analysis of "axiological moments" in various domains of her research, first of all in research concerning the theory of science.

She considered accuracy (*scil.* functionality) to be the most important cognitive value of science. Accuracy – as opposed to truthfulness – in a gradable form. The better answers to questions concerning its domain a science gives (the best that can be given under specific conditions of cognition), the more accurate it is.

8.2. The conception of freedom

Among the values of human life, Dąmbska analysed i.a. freedom. It was a conscious choice, motivated by the same factors as analyses devoted to silence and namelessness.

Freedom is not always an axiologically positive value. It is so only if freedom is a necessary condition for realising some positive values.

One sometimes distinguishes freedom-from and freedom-to. Dąmbska [12] emphasized the fact that "freedom-from" and "freedom-to" are correlative terms. She wrote:

> Science's freedom from ideological and administrative pressure is freedom towards it inherent function of searching for and delivering truth; freedom of speech is at the same time freedom to publicly proclaim one's views and convictions [12, p. 857].

The correlation occurs that freedom is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of the possibility of action. And so: freedom from mistake is a condition of morality *etc.*

8.3. Normative ethics

In the domain of normative ethics, Dąmbska defended a certain version of perfectionism and intellectualism (and she contrasted the latter to emotionalism). She formulated ethical criterion as follows: Conduct is good if it aims at the perfection of a human; it is bad if it discourages perfection.

9. Significance

The significance of the personality of Dąmbska – especially after World War 2 – consisted in the fact that she had the courage to bear witness to the truth in all circumstances of her life.

The significance of the work of Dąmbska – lies in the fact that her work reflects laws of reason and the axiological taste.

That is why she earned the title of the first lady of twentieth-century Polish philosophy.

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