

Amicus Plato...

There have been various open letters published about the current threat to Latin and Philosophy at Polish universities, but their signatories have not included a single mathematician or physicist. Philosophy has been defended by philosophers, and Latin by classicists, but why have their colleagues from the natural and formal sciences not lent a hand? Where is the *universitatis*? As a professor of Physics, I say, "mea culpa maxima!" Yes, all students without exception should be taught Philosophy, and I cannot understand why this view is not universally held.

I recently saw "The Banality of Love", a play by Savyon Liebrecht, at the Dramatyczny Theater in Warsaw. The audience was full of university students interested in this tale of romance between Martin Heidegger and Hanna Arendt, dealing with philosophy, morality, responsibility for others... A recurring question was whether it would have been better if Heidegger had not taught Philosophy in 1930s Germany, when he publicly supported Hitler. What struck me, though, was this great philosopher's lack of virtue in his unacceptable treatment of students. And not only me, as it turned out. After the play, slowly descending a narrow staircase from the fourth floor, I nolens volens overheard two young men arguing about another philosopher, a scholar of Plato, who in an outburst of eristic passion had used *ad personam* terms towards two students, not even his. Offended, they had taken him to court. The dispute on the stairs was not about this incident *de iure*, but about the question of whether a master *ex cathedra* of Platonic ethics could, as a teacher, act against those ethics, without restraining, through courage and intellect, the impetuosity of his immortal soul... These young people were using substantive arguments, citing, among others, the shocking example of Seneca. They knew and understood a lot. For such a conversation, they could surely have received a high mark at an "Introduction to Philosophy" seminar for math students - if such a thing existed.

And Latin? Can math and physics students be enticed to Latin classes? In their second year, let's say, they might have to choose among three (?) one-semester modules of different degrees of difficulty and different levels of Latin content, with a Latin language course as an elective. At the easiest level, two or three lectures could be devoted to the Horatian fawn, firstly in philological and poetic translations, later in interpretation, and finally the students would read the original (Odes 1,23). Another lecture could be on the meaning of the Pater noster, in the context of Paweł Huelle's story "Gute Luise", in which a young girl uses this prayer as a spell that

unfailingly quells the drunken frenzies of her father Szlifierz. As a trial, I gave a (30-minute, improvised) talk on Horace's fawn and Huelle's pear to a math student, who assured me that he and many of his fellow-students would like to learn about such subjects as part of their university education. I know many humanities students at Warsaw, Gdańsk and Wrocław Universities, and at the seminary in Bydgoszcz, who would be willing and able to give such "para-Latin" lectures to non-Latin-speaking barbarians like me. The lecture halls would be full and the cost-effectiveness criteria satisfied.

During my years at Oxford, there was a rather exaggerated stereotype that our university specialized in humanities and Cambridge in sciences, as in the saying "Oxford stands for manners and marble, Cambridge for sausages and sums." Similarly, Professor Włodzisław Duch went too far when he wrote in "Polityka" magazine that we should "shed no tears for the humanities." Hmm...

Those who cry are the ones who remember: that, for example, when in 1945 there was a shortage of textbooks in Poland, the possibility of publishing twenty books as a "gift from the Swedish government to Polish culture" was contrived by Jerzy Borejsza, communist, savant, workaholic and the legendary editor of "Czytelnik." Twenty being such a small number, only the most essential subjects had to be selected: math, physics, technology, medicine and ethics. The book on ethics was "Foundations of the Science of Morality" by Maria Ossowska. The choice of books reflected the academic ethos that had developed in inter-

war Poland: that culture rested on the foundations of selective university education, hierarchy, and the unity of ethics, science and the arts. So let us always remember that physicists and chemists should study philosophy, and linguists and divinity students mathematics!

God willing, in some future essay I hope to write an introduction to the formal sciences, and outline minimum *minimumum* what is necessary for a rational understanding of the world. At one time Włodzimierz Zonn lectured in Astronomy at the Academy of Fine Arts, while today's humanities students are taught gender studies and other postmodernist trends, but virtually nothing substantial about the pinnacles of human genius: Gödel's Theorem, Schrödinger's cat, Einstein's Theory of Relativity, the *in vitro* method, the discovery of the Big Bang...



All university students - without exception - should be taught philosophy

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