

In memoriam Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009)

A Master and a Friend

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When we think of Leszek Kołakowski, present among us so recently, we remember the various roles which made up his extraordinary personality

Kołakowski was a historian of philosophy of incomparable competence, who scrutinized the pinnacles of human contemplation about the world and the duties of reasoning men – from Plato to Jaspers – not so as to classify them according to epoch, school of thought, and trend, but to take from them unceasing questions and vivid grains of wisdom. He devoted his time, attention, and investigation to some more than others – to Descartes, Pascal, Spinoza, Leibniz, Husserl (by no means an exhaustive list) – but he was a rightful, sometimes recalcitrant heir to them all. Even though positivistic, analytical philosophy was furthest from

his interests, for instance, he still took it as a subject of one of his critical dissertations.

Non-arbitrary philosopher

Kołakowski was a philosopher with no ambition to build his own system or custom of speaking with an arbitrary voice. His writings offer more doubts, concerns, tangles, and paradoxes than assertively-delivered statements. He openly admitted that “among the questions keeping European philosophy alive for two and a half millennia not one has ever been solved to our common satisfaction” (*Metaphysical Horror*), yet he insisted that philosophical analysis is a worthwhile pursuit, valuable in itself and ceaselessly accompanying human civilization. Thus, he concerned himself with the riddles of metaphysics, the concept of truth, the place and meaning of religious faith, the ubiquity of myths in intellectual culture, aporias of cognition and language, justification of ethical principles, and numerous other issues, while not shunning practical philosophy that has a more tangible association with dilemmas of everyday life as well as our intuitions regarding right and wrong.

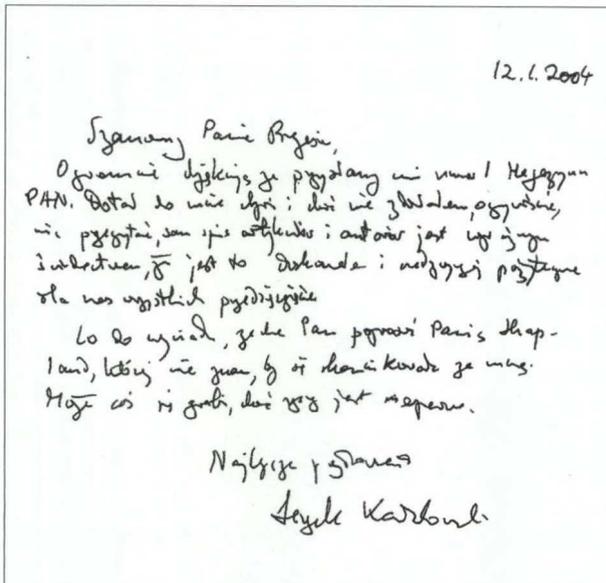
At the same time he was not a moralist offering his readers and listeners ready-made recipes for nobleness and fairness. Rather, he invited them to mutual contemplation, proposing gentle tolerance and respect (although not boundless) for others’ convictions. He created a characteristic blend of seriousness and jest, at times jocular seriousness or serious jest, such as when adding unexpected punch lines and amusing messages to holy parables.

He was a writer of unequalled sensitivity to the significance of words, wealth of associations and rhythm of sentences. His favorite writing style was that of an essay combining philosophical dilemmas with literary finesse (at times already in the title). He was an author difficult for the student in a hurry, wanting to quickly underline or list point-by-point what would be necessary for an exam. However, his writing was comprehensive and generally accessible even to readers lacking philosophical education yet interested in following the trail of his thoughts.

Politics and the intellectual

Kołakowski did not shy away from politics and from what he regarded as the duty of a Polish intellectual – where he was not infallible, but also ready to renounce faith and commitments he regarded as false, regardless of the consequences of such a step. He did not hesitate to say and write things that carried a risk of revocation of his teaching rights,

Academia Archives



Since the first issues of *Academia* Professor Leszek Kołakowski was a sympathetic observer and commentator of the editorial team's efforts, as documented by this hand-written letter to the President of the Academy. On 27 January 2004 the Professor gave an interview published in the 2/2004 issue, entitled "Europe: the Presence of Culture"



Piotr Wójcik/Agencja Gazeta

Professor Leszek Kołakowski was a full member of the Polish Academy of Sciences, a professor at All Souls College at the University of Oxford, and winner of several prestigious awards. He passed away on 17 July 2009 in Oxford

his right to print or to remain in his homeland. During the period of his physical absence in Poland he remained present with words smuggled through cordons, maintaining a hazy hope for freedom. He returned to familiar places as soon as it became possible, and patiently, good-naturedly endured the limelight of his growing popularity – something that philosophers are generally not used to.

He was a true European, speaking and writing in several languages including Latin, and enjoying general respect. His writings were and are still being translated into many languages, with his three-volume history on Marxism as doctrine and practice probably being his best known work in Europe. However, in Poland, whose intelligentsia departed from Marxism early on and without particular distress, this was not his most widely-read work.

He was a private, family man, valuing the peace of an Oxford college and a modest home, and surrounded by the love of his nearest and dearest. At the same time he willingly and cheerfully feasted among people who he felt close to. He was a faithful friend, saddened by the passing of peers with whom he had maintained tried and tested bonds through difficult years.

Now that he, in his turn, has left us, sorrow and regret remain – the result of the loss of one so unsurpassed and

individual that we might meet his like only once in a lifetime. The Polish academic community will now have a duty to ensure that his collected works are published quickly. ■

Prof. Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009), eminent Polish philosopher, one of the co-founders of the Warsaw school of the history of ideas, worked on history of philosophy, history of political ideas and the philosophy of religion and morals. His books include *Individual and Infinity: Freedom and Antinomies of Freedom in the Philosophy of Spinoza* (1958, English edition 2004); *Main Currents of Marxism* (1976, English edition 1978); *Religion: If there is no God...* (1982); *Metaphysical Horror* (1988), and *God Owes us Nothing* (1998). From the mid-1960s onward he was connected with Poland's democratic opposition. Professor and lecturer at the University of Warsaw, full member of the Polish Academy of Sciences, fellow of the All Souls College in Oxford. Awarded several prizes, including the John Kluge Prize, regarded as equivalent to the Nobel Prize in humanities.