

Obecność zła. O filozofii Leszka Kołakowskiego [The Presence of Evil: On the Philosophy of Leszek Kołakowski], By JAN TOKARSKI (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2016 pp. 364)¹

Many of us, thinking about Leszek Kołakowski, have an image in our heads of the wrinkled face of the sage, with small glasses, and a penetrating look, or a lightly stooping figure in a hat with a distinctive glass cane. However, even Leszek Kołakowski was young once. Or at least he was middle aged. A picture of him from the end of the 1960s in Montreal confirms this. We see those same circles under his eyes, but a face without wrinkles. In his thin long-fingered hand is a cigarette – a symbol of the times and reliable tool aiding concentration during writing and public discussion. This is the 40-year old intellectual after writing *The Presence of Myth* and before *The Main Currents of Marxism*, at the peak of his vitality and cognitive strength.

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It was not a coincidence then, I believe, that this picture ended up on the cover of *The Presence of Evil: On the Philosophy of Leszek Kołakowski* by Jan Tokarski, a historian of ideas and editor of the *Political Review* and *Kronos*. He would like to give Kołakowski a second youth, and to demonstrate the vitality of his thought. Tokarski thus begins his book with a provocative statement: these days the writings of Leszek Kołakowski are neither read nor discussed. He points to evidence from academia – the author of *Main Currents of Marxism* is not talked about in philosophical studies as one of the most distinguished thinkers of the 20th century. Students do not write theses about him and lecturers rarely include his texts on their syllabi. In cafes and libraries, other authors are being read more often.

Why did this happen? Tokarski considers three answers. The first is that the subjects Kołakowski covered are subjects of the past. The problems of communism or historical determinism are less relevant to current questions. Political thinking focused solely on the warnings of totalitarianism, even though pertinent, carries the risk of boredom and paralysis. Similarly to the anti-totalitarian works of George Orwell, Arthur Koestler or Karl Popper, Kołakowski's work has already lost its status of a bible for intellectuals. At best his work could be of interest to intellectual historians of the 20th century. The second answer is that Kołakowski has not aged well – his small works written after 1989 lack the intellectual energy of the previous years. They have become part of the tedious truism that nothing can be known about anything. Tokarski provocatively dismisses the series *Mini-lectures on Big Issues* and *What Are Great Philosophers Asking Us* as 'popular page-turners'. At another

¹ Originally published as Michał Jędrzejek, 'Nasza wieczna sprawa z Kołakowskim?', *Znak* 736 (2016), 104-107.

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point, he recalls 'the idyllic atmosphere of conversations with the master' of an extended later interview in which 'the pressure' of serious questions was lacking. It may seem that the former philosophical jester took on the position of a standard author in the canon.

Are these explanations correct? It is not out of the question, according to Tokarski. He adds a third explanation, however, which justifies the work on reconstructing Kołakowski's philosophical views. An interpretation showing the unity of the thinker's extensive work ranging from Spinoza and the Dutch mystics, Marxism and phenomenology, to the Catholic Church and modern civilization was missing as the work itself was scattered. In keeping with Isaiah Berlin's popular statement, one can discern two types of philosophers: the fox, sprinting here and there, conscious of the existence of different interesting recesses; and the slow hedgehog who knows one important thing.

Kołakowski seems to be a typical philosopher-fox. However, Tokarski wants to uncover the hidden hedgehog in him, to recognize in his work the nerve-center, the subject present in his whole philosophical journey. It is 'the presence of evil' that provides him with the contour of the solid core.

Thanks to the continuity in Kołakowski's works, starting from his engagement in the communist regime, feeding on a Promethean hope of the eradication of earthly evil, through to the recognition of religious teachings on original sin and the devil, the permanence of evil in our temporal ventures becomes more visible and one can see 'the extravagance that is timelessness', as Tokarski elegantly states. The subject of evil becomes the centerpiece of the book, which functions as 'a guide to the thought of the author of *The Main Currents of Marxism*' on the one hand, and on the other presents 'a personal dialogue with the work of Leszek Kołakowski' (13-14).

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Tokarski's book is not a guide in the same vein as in an academic monograph. Certainly, the Warsaw historian of ideas has managed to lead the reader through Kołakowski's entire work in a sensible and systematic way. Starting with a biographical sketch and then leading into four chapters covering: 1) history, Marxism and totalitarianism, 2) reason, myth and religion, 3) ethics, and 4) critiques of modernity. Through short quotations and commentaries, he draws upon the over 20 works of the author of *Main Currents of Marxism*. Tokarski is distinct from many other Kołakowski scholars due to the absence of a characteristic (though sometimes also amiable) anecdotal-personal tone. Tokarski, as a young scholar (born 1981), measures up with carefully read texts and not with his personal recollections of 'beloved Leszek'.

However, what is lacking in the book – at least for this avid academic reader, who demands more details from a 'guide to Kołakowski' – is a wider historical-philosophical context on the one hand and on the other, a useful confrontation with the literature on the subject. Tokarski is not trying to describe in more detail the philosopher's intellectual

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inspirations nor the main ramifications of the reception of Kołakowski's work in Poland and abroad. However, it would be intriguing to follow the reaction among the West European leftists to Kołakowski's turnaround, from Marxism to its thorough criticism. Also missing is an engagement with the important works of other authors. For instance, the argument concerning a necessity to acknowledge the existence of an absolute Consciousness in order to make use of the concept of truth, contained in Kołakowski's work, *Religion: If There is no God*, would need a more incisive problematization. This argument provoked a heated polemic coming from Helena Eilstein and up to today it is the source of irritation for the heirs of the Lwów-Warsaw school (one of them angrily named Kołakowski, 'a renegade of the rationalist tradition'). If this is a guidebook, then it is an essayistic one, saturated with the sensitivity and close readings of its author. We must admit that Tokarski has managed to lucidly present most of the important philosophical issues, often glimmering with excellent and original commentary.

I would distinguish two revelations that came out of reading *The Presence of Evil*. The first is the debate over how young Kołakowski arrived at communism. He presents a convincing sketch-like analysis of various kinds of totalitarian seduction. Aside from the 'captive mind' believing in the inevitability of history, and governing through fear and material incentives, the author highlights a picture of still other motivations for ideological engagement. He defines it with the philosophical moniker of nihilism. The experience of war was supposed to cause hatred for the existing world as a source of senseless suffering. Simultaneously this experience paradoxically familiarized people with violence, and even legitimated it. Contrary to the expectations of the naïve ones, violence became necessary to overturn the existing order. Tokarski describes engagement in communism not as an expression of calm faith in the idea of intellectual prowess and brotherhood, or as the result of a lack of awareness about the crimes of the USSR. In a mini social-psychological speculation, he opines that young believers were often fully conscious of communism's demonic nature. It was about 'the experience of engaging in an ideology which is accepted not despite its radicalism, barbarity or ruthlessness but precisely because of these things'. For that reason, Kołakowski at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s – as accounts from that era confirm – 'was more of a Stalinist than a Marxist' (40). Tokarski, thanks to his sensitivity regarding the title subject of evil, managed – I believe, accurately – to illustrate the post-war spiritual climate.

The second fascinating revelation which I would like to point out in *The Presence of Evil* is a simple discovery: in Kołakowski's work there are no Greeks. In contrast to many other 20th century thinkers, the Polish philosopher did not deal with the Classics, nor did he use antiquity to search for models for the present. What are the philosophical consequences? Tokarski contrasts the study of Kołakowski's *sacrum* with the perspective of the Italian intellectual Nicola Chiaromonte for whom ancient Greece became a true spiritual homeland (188-197). Chiaromonte strongly argues for the thesis that Greeks – better than Christians who believe in an eschatological happy end – came to understand the lasting

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nature of evil. Simultaneously they worked out an alluring model of personhood which, although tied to its own contingency, courageously challenges the forces governing the world and tries to maintain them in good measure. Expanding on Tokarski's intuition, it can be suggested that the absence of the Greek perspective in the writings of the author of *The Presence of Myth* results in a very pessimistic description of the consequences of the secularization process. The memory of Greece in the history of modern Europe always provided hope for a better life outside of the Christian imaginarium. The hypothesis must be considered then that the simplified alternative 'either God or nihilism', appearing in Kołakowski's later work, results from the fact that the Greek image of man and the world is absent from his philosophical outlook.

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There are also reasons to somewhat disagree with Tokarski. One can see that he easily engages with the subjects of cultural criticism, the problems of liberal democracy and questions of modern religiosity. Among the texts he engages with, liberal and conservative thinkers dominate. The fate of the left is not the subject of deeper reflection.

The author did not attempt the difficult work of a critical analysis of the third volume of *The Main Currents of Marxism*, which at times caricatures the 20th century Left, such as the thinkers from Frankfurt School. It could be interesting also to make sense of today's swelling interest in Marxism (in the age of growing economic inequality) through the lens of *Main Currents*, which proclaimed the dissolution of that intellectual tradition. In the chapter on the modern world there are also some irritating conservative traces of an overdone criticism of culture – it's hard to say if they come more from Kołakowski or from Tokarski himself. There is no space in them for perceiving attempts at modern emancipation, while the two-sentence diagnosis of the anti-globalist movements boils down to accusations of a 'nihilistic joy of destruction' and stirring up 'riots' (296). All the while liberal society is characterized neither by cultivating individual freedom nor by a previously unheard of care for the rights of excluded groups, but solely the creative pursuit of avoiding life's unpleasantness. The author approaches a conservative cliché when he concludes his considerations: 'This is the very essence of the liberal-democratic *dis-society*: the society of uprooted and atomized individuals, who are also enlightened and emancipated' (309).

Tokarski's explorations on Christianity also give rise to certain reservations. He appropriately, I believe, criticizes the simplified image of later Kołakowski as a thinker encouraging an erasure of the enlightenment-positivistic wave and calling simply for a return to religion. The philosopher, not espousing religious belief, diagnoses both the cultural necessity for myth as well as an impossibility of believing in it with the naïveté of old. Some other observations, however, can be called into question. Tokarski states that Kołakowski was not a sympathizer of the 'open Church' consoling people, but rather an

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anti-utopian, apocalyptic prophet – aware of the possibility of catastrophe and fragility surrounding our reality. Christ on the cross was to be an important symbol for him – of a God who gives oneself up to death, suffers and is unsure of his own victory. God, if he exists, cannot be an indifferent defender of order nor a great consoler justifying every existing evil in the historical theodicy. Tokarski sums up his considerations writing, 'Kołakowski's God is therefore not a God of triumph or cosmic success – he is rather the God of defeat – a God who is losing at every turn because he suffers defeat every time evil occurs' (201). As well as, 'From Kołakowski's perspective nothing could be more foreign to the very essence of the *sacrum* than theodicy' (345).

That pessimistic-existentialist view of Christianity – however close to the apocalyptic deliberations that are contained in *Jesus Ridiculed* – overlooks at least two important motifs in Kołakowski's reflections on Christianity. The first is the ethical motif. The Polish philosopher oftentimes – also after his conservative turnabout in the 1980s – talked about his attachment to the interpretation of the New Testament in the spirit of Erasmus of Rotterdam (among other times, as in his interview with Jerzy Turowicz in 1989). Christianity was thus for him then, and perhaps above all, a set of moral concepts, commanding love for one's neighbor and offering a personal example in the figure of Jesus. The second motif present in, among many others, *Religion* is the conviction that the metaphysical Absolute is a guarantor of the moral and epistemological order. Although people are plagued by the feeling of an ever-present evil, the only religious medicine for it is faith in God's design. In considerations from this late work he does not dismiss theodicy at all nor does he isolate the figure of the suffering God from the entire story of resurrection and redemption. In a conversation with Krzysztof Michalski (*Why Nietzsche?*) from 1998, Kołakowski said, 'I don't know if it makes sense to talk about religion if... [religion] does not include some type of belief in an order of the world which comes before us, which is formed prior to our existence, and was not made by us. If there is no such order then I don't know in what sense we can talk about religion'. Tokarski, in a similar manner to when he assigns Kołakowski a close relationship to Nietzsche and Heidegger, seems to be too reliant on the interpretations and opinions of Krzysztof Michalski. However, the author of *The Presence of Myth* – differing from Michalski in his later essays – is not a Christian existentialist; rather he connects skeptical pessimism with Erasmus's humanism and with the desire for belief in the existence of the pre-established (but never fully inscrutable) order.

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Jan Tokarski has written an interesting and, at times, impressive book – both philosophically and stylistically, while occasionally leaving room for disagreement and debate. This is both a good introduction to the works of Leszek Kołakowski, as well as a book for his devoted readers who will find some revelatory remarks.

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It is possible to propose one more answer which we have yet to consider on the question of why the author of *The Main Currents of Marxism* is not at the center of academic debate today. Despite the efforts of his interpreters, it is impossible to place Kołakowski in the category of those thorough philosophical hedgehogs who are developing a single thought throughout their entire lives: dealing with a single question. After all he did not create his own, elaborated theory of evil (similarly to the theory of religion), which one could attach to his name and commit to academic study. In Tokarski's reading too, he did not accomplish this. The oft-repeated thesis that modern culture is laced with a hope for erasing earthly evil from our world, seems quite questionable. The crisis of utopian thinking, diagnosed by Kołakowski attests to quite the contrary. In a world without utopia, the hope for defeating evil is also absent. The ubiquity of evil is constantly being confirmed at any film festival, confronting us with a paralyzing image of earthly suffering – in war, in politics and in family life.

At the same time, it is hard to believe that Kołakowski will no longer be read. Both his weakness and his strengths are accounted for by the fox-like nature of the author of *The Presence of Myth*. Even if some of the philosophical-political issues Kołakowski undertook seem to be, at least at the moment, irrelevant, his wonderful historical and religious-metaphysical works still remain lively. Perhaps the epoch has ended when most of the Polish intelligentsia defined itself through the spiritual mood of *kołakowskiism*. However, I am convinced that the intellectual journey of Leszek Kołakowski will continue to stir emotion and unease among the next generation of authors. Jan Tokarski's *The Presence of Evil* is evidence of that. I think that in a short time subsequent works of this sort will appear.

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Piotr Augustyniak, *Homo polacus. Eseje o polskiej duszy* [Essays on the Polish Spirit], Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2015

It is not a large volume. However, in its small format of 180 pages, extraordinarily it managed to fit a substantial story about twentieth century Polish intellectuals' struggles with Polish identity, history, and culture. The underlying theme of the essays collected here is a portrayal of various ideological strategies, arising as a result of the confrontation of Poles with the modern world. The book is thick with ideas, full of meanings and symbols, associations and revelations. It has two dimensions, two narratives that complete each other. The first and essential [narrative], is a passionate, but at the same