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If There is No Religion: L. Kołakowski's Defence of the Sacred

Part 2 a polemic

Abstract

The article is an argument with the main theses presented by L. Kołakowski in his vision of religion. The discussion, which considers the strengths of the Polish philosopher's analyses, concerns the distinction between empiricism and transcendentalism, the epistemological status of empirical sciences and broadly understood naturalisms, as well as the question of metaphysical horror as understood by L. Kołakowski. The text analyses the anthropological argument and the specificity of religion with its personal trust, the specificity of human existence, the experience of the sacred-profane and the importance of religion for human existence. The conclusion presents a further perspective for the analysis of the phenomenon of religion.

Keywords

The Absolute, historical God, temporality, good, self, naturalism, transcendentalism, the sacred, the profane, knowledge, truth, science, personal trust, religious perception, contingency.

Presenting the polemic with L. Kołakowski's view of religion, we shall recall its main theses. The philosopher places the sphere of the sacred in the transcendentalist paradigm, which is incompatible with naturalisms, especially with the methodological and philosophical assumptions of empirical sciences.

Whilst not denying the successes (but also the threats) of the results of research in empirical sciences, L. Kołakowski, emphasises that the naturalisation of the world entails naturalisation (biologisation) of human existence and complete inability to apply, for instance, the concept of truth. However, philosophical attempts to ground the Absolute or the indisputably existing subject end in the inability to positively define these two important entities – this is how metaphysical horror arises. Using the anthropological argument (man as a transcendent being), L. Kołakowski indicates religion as a “place” of an adequate conception of human existence and the universe. The area of religion and religious beliefs is not subject to the rigour of empirical science. It has its own criteria of validity and its reasons. These include the act of personal trust and the experience of the sacred. While not being a science, religion is very important for human life and its self-positioning in the cosmos. The choice between the area of the sacred and the profane is based on the principle of *credo ut intelligam* – it is by no means arbitrary, but is non-arbitrary in the historical sense.

We believe that L. Kołakowski's distinction between the two main options – empiricism and transcendentalism – as the basic models with which to grasp various visions of the world, is correct, although instead of “empiricism” we will use the term “naturalism” in the sense explained below instead of „empiricism”. The Polish philosopher confronts the religious approach with the empirical approach (by which, he means only the empirical sciences).

Following K. Jodkowski's reflection¹, science can be functionally described as specific activities leading to results (the context of discovery), their evaluation

¹ K. Jodkowski, *Nienaukowy fundament nauki*, „Granice Nauki Lectiones & Acroases Philosophicae” (2013), VI, 1, pp. 59, 59–108.

(the context of justification) or as results objectified in the form of a theory. In another approach, scientific theories are not so much sets of ordered theorems, but tools that produce judgments about reality. Whilst trying to find, as he writes, the “foundation” of scientific analysis, K. Jodkowski distinguishes four popular meanings of the term. The foundation of science can be understood as the axiomatic basis of a given scientific theory (1), the source of scientific theories (2), in definitional terms – in the form of a demarcation criterion (3) and finally everything that serves to justify scientific claims as their basis (4).²

Recognition of science as an axiomatic system no longer works today and situating its foundations in the genesis (inductionism) is difficult to maintain. As far as the problem of demarcation is considered, verificationism, confirmation, corroboration, and falsifiability, for reasons analysed in detail and widely known, will not contribute to revealing what science is based on. However, naturalism can be the foundation of science.

N. Eldredge writes that if there is one rule which defines a given idea as scientific it will certainly be the principle of applying naturalistic explanations of phenomena.³ Scientists are only allowed to formulate hypotheses that relate to the material universe, and they can only make such hypotheses in a way that allows them to be tested by evidence (directly or indirectly).⁴

Methodological naturalism is the view that in scientific explanation one cannot go beyond the phenomena and laws of nature or refer to supernatural causes. In addition to the above understanding of naturalism, there are of course many others, such as ontological, epistemological, axiological naturalism, naturalism in the field of social sciences, naturalism in the form of CST or eliminative materialism.⁵

Naturalism is what K. Jodkowski describes as an “epistemic frame of reference.”⁶ K. Jodkowski assumes the distinction between an epistemic frame of reference and a less permanent element – the hard core of theory as understood by Lakatos. In the same epistemic system, many approaches

² K. Jodkowski, *Nienaukowy fundament nauki*, p. 60.

³ N. Eldredge, *The Monkey Business: A Scientist Looks at Creationism*, Washington Square Press, New York 1982, p. 82.

⁴ N. Eldredge, *The Triumph of Evolution and The Failure of Creationism*, W.H Freeman and Company, New York 2001, p. 137.

⁵ More on the subject: C. Mordka: *Wszeteczny urok naturalizmu*, in: *Wokół naturalizacji (w) filozofii*, Fundacja „Dzień dobry! Kolektyw Kultury”, Siemianowice Śląskie 2017, pp. 43–61.

⁶ K. Jodkowski, *Nienaukowy fundament nauki*, p. 96 and following.

can be formulated with different hard cores. Naturalism (epistemic foundation) encompasses various scientific disciplines such as physics, biology, and chemistry. The dispute between evolutionism and creationism is an example of the functioning of an epistemic frame of reference. Some creationists take the truth of what is in the Bible as a fundamental claim, and naturalists consider that approach unscientific.

Technically, both basic approaches are from the same level, but may differ in epistemological value.

Methodological naturalism may be dismissed, but one cannot deny that it has led to many successes. K. Jodkowski writes: “I think that in the 21st century it is not enough to simply propose a different epistemic system than methodological naturalism. It has become too deeply embedded in the consciousness of scientists. Before that, you have to show the limitations of the latter.”⁷

L. Kołakowski does not question the successes of the naturalistic option, but points to certain problems associated with it. These include the physicalisation of human existence (for example the rejection of e.g. consciousness data or goals set by people), biologisation (man as a “container for germ plasm”), the inability to use the concept of truth, goodness, personal trust, being surprised by existence, and experiencing contingency. Thus, this option overlooks what is distinct for man.

It is worth noting that L. Kołakowski describes naturalism (empiricism) quite narrowly. Not all naturalists reject consciousness or ascribing the possibility of formulating goals to human beings; moreover, they consider them irreducible and necessary for the analysis of human existence.⁸

L. Kołakowski, who in fact is a radical instrumentalist when it comes to the status of scientific theories, never stated that science itself is only an extension of the technological trunk of civilisation – instrumentalism is only one of the positions.

In his analyses of the status of science, – and following J. Watkins’ ideas – A. Grobler distinguishes truth as a kind of goal that (1) has to be attained, (2) as approaching such a goal, and (3) the truth that can be pursued without the necessity to ascertain how close one has got to it.

⁷ K. Jodkowski, *Nienaukowy fundament nauki*, p. 107.

⁸ J.R. Searle, *Umysł na nowo odkryty*, transl. by T. Baszniak, PIW, Warsaw 1999; M. Tomasello, *Historia naturalna ludzkiego myślenia*, transl. by B. Kucharzyk Copernicus Center Press, Warsaw 2015.

“Laudan is presumably right in saying that truth is an unattainable cognitive result both in the sense (1) and (2). However, there are no obstacles to considering the truth, as suggested by Watkins, to be a type (3) goal.”⁹

We believe that an important issue is the reduction of human existence to the biological level, which is directly related to L. Kołakowski’s anthropological argument.

Certainly, some naturalists make such a reduction. S. Pinker is a good representative of this position.¹⁰ According to him, the human mind can be described by pointing to certain functions developed through natural selection in order to solve the adaptation problems faced by our hunter-gatherer ancestors. While humans and other animals are usually unaware of the ultimate causes of their behaviour, the logic of natural selection states that the function of the mind is to maximise copies of genes that replicate, i.e., and thus remain stable in each subsequent copy.¹¹

Of course, this does not mean that all human activity is adaptive in the Darwinian sense – people postpone having children until they are successful in their career, they die of obesity, and even sell blood to buy a cinema ticket (in India).¹² According to reductionists, the reason for such behaviour is that the human mind was adapted to living in hunter-gatherer groups in which our species spent ninety percent of its existence, and not to living in the world created after the agrarian and industrial revolution. But what about the astonishment at the existence, the experience of contingency, the concept of the absolute, absolute trust, the idea of love for another person as such, or good that cannot be reduced to utility? Are they creations of the post-industrial era and how did they come to be at all?

Such phenomena are unlikely to be analyzed by reductive naturalists, hence the weakness of their position. But not everyone is a reductionist.¹³ D.C. Dennett, a leading naturalist philosopher, writes: “Our ability to devote our lives to something we deem more important than our own personal welfare – or our

⁹ A. Grobler, *Prawda a względność*, Aureus 2002, p. 47.

¹⁰ S. Pinker, *How the mind Works*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London 1997.

¹¹ S. Pinker, *How the mind Works*, Polish translation, p. 54.

¹² S. Pinker, *How the mind Works*, Polish translation, p. 228.

¹³ R. Dawkins, *Samolubny gen*, transl. by M. Skonieczny, Warsaw 1996, p. 265.

own biological imperative to have offspring – is one of the things that set us aside from the rest of the animal world.”¹⁴

Moreover, many theorists believe that it is impossible to explain cultural content as merely a tool that increases the chances of survival and reproduction (without denying that it does have such a function). Such approaches are characteristic of a memetic perspective that undermines the biologisation of man. A meme can be defined as a non-genetically transmitted replicator, existing as a consistent entity¹⁵ and pertaining to various spheres of human activity. Just as a gene is not defined precisely but intuitively, as a segment of the chromosome with copying fidelity that is high enough to make it a useful unit of natural selection, the same is true of the meme with respect to definitional issues.¹⁶ There are memes of human and non-human beings. When it comes to human memes, they concern broadly understood behaviour (including linguistic behaviour, dances, methods of e.g. farming, gestures, rituals, games) and artefacts, e.g. linguistic artefacts (novels, theories, sayings, poems), instruments, buildings (houses, dams), tools, computers (replicators of artificial life and computer viruses)¹⁷. Memes can exist in certain complexes and, in certain related systems. Thus, the Catholic Church, with its architecture, rituals, laws, music, art and written tradition, can be treated as a coadaptive, stable set of mutually supporting memes. In this approach, human subjects (their minds) become vehicles not only of genes but of memes. After our death, Dawkins writes, there will remain immortal or at least long-lived (copies of) genes and memes. Using metaphorical language, memes usually support our existence and the existence of our progeny, but sometimes they stand in opposition to genes. And this is an important reason why the biologisation of humans is unfounded. A person may decide to give up having children, whether by choosing celibacy or having a childless family; they may also voluntarily commit suicide or devote their life to certain ideas. Although there is not much data, the American National Center of Health Statistic indicated that the percentage of American women of reproductive age who declare themselves childless by choice ranged from 2.4% in 1982 to 4.3% in 1990 and

¹⁴ D.C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell. Religions as a Natural Phenomenon*, Penguin Books, New York 2007, p. 4.

¹⁵ A typology of the modes of being, C. Mordka, *Protagonista. Założenia wstępne*, T. 1, Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin 2016, Chapter 2.

¹⁶ R. Dawkins, *Samolubny gen*, transl. by M. Skonieczny, Warsaw 1996, p. 265 and following.

¹⁷ D.C. Dennett, *Odczarowanie. Religia jako zjawisko naturalne*, transl. by B. Stanosz, PIW, Warsaw 2013, p. 392.

6.6% in 1995. People are also capable of acts of so-called “pure altruism”, which is different from kin altruism or reciprocal altruism. Admittedly, researchers doubt the existence of such altruism. This is due to the fact that acts of helping others are nothing else than “gene egoism”, an attempt to avoid social rejection related to breaking the norm of helping a neighbour, or striving to achieve satisfaction/avoid discomfort. Sometimes committing an “altruistic” act occurs when the person we help is attractive or when it is related to our interests. And finally, we risk being punished for failing to help. Leaving aside the sense of using the word “selfishness” since all actions are selfish, I think that people are capable of doing acts which do not meet the above criteria of “selfishness”, although such actions are certainly very rare.

However, by breaking off the “leash of genes” mankind falls into the service of other replicators. But it also does not have to be so. R. Dawkins (the creator of the term “meme”) notes: “We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.”¹⁸

Therefore, contrary to L. Kołakowski’s claims, in the field of naturalism man does not “reduce himself to biology”, nor does he have to become only a “place” for replication of cultural content (memes). However, L. Kołakowski’s anthropological argument remains valid. After all, “we do not know the origins of humanity, culture or religion.” Referring to L. Kołakowski’s anthropological argumentation, it is worth noting that the Polish philosopher overlooked certain properties of man as a being irreducible to the biological level. L. Kołakowski does not take into account the fact that people not only have the concept of truth but also of lie, not only of love but also of hate, not only of power but also of absolute power. We satisfy not only hunger but also taste (Pizza Royale 007 costs PLN 12.700), we travel on feet, but also in a Bugatti Veyron 16.4 Super Sport for PLN 7 million, when on average a child dies of hunger every 7 seconds.

We believe that we need a perspective broader than L. Kołakowski’s to explain the above phenomena. The Polish psychologist J. Koziellecki presented such an approach in his conception of man as a being that by definition “crosses boundaries” (a transgressive being). This idea differentiates between homeostatic (satiation) and heterostatic (aspirational) motivation. Homeostatic motivation (e.g. hunger) can be reduced thanks to appropriate mechanisms by which it is possible to describe animal organisms. However, it fails to explain human

¹⁸ R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford, New York 2006, p. 201.

behaviour that is driven by heterostatic motivation. This motivation is determined by the difference between the current state and aspirations, which in the case of human existence have no limitations; hence the “insatiability” as an anthropic constant of the human race. When trying to achieve aspirational states, man transgresses towards things, towards others, towards ideas and towards oneself.¹⁹

The above approach recognizes the human being as a being in certain movement towards something that is yet to be, rather than defining them in terms of biology, culture or soul (spirit). This movement implies that we not only love non-biologically but also hate non-biologically; that not only power is important to us, but also absolute power; that we not only accumulate material goods, but that there is no limit to our desire for them. The idea of man outlined here includes the “human qualities” that L. Kołakowski talked about, and “extends” them while remaining within the realm of naturalism. L. Kołakowski claims that naturalisms do not explain human existence since we do not know the origin of humanity, ethics or religion. However, it cannot be said that we know nothing.

We are able to determine that about 70,000–30,000 years ago a “cognitive revolution” took place and since then man not only invented dozens of tools, but that also religion, trade and social stratification appear in human communities. What triggered this revolution? “The most commonly believed theory argues that accidental genetic mutations changed the inner wiring of the brains of Sapiens, enabling them to think in unprecedented ways and to communicate using an altogether new type of language.”²⁰ Therefore, our knowledge about the origins of humanity is growing, although it does not meet L. Kołakowski’s condition.

Returning to the critical remarks on L. Kołakowski’s reflection; when it comes to striving for truth in naturalism, it is not forbidden, although at present there is no chance to assign the category of truth as understood by L. Kołakowski to scientific theories. However, this problem concerns all concepts that we have at our disposal today. L. Kołakowski’s arguments regarding the existence of God as a condition of truth are valid, but also trivial in the sense that the truth is guaranteed by the fact that reality is not chaos.²¹ Additionally, the philosopher

¹⁹ J. Koziński, *Koncepcja transgresyjna człowieka*, PWN, Warsaw 1987.

²⁰ Y.N. Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, transl. by J. Purcell, Harper, Sydney 2015, p. 21.

²¹ Cf. H. Eilstein, *Jeśli się nie wierzy w Boga. Czytając Kołakowskiego*, Aletheia, Warsaw 1991, p. 15.

does not solve the question of what is true. L. Kołakowski did not show that the naturalistic (scientific) option must be instrumentalist, hence the problem of truth remains open and the fact that we have this idea is not enough to reject naturalism.

When it comes to the category of good as different from good-for-something, a concept that is so important for L. Kołakowski, unfortunately in no text did the philosopher go beyond the above distinction; neither did he indicate what the good-in-itself should consist in (in terms of content). And the same is true of the concept of love. It is completely unclear what kind of “love” L. Kołakowski means, and it should be added that psychologists distinguish between sexual need and love, which is in the area of empirical science.²²

An extremely important aspect of L. Kołakowski’s analyses is the introduction of the concept of “personal trust” or “personal hope.” L. Kołakowski distinguishes between “trust in things” based on a greater or lesser reliability experienced so far, and personal, groundless trust that affirms the other as a person.

The first approach (trust in things, hope in things, etc.) resulted from the thesis of methodological materialism, fashionable at the time, which said that all concepts of science (and thus all meaningful concepts) are reducible to physical concepts “relating to events in time and space”²³, and each psychological concept (i.e. expression) should be such that would allow for constructing a definition for it which indirectly derives this concept from physical or behavioural concepts.²⁴ Thus, when we say “X has a headache”, we are talking only about his dispositions to behave in particular ways (rubbing his forehead, grimacing his face, taking a pill). However, the reduction of psychological concepts to physical description was unsuccessful, and what is more, empirical sciences do not currently explain all phenomena in the categories of cause and effect, but in functional (biology) or functional-intentional (e.g. sociology or psychology) categories. This is not the problem, however. L. Kołakowski writes about personal trust as “acceptance of another person in toto, without reasons, without the need for justification”. I believe that such a description is completely devoid of any explicable content, and there is literally no reason to use the word “trust” here, since it is not based on a specific way of behaving. L. Kołakowski also points out that the concept

²² Cf. e.g. B. Wojciszke, *Psychologia miłości. Intymność. Namiętność. Zobowiązanie*, GWP, Gdańsk 2021.

²³ W. Sady, *Spór o racjonalność naukową. Od Poincarégo do Laudana*, Wrocław 2000, p. 103.

²⁴ W. Sady, *Spór o racjonalność naukową. Od Poincarégo do Laudana*, Wrocław 2000, p. 128.

of “I” (“me”) does not function in the field of empirical sciences. For there is no science about “me”, which constitutes an omission of such an important element of the world as “I”.

Scientists do not actually study a given individual as such, if only because it would be very expensive. Moreover, L. Kołakowski himself proved that the “I” “cleansed” of the body, psyche or soul as haecceities is materially nothing, and in formal terms – something unidentified. Perhaps, however, the philosopher’s thoughts can be validated. M. Merleau-Ponty states: “I am not the result or a cross of many causalities that determine my body or my ‘psyche’, but I cannot think of myself as part of the world, as an ordinary object of biology, psychology, and sociology, or to enclose the world of science around me. Everything I know about the world, even through science, I know from my own vision or experience without which scientific symbols would make no sense.”²⁵ Contrary to the above, it cannot be denied that the subject is dependent on certain factors, be it biological, social, or even spiritual. Nevertheless, Ponty indicates an essential issue.

We agree with L. Kołakowski when he recognises that the “temporality” of the human being, unless it is based on the Absolute, makes it a kind of “smoke sculpture”, but it is not an argument for the existence of an Unchanging Being. On the other hand, the experience of one’s “own fragility” which is accumulated in the perspective of the “contingency” of the world, i.e. the existence of a difference between being and being something, leads, as we think, and if we ask about ultimate explanations, to accept a certain kind of absolute. However, L. Kołakowski did not specify what kind of absolute, and philosophical considerations do not offer great hopes for a positive view of the absolute. It is true that Metaphysical Horror includes the concept of a historical God, an idea that L. Kołakowski connects with “meaning” that is neither subjective nor objective, but appears as a meaning-creating Spirit that actualises itself in the process of revealing itself to our senses and “becomes what it is” thanks to human acts of understanding and participating in the order of the sacred. However, nowhere did L. Kołakowski develop the extremely interesting idea of a historical God, which is a shame.

There is still the area of religion, however. As Kołakowski writes, faith (its content), is neither proven nor should it be, since it is based on acts of personal trust. People are initiated into a specific cult and assimilate its language through

²⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, quoted after: J. Migasiński, *M. Merleau-Ponty*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warsaw 1995, p. 102.

their participation in the life of the community and not through rational persuasion. But is it really so? Are people involved in a given system of beliefs unable to give any reasons²⁶? L. Kołakowski refers to this approach quite marginally.

We agree with L. Kołakowski that there exists a religious perception. The believer perceives (in the sense of performing a complex act defined by sense-perception, concepts, networks of concepts, memory data, and emotional evaluation) the presence of God just as a medical specialist perceives a medical condition on an X-ray image (as opposed to a layman seeing light and dark spots). One must also agree that the language of religion has its own specificity and its standards of identification. L. Kołakowski was also correct in indicating what religion opens one up to its meaning.

However, L. Kołakowski's view of the specificity of religion is not accompanied by indicating the cognitive criteria of religious perception.²⁷ It is true that they are not scientific in the present understanding of the sciences, but the philosopher admits that he is almost completely helpless in demonstrating the epistemological content of faith (religious judgements).

We believe that certain conclusions can be drawn from L. Kołakowski's analyses, although the philosopher would not be happy with them. On the one hand one should "make amends" with empirical sciences, and on the other hand, confront the adopted model of man first with creationist ideas and then with philosophical solutions, such as A. Plantinga's concept in *Knowledge of God*. One should also mention the specificity of religion understood differently from how L. Kołakowski puts it, and situated beyond the strong distinction between "secular" and "sacred", where the religious appeal is directed specifically to this and not another subject.²⁸

In turn, whilst developing L. Kołakowski's ideas about the "historical God", it is worth referring to the concept of the suffering God found in Charles Harts-horne, Raniero Cantalamessa, Jean Galot, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Roger Haight, Elizabeth Johnson, Hans Küng, Michael Sarot and Jon Sobrino. The results of Józef Życiński's reflection will be of particular importance. This will be the subject of a separate article.

²⁶ Cf. R. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, Oxford 1991; J. Hick, *Argumenty za istnieniem Boga*, transl. M. Kumiński, Cracow 1994, and many others.

²⁷ Cf. B. Chwedeńczuk, *Przekonania religijne*, Warsaw 2000, p. 141 and following.

²⁸ J.A. Kłoczowski, *Więcej niż mit. Leszka Kołakowskiego spory o religię* Znak, Cracow 1994, p. 224.

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