

The Essence of Teaching*

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In response to the question posed by the editors of “Znak” [Sign]: “What is the philosophy that I practice?,” Izydora Dąmbska wrote, among other things:

Philosophy, for me, is an essential existential function – a constant search, despite the uncertainty of outcomes, for an order of truth that transcends human life, which is subject to passing and death, and for the duties prescribed by it.¹

In an acknowledgement directed to colleagues and students on the occasion of her jubilee celebrations in 1974, she expressed significant words:

Whenever I had the opportunity [...] to help young people on their path to philosophy, I felt it as the most important task, and at the same time, as a great personal value.²

It would not be difficult to find more similar statements; however, it is worth recalling that Izydora Dąmbska was very restrained in her choice of words, especially when they concerned herself. The statements quoted above, I believe, accurately reflect her attitude and help to understand what was widely perceived as her exceptional authority and influence. Practising philosophy was a fundamental content of her life; being a university professor was an obligation: it was both a challenge and a task that allowed her to embody the values she cherished the most while also passing them on to her students.

* K. Stamirowska, *Sedno nauczania*, in: *Izydora Dąmbska 1904–1983. Materiały z sympozjum „Non est necesse vivere, necesse est philosophari”* Kraków, 18–19 grudnia 1998 r., ed. J. Perzanowski, Polska Akademia Umiejętności, Kraków 2001, pp. 125–129.

¹ I. Dąmbska, *Czym jest filozofia, którą uprawiam* [What Is the Philosophy that I Practice], “Znak” 1977, No. 281/82, p. 1335.

² I. Dąmbska, *Podziękowanie* [Acknowledgement], “Ruch Filozoficzny” 1978, Vol. 36, Nos. 2–3, p. 128.

My first memories are connected with the beginning of my philosophical studies and the lectures on the history of philosophy conducted by Izydora Dąmbska, and later with her seminars. These seminars were different from the university classes I had known before: they were characterized by focus and a lack of haste; there was no reason to impose any particular pace on reading or discussion. Unlike routine exercises, they were an end in themselves. The aim was to reach the true meaning, to grasp the essential thought of the author; the evening meetings were a shared search for truth, not a display of erudition or rhetoric. This is how we learned to read and understand philosophical texts; this is how certain needs and habits were formed, which, I believe, remained equally important also for those of us who later moved away from philosophy.

The seminars, and later the meetings and conversations at the Professor's apartment – although quite regular – were always extraordinary events, not because they were spectacular, but because they deviated from the banality and monotony of practical activities. These were extraordinary occasions due to the atmosphere of focus and the selflessness of the content filling them. Detached for a few hours from the pace dictated by everyday life, and also from the pressure of our other field of study (which, in most cases, was of a more practical nature), and immersed in a different reality, free from the atmosphere of haste, we valued this special experience, the essence of which can be captured in the words of the English poet: "It is the journey, not the arrival that matters." What mattered most were the cognitive experiences and the satisfaction of shared inquiry.

Although we were aware that we were participating in something exceptional, we perhaps did not fully realize the extent to which the content and style of these meetings would remain an unparalleled experience, nor, even more so, how quickly the circumstances in which we were fortunate to study would undergo a fundamental change.

The quality of the Professor that may have struck one the most was what she herself, in her reflections on freedom, referred to as "what is called the authenticity or moral integrity of a human person," that is, "the consistency between what is on the outside and what is on the inside, as Plato says in the *Phaedrus*."³ Professor Dąmbska was always herself; she never pretended anything: there was an obvious consistency between what she thought and said and her actions.

³ I. Dąmbska, *Gdy myślę o słowie "wolność"* [When I Think about the Word "Freedom"], "Znak" 1981, No. 325, p. 855.

She was a true authority, not an apparent one, invented for immediate needs. Opportunism and creating appearances were foreign to her; she was principled, and for this, she was criticized. She neither knew how to, nor wanted to, adapt to situations she did not approve of. She was just – her sympathies or lack thereof never influenced her judgments of others, which were balanced and cautious but clear and distinct. She could separate judgment from emotion, and her voice always sounded the same: it was the voice of conscience and the voice of truth, commanding respect even from her opponents.

In her treatise *Sceptycyzm francuski XVI i XVII wieku* [French Scepticism of the 16th and 17th Centuries], while discussing Pascal's views, Dąmbska lists among the factors that hinder the distinction between truth and falsehood – imagination and self-love:

All the theatrical apparatus of ceremonies and costumes, rituals created by people to impress others, appeals to our imagination. It dictates assessments and rules of beauty, goodness, and righteousness. No less dangerous a deceiving force is a person's self-love. It makes us want to appear better, wiser, and more beautiful than we are. And not just to others, but also to ourselves. That is why it compels us to wear masks and pretend.⁴

These very practices – putting on a mask and creating false impressions – were profoundly alien to her; they carried intellectual and moral risks and also raised aesthetic objections.

Izydora Dąmbska was exceptional also because she was free from the weakness, so common even in academic circles, of self-love and vanity. While valuing the opinions of people she respected, she was infinitely distant from the vanity fair, incapable of doing anything for show, devoid of any desire to impress, as only someone who serves absolute values and is fully aware of this fact can be.

If she strived perfection, she was genuinely close to it; perhaps that is why she was criticized for her lack of compromise. But if she had acted differently, if she had agreed to pay the price demanded to remain at the university, she would have ceased to be herself – and would not have become a role model for others.

In the times of the harsh “little stabilization” and minimalism, she was a guidepost and a model, something that the passage of time did not change; on

⁴ I. Dąmbska, *Sceptycyzm francuski XVI i XVII wieku* [French Scepticism of the 16th and 17th Centuries], Towarzystwo Naukowe w Toruniu, Toruń 1958, p. 65.

the contrary, everything that happened after her death confirmed the correctness of her stance and the accuracy of her judgments. As Jerzy Perzanowski wrote in an essay dedicated to Izydora Dąmbska, her merit does not fade but shines ever brighter and for more and more people.⁵

There was something different in her behaviour and words, indicating that she lived in a slightly different dimension, one where there was no room for falsehood, commonness, or banality. She imposed this way of being on others – it was not only respect, but something more; in her presence, one weighed words, and even thoughts, more carefully. Every interaction was not only an experience of encountering something extraordinary but also left an indelible mark on memory. Perhaps for these reasons, in the eyes of the party officials, who harboured illusions about their ability to shape attitudes, she was considered a highly dangerous person: unintentionally, she became a benchmark, setting the standard, someone perfect in a world full of imperfections. Perhaps her hierarchy of life needs, expressed in the saying she often quoted: “Non est necesse vivere, necesse est philosophari” [It is not necessary to live, it is necessary to philosophize], implemented quite literally, despite adversity, was the explanation for her extraordinary power of influence.

She was characterized by a sense of responsibility towards her discipline, for the results of her research that she published, as well as towards and for her students. She was a living example of what a scholar and philosopher can and should be; an example undoubtedly difficult to follow, unattainable, but – paradoxically – alive and close, because she was accessible every day, revealing herself in specific situations, always giving the impression of an encounter with something lofty and noble, yet very close – there was no trace of arrogance in her, though she could impose a sense of distance. She was demanding, sometimes strict, yet also kind and full of warmth. She was truly deeply loved and admired by her students – and the passage of time, rather than distancing her, made her even closer and clearer. Individual and social experience confirmed the righteousness of her choices and behaviour. The past 15 years, during which there were no shortages of critical situations, frequently brought her to mind along with the question: “What would Professor Dąmbska say?”

⁵ J. Perzanowski, *Głos prawdy. O Pani Profesor Izydorze Dąmbskiej* [The Voice of Truth: About Professor Izydora Dąmbska], “Znak” 1986, No. 1(374), p. 17.

She did not live to see the year 1989 – she only witnessed the rise of Solidarity and later the imposition of martial law. She passed away in the difficult year of 1983, during the Pope's pilgrimage to Poland.

Although aware of her deteriorating health, we did not believe that we could be so quickly deprived of her presence, or that the doors of the apartment at Podwale 1 could one day be closed. Behind those doors remained an important part of our lives and experiences – both scientific and personal – which, without her, would not have been part of our lives and which we would have been poorer without. This is a debt difficult to repay. She showed and exemplified what a university professor and a professor of philosophy can and should be – as a scholar, as a human being, and as a follower of philosophy, one who proclaims truth – not merely with words but with life, confirming the choice of life's path. To say that she lived in harmony with herself is to also realize that the condition for such a life is knowing who you truly are. Contrary to appearances, this is not always easy or obvious knowledge.

Izydora Dąmbska grew out of the tradition of the Lvov-Warsaw School, in which, as she wrote:

a distinctive feature of metaphilosophical reflection [...] was the emphasis placed, either explicitly or implicitly, on axiological moments: on the moral values that the practice of philosophy presupposes and at the same time generates – on its unique ethos that shapes the meaning of a philosopher's life.⁶

For her, philosophy was not only a field of study but also a source of values: it was from this understanding of philosophy's role that her life stance emerged, one that demanded fidelity to principles and convictions, freedom from external compulsion, freedom from erroneous beliefs, and the consistency of thoughts and actions. She adhered to the interconnected principles of living in truth and living freely.

Her life was authentic at a time when pretence had become a widespread practice and conformity almost a norm. Her rigorism was an exception at a time when many justified compromises by the need to survive. She understood the weight of words when words were commonly abused. She defended immutable values in times of devaluation; she was genuinely creative, resisting the pressure

⁶ I. Dąmbska, *Podziękowanie*, op. cit., p. 128.

of mediocrity and not succumbing to influences; she was full of seriousness when the convenient mask of a jester became commonplace.

It is, in fact, a peculiar paradox that those tendencies, dangerous to both science and social life, which were then generally imposed, are now often the result of choices, or perhaps only apparent choices.

Zbigniew Herbert called Dąmbska an example of courage, perseverance, and fidelity. He expressed what everyone who interacted with her felt. These traits – coexisting to such a high degree – were not often encountered in times when the phrase “one has to live somehow” was used to justify oneself and others, even though these were merely superficial justifications that did not relieve the feeling of unease, or at least distaste.

Without meeting her and without the experiences and reflections that arose from these encounters, there would perhaps not have been born the full awareness of attitudes and values that exist and are implemented in concrete terms, not in the realm of abstraction. She embodied what we generally believe to exist only in an ideal form: in her case, these values were as concrete as possible. Her life was proof that it can be so in everyday life.

The university is – or at least should be – a school of intellect and a school of values. One can complete university studies while experiencing mainly various forms of ersatz. Our privilege was the opportunity to genuinely study and develop under the guidance of a philosopher who, by her example, truly taught not only how to philosophize but also how to live. That extraordinary philosopher was Professor Izydora Dąmbska.