

Tadeusz Kotarbiński – Teacher

On the 75th Anniversary of His Birth*

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A week ago, I was at the Polish Philosophical Society for a lecture by Professor Kotarbiński titled “O sprawności działania” [On the Efficiency of Action]. Sitting next to me was a student from one of the higher years of philosophy studies. It turned out that it was the first time in his life he had seen and heard the Professor. At that moment, I thought to myself that the older students from the Faculty of Humanities, and later the Faculty of Philosophy, were in a better position than my neighbour. They regularly attended the lectures on *Elementy* [Elements]¹ and participated in Kotarbiński’s seminars. And that’s much more than just knowing him from books or articles...

The fact that it was much more, was so obvious to me that only after a while did I ask myself – actually, why. After all, there are outstanding minds and personalities that rise above the rest, with whom the best form of contact is the kind of intellectual bond that connects the author with the reader. There are other great creators and thinkers whom you just need to know through their works. However, it is different in the case of Tadeusz Kotarbiński: reading his books and articles – it is not enough. Gaining knowledge from his works – it is still not everything. One has to be his student. And then I realized that people generally don’t seem to know this.

* J. Pelc, *Tadeusz Kotarbiński – Nauczyciel. W 75. Rocznicę urodzin*, in: J. Pelc, *Wizerunki i wspomnienia. Materiały do dziejów semiotyki*, Uniwersytet Warszawski, Polskie Towarzystwo Semiotyczne, Warszawa 1994, pp. 81–84.

¹ Pelc is referring to Kotarbiński’s seminal textbook, which served as the basis for his lectures: T. Kotarbiński, *Elementy teorii poznania, logiki formalnej i metodologii nauk*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1961 [English translation: T. Kotarbiński, *Gnosiology: The Scientific Approach to the Theory of Knowledge*, Pergamon Press, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Oxford–Wrocław 1966] [translator’s note].

For what does someone not associated with philosophy or science, an average newspaper reader, radio listener, cinema or television viewer in Poland, know about Tadeusz Kotarbiński? They know he is an eminent scholar, the president of the Polish Academy of Sciences, that he is an author of books, that he is a university professor... They briefly see his slender figure in a film or television newsreel, perhaps retaining an image of his distinctive face, outmoded – due to his fairly long, now grey mustache. Or maybe they hear on the radio that at some ceremony or academy “among the outstanding personages,” the president of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Tadeusz Kotarbiński, also took part. But they don’t really know, because how could they know, how much the term “outstanding personage” does not fit the Professor, even though he is outstanding and even though he is a personage. And they do not know how much he himself dislikes such terms, or tributes, or fanfare in his honour; how uncomfortable and embarrassed he is when confronted with this, how far he does not feel and does not want to feel like a dignitary – even though he is one.

Someone who reads Kotarbiński and about Kotarbiński knows, of course, much more about him and his views. They know, for example, that he is a member of foreign academies and societies, a doctor honoris causa of Polish and foreign universities, the president of the Polish Philosophical Society – for many years now – that he holds the highest state honours, that he often speaks out as a publicist on educational, ethical, and worldview issues, that currently in his research and scientific work he focuses on praxeological issues, and until recently, he also pursued philosophy, general logic, and the history of logic.

That as a philosopher, he is a representative of the materialistic and nominalistic strand of the so-called Lvov-Warsaw School, whose roots grow out of philosophy with a positivist or neo-positivist taint. That, as a result, Kotarbiński’s own philosophy is minimalistic, advocating clarity, distinctness, and conciseness in formulating thoughts, and requires thinking to be scientific, in line with the rigorous and challenging demands of objectivity and verifiability. That it combats all delusions, phantasms, and hypostases, and proclaims the demand “that all sensible assertions containing the so-called names of qualities, relations, events, etc., be able to translate into a language containing no other names except the names of some things.” That such ideas characterize so-called somatic reism, or concretism, a philosophical direction introduced and developed precisely by Kotarbiński. Finally, that in ethics, he advocates, in accordance with his atheistic

attitude, a secular ideal, somewhat similar to the evangelical: providing good and effective care for those we should care for and for whom one is responsible, due to social, familial, friendly, or educational ties.

But how much richer were these experiences for those who not only read Kotarbiński but were also his students. When I think about it, two reflections come to mind. The first one – how ambiguous the word “teacher” is. Among its many meanings, there is one that deserves to be highlighted among others and be written with a capital letter. Due to its moral and social values. Teaching in this sense is not a profession but a calling. It evokes an emotional response. It yields results that are different and incomparably richer than ordinary teaching. Only rarely, as a high degree of perfection, it is achieved by those who are professionally engaged in teaching and educating; it also happens, albeit rarely, in the case of non-teachers or non-educators.

The second reflection is this: Each of us has had many teachers – in school, in high school, or at university. We often meet them later. Sometimes we work together with them, becoming their younger colleagues. And most often our attitude towards them changes. A former student, when he grows out of childhood or adolescence and becomes an adult, a family man, a mature specialist in his profession, while still maintaining respect and sentiment for his former teacher, he usually stops seeing him as someone who should guide him, set an example and give advice, correct mistakes even today.

Well, it is different with Professor Kotarbiński’s students. First and foremost, they are his students today, just as they were a few decades ago. They never become former students. One significant thing: Although each of them surely has had more than one teacher, professor, educator in life, they always consider themselves students – precisely of Kotarbiński, and when they say briefly “Professor” – it’s him they have in mind.

There exists – everyone feels it vividly – a kind of community among the Professor’s students. An emotional and intellectual bond connects people of different ages and specialties, different positions and different views. It is neither codified nor captured within the framework of any convention, nor shaped into concepts. Yet it is strong enough to survive years and distances – spatial and non-spatial. [...]

Pedagogical recommendations – it’s not enough for them to be right. They must also not be “cheap,” meaning there must be a visible high price paid by the one who delivers them, shaping oneself to be able to deliver them honestly.

Kotarbiński's students know that the one they apprenticed under indeed in this way understands and applies the old principle *Verba docent, exempla trahunt*.

These exempla – that's what makes the Professor's students richer than the readers of his works. The power of these examples must be significant, since – as one of Kotarbiński's students wrote abroad – in a conflict situation, when a decision had to be made according to the dictates of honour and duty, the first thought that came to mind was: What would the Professor say about this?

But there is yet something more that students experience: In line with the moral ideal of a guardian one can rely on, such a guardian they find in the person of the Professor. It is a care exercised through rational friendship. All the more valuable because it always reveals itself then and mainly then when it is particularly needed and expected. That is, in moments of failure. Both minor and major ones. He knows it, the student who blurted out some nonsense in a discussion, helplessly and anxiously awaiting the laughter or irony of those present, only to receive assistance from the Professor, who just extracted something worthy of attention from his words. And the mature person, when bending under the weight of adversity, came to ask for advice, and received advice as well as assistance, as well as encouragement to persevere.

The works of a scholar live on the pages of his writings. The works of a teacher also live on. In the conduct of those whose personality he shaped according to the ideals he set for himself. The latter works are equally enduring.

Tadeusz Kotarbiński created and continues to create both the first and the second. It's been quite a few years of this work. Certainly enough to say that it is "a good job." [...]