

## Speech at the Jubilee Celebration at the University of Warsaw on 5 April 1956\*

Maria Ossowska

I cannot dare to attempt a characterization of the entire body of Tadeusz Kotarbiński's work here, nor can I try to enumerate all the theoretical achievements that his students owe to him. The bibliography of Tadeusz Kotarbiński's writings, which includes over 100 items, reveals the full richness and multifaceted nature of his subject matter. The central thread runs through considerations in the field of practical philosophy, particularly dear to the Author's heart, initiated in 1913 with the book *Szkice praktyczne* [Practical Sketches] and culminating in 1955 with *Traktat o dobrej robocie* [Treatise on Good Work].<sup>1</sup> The second major thread consists of issues in theoretical philosophy: issues of logic, theory of cognition (knowledge), and ontology. The third thread comprises didactic works of a textbook nature, as well as reflections related to organizing philosophical life in Poland over the past 40 years. Interspersed with works intended for a narrower circle of specialists are considerations seeking contact with a broader readership and direct responses to social issues prompted by current events.

Tadeusz Kotarbiński's students chose various aspects of his work to pursue. Some followed the path of theoretical philosophy, while others – a rarer few – adopted issues of practical philosophy. In both cases, they accepted certain suggested solutions while often resisting others. Some of his students, from the beginning of their studies, did not intend to devote themselves to philosophy at all, instead considering mathematics, biology, law, or medicine as their primary fields. But

\* M. Ossowska, *Przemówienie na uroczystości jubileuszowej w Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 5 kwietnia 1956 roku*, in: *Maria Ossowska (1896–1974) w świetle nieznanych źródeł archiwalnych*, eds. J. Dudek, S. Konstańczak, J. Zegzuła-Nowak, Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, Zielona Góra 2011, pp. 113–116.

<sup>1</sup> Published in English translation in 1965 as *Praxiology: An Introduction to the Science of Efficient Action* [translator's note].

regardless of professional diversity, differences in interests, or views, Tadeusz Kotarbiński's students were always united by a lasting bond of the highest regard for his approach to science and teaching. I would like to dwell on it here.

When Tadeusz Kotarbiński assumed the rectorship of the University of Łódź in 1945, the academic youth approached him regarding the funding of a banner for the newly established university and the selection of an emblem to be embroidered on it. The emblem proposed by the Rector was the words "Freedom and Truth." These are grand words, which naturally evoke distrust among those who know that grand words are often invoked by those who have the least right to do so. However, these words carry a different weight when backed by the life of a man who never hesitated to fight for freedom and truth when it was necessary. People who threatened these values changed over the years, but the need to defend them remained. And Tadeusz Kotarbiński considered himself called to this defence, both as a representative of science and as an educator. For such people, the concepts of freedom and truth are inextricably linked, for it is the fundamental duty of a scholar and teacher to defend the form of freedom that is the freedom to speak the truth.

The mature years of Tadeusz Kotarbiński coincided with periods, as he himself wrote, when "liberalism was sidelined, with some claiming it was merely going in for repairs, while others claimed it had been scrapped" (1936).

What was this liberalism that Tadeusz Kotarbiński steadfastly upheld over the years, despite all attempts to discredit it?

This liberalism had nothing to do with the liberalism in the name of which the industrial *laissez-faire* advocate defended his interests. This liberalism, as he wrote in 1932, finds repugnant "the freedom to oppress the individual through money, but cherishes the freedom of the individual from the oppression of money." This liberalism does not seek, as he wrote four years later, freedom for capital but rather freedom from capital. "It has become too blatant," Tadeusz Kotarbiński wrote in 1936, "the exploitation of freedom of hiring and contracts in general, to pay a pittance, demand work to the last drop, discard workers after draining their strength, form trusts, and strip the consumer of his last penny." While economic liberalism pursued profits unrestrained by state oversight, his liberalism opposed exploitation as the negation of freedom.

But defending against economic terror did not exhaust the matter. Tadeusz Kotarbiński's liberalism, while demanding protection of the individual from eco-

nomic oppression, also defended against political oppression by the state. And during that period, civil liberties were increasingly shrinking. "Another noose tightens around the neck of the Independent Man," he observed in 1933. "Deputies, associations, local governments, judges, teachers, and professors are being put on a leash." For Tadeusz Kotarbiński, liberalism, which fought against political terror, stood in opposition to servility, in line with the etymological sense of these terms.

Tadeusz Kotarbiński is well aware of the criticisms levelled against this understanding of liberalism. It is said that liberalism is tolerance, and tolerance helps the enemy and paralyzes one's own actions. The liberal is seen as a representative of a fragmented intelligentsia, incapable of disciplined, collective action. Tadeusz Kotarbiński protested against equating a liberal with a brawler. If a liberal were to be considered a brawler, then all those who have ever fought against tyranny would have to be counted as brawlers. And those who claim that an independent person is incapable of solidarity, in his view, confuse two different things: walking hand in hand and marching in lockstep.

As a praxeologist, Tadeusz Kotarbiński warned that the pinnacle of uniformity is not necessarily the pinnacle of efficiency. Disorder *can* kill creativity, but absolute order kills it *for sure*. To blow well in a harmonized orchestra, one must first of all breathe freely. Whatever criticisms may be directed at an independent person, one must – as he reminded – remember that from their ranks come "the most magnificent creators, the vanquishers of false authorities, the pointers of new paths, the guardians of personal dignity, the defenders of the oppressed against oppressors."

Certainly, freedom has its dangers, but when one compares those dangers with the dangers that come with stifling it, it is difficult not to stand for freedom. One loves freedom, as he wrote in 1936, not because it is free from sin, but because without it, life loses all charm. How grim would the world be if human faces were as alike as human backsides, he remarked three years later at the Congress of the Polish Teachers' Union. Among the charms of freedom, in his opinion, the most precious is the awareness of it. For greater works are born of enthusiasm rather than fear, and enthusiasm carries the spirit of conscious freedom, while fear reeks of the stifling air of conscious enslavement.

As a man whose work revolved around words, the ability to maintain his own integrity was inextricably linked to freedom of speech for Tadeusz Kotarbiński.

So he returned to this issue repeatedly. "To step on a professor's freedom," he wrote in 1933, "is like stepping on an officer's honour." Priests cannot be teachers of the youth because they have sworn allegiance – not to the truth, but to doctrine, and it is impossible to solve problems according to the truth if they are resolved according to orders. Obscuring the truth by avoiding the difficult questions that trouble the youth is ineffective pedagogy: for those who think, these questions will return on their own, and for those who are sluggish, it is a pity that they won't return. To avoid issues is to remain silent, and the life of a person who cannot live by truth, yet does not want to live by falsehood, and thus must live in silence, is terrifying.

Kotarbiński wrote these words in 1936. Times changed, systems changed, but the causes he fought for remained vital. Tadeusz Kotarbiński's views also evolved in certain respects under the influence of life experiences and the continuously growing body of social knowledge. During the occupation, he established relationships with Żoliborz socialists to discuss social issues with them. After the war, he set about organizing a university in the working-class city of Łódź.

Those who have worked with Tadeusz Kotarbiński over the past 11 years know that he remained ever faithful to the principles inscribed on the banner of the University of Łódź. There were those who found him to be a particularly troublesome figure due to the independence of his thought, made even more troublesome by the respect he commanded. One could hear discussions regarding whether, from the standpoint of the goals he himself set, this steadfast insistence on freedom and truth was justified. I believe that today no one questions this justification. The years behind us have made us all aware of the immense social value of a person in whom one can place absolute trust.