Modern Intellectual History (2025), 1–25
doi:10.1017/S1479244324000520

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

"None of It Matters Now": Leszek Kołakowski between Marx and Spinoza

Daniel Edison

Independent scholar
Email: dedison01@gmail.com

(Received 23 September 2023; revised 18 September 2024; accepted 30 November 2024)

This article examines the influence of Spinozism on Leszek Kołakowski's humanist Marxism between 1953 and 1968. After historically exploring Kołakowski's early Stalinism and his later belief that Hegel's historical theodicy, in eradicating the contradiction between totality and particularity, abolished individual moral responsibility, it examines Kołakowski's interpretation of Spinoza's alternatively ahistorical and ambiguous relationship between substance and its modes, which Kołakowski admired despite finding it metaphysically contradictory. It shows that this interpretation contributed to Kołakowski's Marxism, which focused on the moral freedom of the individual by accepting the permanence of contradiction between subjectivity and totality. His interest in Spinoza also changed Kołakowski's understanding of modernity, which he increasingly identified with the seventeenth century, especially those forms of thinking that contradictorily blended elements of religious and rationalist thought. While Kołakowski abandoned Marxism, this interest in the relationship between religion and secularism defined much of his thought after 1968.

Introduction

In November of 1968, as winter arrived in Warsaw, Leszek Kołakowski left Poland. Traveling with his wife Tamara and daughter Agnieszka, the philosopher packed what he could of his library, some notebooks and manuscripts, and two bottles of Polish vodka which he declared while passing through customs.[1]

Throughout communist Eastern Europe's 'thaw' from 1953 to 1956, Kołakowski had garnered international attention and domestic infamy as Poland's leading "revisionist" Marxist. Once a young Stalinist, he came to polemicize single-party communism. His 1959 essay "The Priest and the Jester," which provided an influential framework for Polish revisionism, aimed to "undermine existing structures and rip off existing roofs" within authoritarian state socialism.[2] Kołakowski's priest, an emblem

[1]Customs Export Declaration, 30 November 1968, Signature 13159, Folder 6, Leszek Kołakowski Archive (ALK), National Library (BN), Warsaw, Poland.

[2]Leszek Kołakowski, "The Priest and the Jester," in Kołakowski, *Toward a Marxist Humanism: Essays on the Left Today*, trans. Jane Zielonko Peel (New York, 1968), 9–37, at 35.

for communist dogmatism, represented the institutionalization of absolute truth. The jester's vocation was to endlessly criticize such pretensions to otherworldliness, affirming the immanent, if contradictory, character of human life. Kołakowski declared himself "in favor of the jester's philosophy, and thus vigilant against any absolute."[3]

Commenting on Kołakowski's influence on the opposition which emerged from Poland's post-revisionist left in the 1970s, dissident Adam Michnik later reflected that "each of us is to some extent Kołakowski's pupil."[4] Less warm was the Polish United Workers' Party. After years of surveillance, he was expelled in 1966, two years before he left the country. After publishing the monumental *Main Currents of Marxism* in exile in 1976, which renounced his youthful Promethean communism, Kołakowski increasingly embraced religion as a safeguard against the extremities of modern politics. While he had kept a pistol on him in his postwar years as a Stalinist, by the 1980s he instead carried a crucifix in his suit pocket.[5]

Kołakowski's turn from Marxism surprised many observers west of the Iron Curtain. His frustrated encounters with the American, European, and British New Lefts were epitomized in an exchange in the *Socialist Register* with E. P. Thompson between 1973 and 1974. Thompson lamented of Kołakowski, whose "voice was the clearest out of Eastern Europe" amidst the earlier renewal of Marxism around 1956, that now "with you one feels that despair has already made a deeper entry. It has broken into reason's gate."[6]

Kołakowski's revisionism, however, had always betrayed undertones of religiosity. Although he had delved into Hegelian historicism and the "Young Marx," and was drawn to phenomenological and existentialist thought, as frequently acknowledged by interpreters, these inspirations were often secondary to his interest in the philosophy and history of religion as a young radical.[7] Kołakowski studied scholasticism in his years as a graduate student, and emerged as a specialist in early modern religious thought with the publication of his 1965 *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna* (*Religious Consciousness and the Church Bond*). In the same years, as Piotr Kosicki has observed, he embraced dialogue with Polish Catholicism and personalism as his commitment to secularism loosened.[8]

[3]Ibid., 36.

[4]Marci Shore, "In Search of Meaning after Marxism: The *Komandosi*, March 1968, and the Ideas That Followed," in Glen Dynner and François Guesnet, eds., *Warsaw: The Jewish Metropolis* (Boston, 2015), 590–612, at 609.

[5]Leszek Kołakowski and Zbigniew Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy, czas niespokojny*, vol. 1 (Krakow, 2007) 87; Zbigniew Janowski in conversation with the author, July 2022.

[6]E. P. Thompson, "An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski," *Socialist Register* 10 (1973), 1–100, at 2, 39.

[7]On his existentialist influences see Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis: Sozialphilosophische Studien* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), 445–50; George Kline, "Beyond Revisionism: Leszek Kołakowski's Recent Philosophical Development," *Triquarterly* 22, *A Leszek Kolakowski Reader* (1971), 13–47, at 14; in more detail see Marci Shore, unpublished manuscript on the reception of phenomenology in Central and Eastern Europe.

[8]Piotr Kosicki, *Catholics on the Barricades: Poland, France, and "Revolution," 1891–1956* (New Haven, 2018), 296.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The thinker who bridged Kołakowski's commitment to radicalism and his fascination with religion was Spinoza, a quintessential philosophical jester who showed that "it is not God who wears a priest's clothes, but the priest who wears God's costume," as Kołakowski wrote in 1958.[9] Kołakowski defended his doctoral dissertation on Spinoza in 1953, and over the next four years, amidst the height of his revisionism, wrote *Jednostka i nieskończoność: Wolność i antynomie wolności w filozofii Spinozy* (*Individual and Infinity: Freedom and the Antinomies of Freedom in the Philosophy of Spinoza*). He also dedicated large portions of *Religious Consciousness* to Spinoza's influence on the "Second Reformation" in the Netherlands.

While *Religious Consciousness* was translated and widely read in French as *Chrétiens sans Église, Individual and Infinity* has remained untranslated. Consequently, the depth of his Spinozist thought has been inaccessible outside Poland, save for several translated essays.[10] Within the Polish literature, major interpreters, such as Jan Andrzej Kłoczowski and Hubert Czyżewski, have acknowledged Spinoza's importance, but have not investigated the full extent of his direct influence on Kołakowski's Marxism.[11]

Alternatively, German scholar George Lichtheim noted in a 1969 review of a collection of Kołakowski's Marxist essays that "Althusser and Kołakowski" can be seen to "concur in the importance they allot to Spinoza, and in attempting to minimize—if not to exclude altogether—the Hegelian inheritance."[12] More significantly, Szymon Wróbel has analyzed the major ideas of Kołakowski's *oeuvre* through the lens of *Individual and Infinity*.[13] This reading, however, does not thematize how Kołakowski's Spinozism contributed directly to his political thought in the crucial years between 1953, when Stalin died, and 1968, when Kołakowski left Poland and the Eastern European humanist socialist project was abandoned following the authoritarian crackdowns on liberalizing protest movements in Poland and Czechoslovakia.

In this article I foreground the significance of Spinoza in Kołakowski's trajectory from Marxist humanism to anticommunism. By reading Kołakowski's evaluation of Spinoza's thought in relation to his own philosophical questions, and contextualizing these in his historical and political horizons between 1953 and 1968, I show that in the ambiguous relationship between Spinozist substance and its modes, he found an alternative to the Hegelian interpretation of the historical process as synthesizing all contradictions between universality and particularity. Kołakowski saw, on the basis of his post-Stalinist guilt, this Hegelian synthesis as negating the reality of the individual, and removing its moral responsibility. In response, he used Spinozism to find alternative understandings of modernity, morality, and progress, founded not on

[9]Leszek Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność: Wolność i antynomie wolności w filozofii Spinozy* (Warsaw, 2012), 301.

[10]Leszek Kołakowski, *The Two Eyes of Spinoza and Other Essays on Philosophers*, ed. Zbigniew Janowski (South Bend, 2004).

[11]Jan Andrzej Kłoczowski, *Więcej niż mit: Leszka Kołakowskiego spory o religię* (Krakow, 1994); Hubert Czyżewski, *Kołakowski I poszukiwanie pewności* (Krakow, 2022).

[12]George Lichtheim, "Marxism and Beyond: On Historical Understanding and Individual Responsibility (Review)," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 7/4 (1969), 474–7, at 475.

[13]Szymon Wróbel, *Filozof i terytorium: Polityka idei w myśli Leszka Kołakowskiego, Bronisława Baczki, Krzysztofa Pomiana i Marka J. Siemka* (Warsaw, 2016), 47–155.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a Hegelian negation of faith into reason, but rather on an irresolvable contradiction between history in its infinity and subjectivity in its finitude. The Spinozist subject, for Kołakowski, must stoically accept its partiality in the face of infinity and eternity as the basis for its moral freedom and flourishing. Following Lucien Goldmann, one of his most important influences, in identifying the moral spirit of Marxism with the early modern moment of Spinoza, Jansenism, and Pascal's bargain, he rejected the equation of historical progress with rational or empirical certainty. Instead, he advocated for a moral faith, drawn from Spinozist "intuition," and incompatible with the institutionalization of socialism into an organized movement, in the possibility of realizing eternal values within the historical process, while denying that this possibility could be proven.[14]

To describe the existential contradiction which requires this leap of faith, Kołakowski wrote of the "two eyes of Spinoza": the attempt to simultaneously gaze upon nature in its parts, or modes, and in its infinity, as a single substance, while refusing to collapse these visions into one, as was the case with Hegelian and Stalinist historical dialectics. Although he did not develop it into a systematic foundation for Marxism, his turn to Spinoza in the 1950s and 1960s can therefore be understood as an attempt to find an alternative to the thinking of Hegel, comparable to attempts undertaken by French Marxists following Louis Althusser, and contemporary political thinkers.[15]

The first section of this article sketches Kołakowski's young Stalinist convictions, including the Hegelian influence of his teacher Tadeusz Kroński. I then briefly contextualize the relationship between Spinozism, Hegelianism, and Marxism, before exploring the agenda of Kołakowski's revisionism in the 1950s, particularly his aim to find an irreducible site of individual moral responsibility amidst history's apparent determinism. The following section analyzes how Kołakowski mined Spinozism for anti-Hegelian and anti-Stalinist answers to this problem. He developed a Marxist ethics which cast away its submission of individual action to historical totality, and redefined communism as the striving to realize moral values amidst historical and existential contradiction, rather than the instrumental consequences of such striving. I then turn to *Religious Consciousness* and the influence of the anti-denominational Dutch "Second Reformation," particularly its Spinozist strands, on Kołakowski's rejection of socialism's institutional character. Finally, the last portion of the article shows how the Spinozist tools he used as antidotes to Hegel led Kołakowski, particularly his mystical interpretation of Spinoza's "intuition," to embrace the concept of myth, which held that moral freedom requires a necessarily irrational faith in a nonempirical unconditioned truth. Whereas Kołakowski's younger years followed Marx's imperative that, after the Reformation, "it was no longer a question ... of [the layman's] struggle against the priest outside himself, but of his struggle against his own internal priest," by the

[14]Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. Philip Thody (London, 2016).

[15]Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago, 2011); Hasana Sharp and Jason E. Smith, eds., *Between Hegel and Spinoza: A Volume of Critical Essays* (New York, 2012); Tracie Matysik, *When Spinoza Met Marx: Experiments in Nonhumanist Activity* (Chicago, 2022).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

time he left Poland, he saw jester and priest as equally crucial dimensions of human life.[16]

Between Stalinism and de-Stalinization

For a self-declared jester, even the young Leszek Kołakowski was unnervingly priestly. As a professor at the University of Warsaw he frequently dressed only in black; students occasionally mistook him for a defrocked clergyman, and his intellectual reputation lived up to his clerical fashion.[17] Philosopher Marcin Król spoke for many Warsaw philosophy students in writing that "the thought and person of Leszek Kołakowski made up the greatest spiritual adventure of my youth."[18] Such impressions were reinforced by Kołakowski's obsessive interest in the history of religion, and by his belief that Marxism had to produce its own answers to the social and spiritual questions of the Catholic Church.

Kołakowski, born in 1927, discovered Marxism during the Second World War. While he had been shaped as a child by the egalitarian, atheist, and anti-chauvinist values of his father, an activist in Edward Ambrowski's co-operative labor movement, his politics crystallized as the Second Polish republic crumbled under the unprecedented devastation of the 1939 joint Nazi–Soviet invasion.[19] The brutality of the war in Poland is well known; six million Polish citizens died, including three million Polish Jews murdered in the Holocaust. Kołakowski left the war as an orphan, his father having been executed in a Nazi roundup of the resistance, and his mother having died in his early childhood.[20] Although Marxism would never become popular in Poland, to some, Stalinist planning seemed to be the only possible future after the complete destruction of the country's infrastructure and social fabric.[21]

Total war also created a hatred for the existing and normalized thinking in extremes. During the war, Kołakowski was informally tutored by a former priest, who taught him Latin and introduced him to Christian theology.[22] While he saw religion as a mystification of inegalitarian social structures, he nevertheless internalized an element of faith in his communism. Marxism promised that necessity lay behind irrationality and violence. As his later colleague Andrzej Walicki observed, the "concept of the inner meaning of history … made it possible to believe … that present evil was, in fact, paving the way for a better future."[23]

[16]Karl Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx–Engels Reader* (New York, 1978), 53–65, at 60.

[17]John Connelly, "Jester and Priest: On Leszek Kołakowski," *The Nation*, Sept. 2013, at www.thenation.com/article/archive/jester-and-priest-leszek-kolakowski

[18]Quoted in Shore, "In Search of Meaning after Marxism," 595.

[19]Kołakowski and Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy, czas niespokojny*, 1–30.

[20]Zbigniew Mentzel, *Kołakowski: Czytanie świata: Biografia* (Krakow, 2010), 52.

[21]Bradley Abrams, "The Second World War and the East European Revolutions," *East European Politics and Societies* 16/3 (2003), 623–64.

[22]Kołakowski and Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy, czas niespokojny*, 48–50.

[23]Andrzej Walicki, "On Writing Intellectual History," *Interlocutor: Journal of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas* 1 (2017), 125–41, at 127.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This theodicy, by which evil was justified by the necessity of future progress, fit with the principle of synthesis through contradiction in Soviet Marxism. In his entry on "Dialectical and Historical Materialism" in the Soviet Union's ideological handbook, Stalin wrote that dialectical materialism sees that nature is "in constant movement and undergoing constant change, and the development of nature [is] the result of the development of [its] contradictions."[24] Historical materialism applied this principle to social life, seeing all historical contradiction as a potential synthesis intelligible in light of the necessity of the future.

Kołakowski, eager to place himself on the right side of history, bought into this theodicy. In a late interview, he recalled believing that "it was necessary to impose communism, even by force, because communism was the future of humanity."[25] He attempted to join a guerilla unit of the People's Army of Poland, but was rebuffed due to his decidedly academic constitution (he would find the need to use a cane as young as twenty-eight), and recommended to join the ranks of the party intelligentsia. After the war, he began to study at the University of Łódź and joined the Polish Workers' Party (PPR) in 1946.[26] Two years later the PPR forced a merger with the Polish Socialist Party and became the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR). After several years of political intimidation, falsified elections, and violence bordering on civil war, the PZPR, backed by the Soviet Red Army, gained control of Polish political and economic life by 1948. It became a satellite party when it was cleansed of national communists in a purge of "anti-rightist deviations" across the Eastern bloc, as Stalin consolidated his hold on the region.[27]

Kołakowski's commitment to the cause remained unshaken through the early 1950s. His archive includes an undated propaganda speech he delivered to his communist youth union in Łódź. He proclaimed that "we are aware of the inevitability of the historical process; we try to anticipate it and keep up with its changes … Loving life, we are not afraid of losing it. We know that our thoughts and actions will be continued by others."[28]

After Łódź, Kołakowski began to study for his doctorate at the University of Warsaw and the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), a school founded by party philosopher Adam Schaff in accordance with the project of forming a new socialist intelligentsia announced in the 1950 six-year plan.[29] Despite the institute's charter, it brought together young Marxists who, under the guidance of several interwar sociologists and philosophers willing to depart from the party line, pursued theoretical interests

[24]Joseph Stalin, "Dialectical and Historical Materialism," in David Brandenberger and Mikhail Zelenov, eds., *Stalin's Master Narrative: A Critical Edition of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course* (New Haven, 2019), 248–73, at 249.

[25]Kołakowski and Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy, czas niespokojny*, 80.

[26]Ibid., 77–8.

[27]Andrzej Paczkowski, *The Spring Will Be Ours: Poland and the Poles from Occupation to Freedom*, trans. Jane Cave (Philadelphia, 2003), 147–278.

[28]Ryszard Herczyński and Leszek Kołakowski, "Projektowanie jako referat ideologiczny 'Życia'," Signature 13228, Item 2, ALK, BN, Warsaw, Poland.

[29]John Connelly, *Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 60.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which extended beyond Stalinist boundaries. Among these was a deep engagement with Hegel.

Hegel's thought, seen as subjectivist and idealist, was minimized in the Marxism–Leninism disseminated by Adam Schaff in textbooks and mandatory university courses.[30] Hegelianism nonetheless appealed to Kołakowski, offering a more sophisticated historical theodicy than Stalinism. In seeking to show that history, including its violence, mediates a rational absolute idea, Hegel had appropriated the formal architecture of faith into his scheme of history as the autobiography of Spirit, allowing for his claim that that "all states have originated in force, and this subjugation, domination … is thoroughly necessary."[31]

Leading the Hegelian strand of Polish Marxism was Tadeusz Kroński, an interwar phenomenologist who, after his experience of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, eventually became a committed Stalinist.[32] Kroński's turn to communism, and a corresponding attraction to Hegel, seem to have been an attempt to salvage history as a medium for reconciliation with the world after the terror of Nazism. In a 1955 essay, Kroński identified Hegel's concept of evil as the gap between what is and what should be in moments of historical transition. Historical evil is alienation, the fetishization of an old way of life whose roots have been torn asunder amidst the emergence of a new social reality. He castigated identification with the transient in favor of a reconciliation with the historical process in totality as a vehicle for human values. This Hegelianism, like Stalinism, dissolved the reality of existing particularities, and their contradictions, into the essence of history in its whole.[33]

Teaching at the ISS, Kroński exerted such immense influence on a circle of future revisionists that in 1963 philosopher Zbigniew Jordan identified Kołakowski and his colleague Bronisław Baczko as leading a "Hegelian wing" in Polish Marxism initiated by Kroński.[34] Kołakowski in particular became known as Kroński's "special student," adopting aspects of his humor and much of his Hegelianism.[35] Kołakowski crucially internalized Kroński's belief that the fundamental project of philosophy is the subject's reconciliation with the world, to "overcome man's imperfection by means of understanding the Whole."[36]

[30]Zbigniew Jordan, *Philosophy and Ideology: The Development of Philosophy and Marxism–Leninism in Poland since the Second World War* (Dordrecht, 1963).

[31]G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit 1827–1828*, trans. Robert Williams (Oxford, 2007), 190.

[32]Andrzej Kołakowski, "Przedmowa," in Tadeusz Kroński, *Faszyzm a tradycja europejska* (Warsaw, 2014), 7–20.

[33]Tadeusz Kroński, "Problem zła moralnego w Heglowskiej filozofii dziejów," in Kroński, *Rozważania wokół Hegla* (Warsaw, 1960), 59–90.

[34]Jordan, *Philosophy and Ideology*, 129.

[35]Marta Bucholc, "The Warsaw School of the Historians of Ideas as a Thought Collective: Together, Separately," *Interlocutor: Journal of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas* 1 (2017), 142–62, at 153; Leszek Kołakowski, "Tadeusz Kroński," in Zbigniew Mentzel, ed., *Pochwała niekonsekwencji: Pisma rozproszone sprzed 1968* (London, 1989), 346–53.

[36]Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, The Golden Age, The Breakdown*, trans. P. S. Falla (New York, 2005), 12.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While at the ISS, Kołakowski pursued this project by criticizing religion's mystified barriers to the humanization of nature and history. He took this criticism seriously, castigating his colleagues for failing to tackle religious problems on their own terms.[37] Baczko went so far as to describe him as "suffer[ing] from religious obsession."[38]

This interest brought Kołakowski to Spinoza, on whom he chose to write his dissertation. Kołakowski was drawn to Spinoza as a forerunner of Feuerbach and Marx in his criticism of religious illusion. He claimed that "dialectical materialism is the only legitimate heir of Spinoza's philosophical heritage."[39] The dissertation, defended in December of 1953, saw Spinoza as democratizing truth against a privileged class of clerics. By the time the work was finished however, the Stalinist moment had ended, after which, Kołakowski's engagement with Spinoza would further inform his fundamental philosophical positions.

Between Hegel and Spinoza

Retrospectively, Kołakowski found himself in good company as he turned to Spinoza. The seventeenth-century Dutch Jewish thinker, central to the development of German idealism after Kant, was equally admired by a lineage of nineteenth- and twentieth-century radical thinkers, including Marx.

Spinoza's system, built on top of his early heretical forays into biblical criticism and his denial of a divine creator, reached its full iteration in his posthumous *Ethics*. He defined God as an infinite, necessary, and self-causing substance, expressed in attributes such as thought and extension. The attributes and their modes—particular traits, including human beings, which inhere in substance and populate the world we perceive—are identical with God insofar as they are its particularized expressions. Spinoza based his system on the principle of sufficient reason to suggest that the essence of a mode is equivalent to the knowledge of its cause within the infinite process of substance's self-determination. This implied the universe's metaphysical unity in which "the whole of nature is one individual."[40] In this context, freedom is knowing and possessing oneself in light of one's relational identity as both affected by more powerful bodies and, however, also capable of affecting bodies which are less powerful, an awareness of which allows the subject to pursue its striving for survival, or *conatus*.

Historian Tracie Matysik has identified two predominant threads in the reception of Spinoza by socialist and Marxist thinkers. First has been the attempt to found socialist thinking on non-teleological grounds, and second to find a basis for freedom which does not rely on a humanist individualism.[41] In the twentieth century, these tendencies were increasingly held to be antithetical to Hegelianism. Emblematic of this anti-Hegelianism are the French Marxists who followed Louis Althusser's turn to Spinoza in pursuit of a non-teleological and antihumanist dialectic, a project epitomized in Pierre Macherey's classic *Hegel or Spinoza*.[42] Spinozism allowed Althusser to see history as a

[37] Czyżewski, *Kołakowski i poszukiwanie pewności*, 38.

[38] Quoted in ibid., 46.

[39] Quoted in ibid., 51.

[40] Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (New York, 1996), 43.

[41] Matysik, *When Spinoza Met Marx*, 8.

[42] Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan Ruddick (Minneapolis, 2011).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"process without a subject," and nature as containing no transcendent *telos*.[43] This reading accepted Hegel's influential criticism of Spinozism as a bastion of the negative, but praised the "void" which lay at its core against Hegel's negation of this pure negativity, which forces the pluralism of nature into a dominating humanist logic.[44]

As will be elaborated below, Kołakowski would also hold much of Spinozism in contrast to Hegel. He fundamentally differed from the French thinkers around Althusser, however, in that his primary antagonist was the experience of Stalinism in Polish society, which he construed through his Hegelian commitment to historical theodicy. Like Althusser, he saw a looming negativity in Spinoza, but equally praised an empowering affirmation of the individual, more akin to the reading of Gilles Deleuze.[45] Reflecting the limits to their parallels, Kołakowski would directly criticize Althusser in the early 1970s for developing a Marxism with no positive content, whose structuralism inadvertently maintained the presence of teleology.[46]

These contrasts with his French contemporaries reflect that Kołakowski's interpretation of Spinoza was inextricably linked to his changing political project, and did not seek, like Althusser, Macherey, or Deleuze, a systematic philosophical method. He rather used Spinoza's thought as a resource to dynamically respond to specific shortcomings in Hegel's teleology and Stalinism's philosophical vacuity. It was Spinoza's inability to be "domesticated" or "assimilated" into Marxist thought which gave Kołakowski's Spinozism its power in questioning communist dogma.[47]

Between individual and infinity

The day that Stalin died, 5 March 1953, was the ignition of a bomb with a delayed fuse. Later in the same year, a defected Polish security minister used Radio Free Europe to broadcast confidential information regarding the secret police's brutal torture practices.[48] In February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev disavowed Stalin's cult of personality as a deviation from authentic socialism in what marked the height of the Eastern European "thaw." Moscow aimed to replace rule by force with assent, promoting hopes for agricultural decollectivization, economic decentralization, and liberalized public debate within the Soviet Union and its satellite states.[49] Poland's First Secretary Bolesław Bierut died soon after Khrushchev's "Secret Speech," opening the possibility for reform. In June, workers in Poznań took to the streets in anger toward taxes targeting the working class, and in deadly confrontations with police, protesting that "the Party should not be the servant of the functionaries, but of the people," in the words of one striker.[50]

[43]Warren Montag, "Hegel, *sive* Spinoza: Hegel as His Own True Other," in Hasana Sharp and Jason E. Smith, eds., *Between Hegel and Spinoza: A Volume of Critical Essays* (London, 2012), 83–97.

[44]Knox Peden, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavaillés to Deleuze* (Stanford, 2014), 127–48.

[45]Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco, 1988)

[46]Leszek Kołakowski, "Althusser's Marx," *Socialist Register* 8 (1971), 111–28.

[47]Matysik, *When Spinoza Met Marx*, 2.

[48]Zbigniew Błażyński, *Mówi Józef Światło: Za kulisami bezpieki i partii* (Łomianki, 2012).

[49]Thomas Simons, *Eastern Europe in the Postwar World* (London, 1991), 107–8.

[50]Jack Bloom, *Seeing through the Eyes of the Polish Revolution: Solidarity and the Struggle against Communism* (Chicago, 2014), 59.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

After the Poznań uprising, the PZPR took a patriotic turn to quell frustrations, looking to Władysław Gomułka, a communist known as a victim of Stalin's purge of nationalist party leaders in the 1940s. Gomułka became first secretary in the 1956 "Polish October," giving his inaugural speech to a crowd of 500,000 in Warsaw.[51] Days later, the Hungarian revolution began, as the prospect of a liberalized socialism began to spread. The concept of workers' councils was popularized, and intellectuals, including those in the "Crooked Circles Club," of which Kołakowski was a member, attempted to forge ties with factory workers, reflecting the interest in a democratized socialism built bottom-up from popular action.[52] Poland was visited by Western thinkers like Ralph Miliband, C. Wright Mills, Michael Harrington, and Daniel Bell as a test case for socialist reform.[53] Amidst this atmosphere, in 1957, Kołakowski finished writing *Individual and Infinity: Freedom and the Antinomies of Freedom in the Philosophy of Spinoza*.

Individual and Infinity, published in 1958, was the result of four years of philosophical thinking, on top of the work Kołakowski had produced for his dissertation. Much of the book's philosophical legwork contributed directly to his humanist Marxism from 1953 onward, particularly his investigations of Spinozist cognition, the relationship between substance and its modes, and the tension between determinism and moral responsibility. However, the book also bears similarity to the work of French Marxist Jean-Toussaint Desanti, who saw Spinozism as mired in historical contradiction.[54] For Kołakowski, dwelling in these contradictions served to question the Hegelian and Stalinist syntheses of historical conflict into inevitable unity.

The first section contextualizes Spinoza's biblical criticism within theological disputes over the boundary between faith and reason. Kołakowski's main points of comparison are Aquinas, Averroes, and Maimonides, the last of whom, along with Hobbes, he identifies as the closest predecessor to Spinoza's delineation between theology and science. Spinoza argued that holy writings ought to be considered vehicles to teach moral principles to those unable to see truth in its complexity, and not divine documents to be read literally. Kołakowski summarizes that, while "scripture is untainted regarding education in moral precepts" in this reading, "it has no value from the point of view of science."[55]

Kołakowski then explores the autonomizing function of Spinoza's rejection of empiricism in favor of apriorism. By valorizing the method of the mathematical sciences, in which sensory experience is inferior to the pure cognitive act, the Spinozist universe, already emancipated from religious tradition, expands infinitely in its intelligibility. For Kołakowski, "Spinoza's doctrine … has a primarily moral and

[51]Paczkowski, *The Spring Will Be Ours*, 276.

[52]Dariusz Gawin, *Wielki zwrot: Ewolucja lewicy I odrodzenie idei społeczeństwa obywatelskiego 1956–1976* (Krakow, 2013), 13–54; Jan Józef Lipski, *KOR: A History of the Workers' Defense Committee in Poland, 1976–1981*, trans. Olga Amsterdamska and Gene Moore (Berkeley, 1985), 10.

[53]John Summers, "The Cultural Break: C. Wright Mills and the Polish October," *Intellectual History Review* 18/2 (2008), 259–73.

[54]Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology*, 103.

[55]Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność*, 61.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

political orientation."[56] He saw Spinozist rationalism as a fully humanized practical reason whose ends are derived entirely from its own immanent interests rather than a transcendent absolute. Foreshadowing the relationship between priest and jester, Kołakowski observes that "it is not God who wears a priest's clothes, but the priest who wears God's costume … Emancipation from God is also emancipation from those who claim his authority."[57]

In further elaborating Spinoza's humanism, Kołakowski turns to his analyses of the three types of cognition. The first of these is the imagination, which in the *Ethics* incorporates the authority of hearsay, considered separately in the *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding*. Imagination arises from sensory experience, and is the primary cause of falsehood. In confusing the impressions and reactions created by external causes to be agential and independent things, the imagination leads its subject into a self-imposed darkness.

The second form of knowledge, the intellect's capacity for reason, is the understanding of an effect by reference to its cause. The rational intellect can form "common notions," adequate ideas of how two related phenomena are connected. These filter out the confusions of the imagination and disclose the interaction between modes through their shared attributes and the eternal laws derived from substance. Common notions are strung together until an individual is able to see the world as a web of cause and effect, and gains adequate knowledge of its own position in this process. For Kołakowski, while the "intellect" is not empirical, it is nonetheless deeply related to experience. He wrote that "experience does not teach the essence of individual things, but it teaches about their existence, which in turn cannot be justified analytically."[58] What differentiates this experience from empiricism is that the truth of the intellect is not a correspondence between perception and nature which is *discovered*, but is rather itself *created* by the subject's *conatus*. Because "truth is the measure of itself," "ideas have truth not as a relation to reality, but as an immanent feature."[59] True knowledge is a function of an individual's striving for happiness and survival; it is what successfully empowers the subject in this striving.

The third type of cognition is intuition, which sees all things as the effects of God, or substance. For Kołakowski, intuition is a leap beyond reason, contradicting the geometric method of the intellect. He suggested that intuition, particularly in Spinoza's later writings, is akin to a mystic yearning for nondiscursive unity with nature in its whole. In his immanentization of the divine, Spinoza secularized a religious urge to derive the reality of the world's multiplicity from a single primary truth, whose pantheistic character ensures the full intelligibility of nature to the human perspective.[60]

Consequently, Kołakowski found that the Spinozist is forced to see the world through "two eyes." On the one hand is the active reason of an intellect which produces its own humanized criteria for truth as a consequence of its *conatus*. On the

[56]Ibid., 36.
[57]Ibid., 301.
[58]Ibid., 43.
[59]Ibid., 45.
[60]Ibid., 46.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

other is an intuition which seeks to reunite itself with substance and thus cast off its individuality by identifying itself with the infinity and eternity. Kołakowski would write in an essay from 1958, the year when *Individual and Infinity* was published, that "the opposition between a world conceived as a whole, and thus a single substance, and a world composed of parts, and thus as a collection of separate modes," is central to Spinozism.[61] The difference between these conceptions, and between the intellect and intuition, is fundamental. The *Ethics* held that knowledge of God, and thus of nature as a whole, precedes knowledge of particularity. This seems to contradict, however, the basis for the humanized reason of the intellect, which affirms the existence of individual things in its ability to build common notions and aid in the subject's survival. The world seen through our practical eyes, which corrupt substance's infinity and indivisibility into particularities and individual modes, is metaphysically unreal. In another essay on Spinoza, written two years after *Individual and Infinity*, in 1959, Kołakowski observed of the intellect that "our cognition, determined as it is by our practical needs, artificially picks out certain properties from the totality of [substance] … The world-composed-of-parts which presents itself to our senses is only the phenomenal world."[62]

Spinoza's humanism therefore turns into nonhumanism. In a passage from the 1958 essay cited above, in which he observed the similarities between Marxist and Spinozist epistemologies, he asks, "what justifies our saying that the visual world of a fly, made up of light and dark spots of neutral colors, is less 'authentic' or less 'real' than ours, except the fact that ours is better adapted to our needs?"[63] Both perspectives are equally justified on the basis of the intellect's immanent criteria of truth, and yet equally artificial in light of substance's ontological indivisibility. In his 1966 "The Two Eyes of Spinoza," he explained that this contradiction results from the fact that every attempt "to interpret all the qualities of existence as relative to one primordial being" ends up "abolishing the entire realm of the subjective."[64] The coherency of this double vision results from the relationship between the substance and its parts.

Kołakowski thus dedicates the largest portion of *Individual and Infinity* to the nature of substance, particularly its relation to the attributes and modes. He begins with Spinoza's proposition in Book II of the *Ethics* that "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things."[65] Kołakowski defends the doctrine of parallelism that "things have an objective double existence, which, however, does not separate them in terms of being."[66] Ideas in thought and their corresponding bodies in extension do not refer to a common entity, but are ontologically identical.

[61] Leszek Kołakowski, "Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth," in Kołakowski, *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, 38–66, at 52.

[62] Leszek Kołakowski, "Pierre Bayle and the Critique of Spinoza's Metaphysics of Substance," in Kołakowski, *The Two Eyes of Spinoza and Other Essays*, 27–42, at 32–3.

[63] Kołakowski, "Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth," 48.

[64] Leszek Kołakowski, "The Two Eyes of Spinoza," in Kołakowski, *The Two Eyes of Spinoza and Other Essays*, 1–15, at 1.

[65] Spinoza, *Ethics*, 35

[66] Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność*, 123.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

However, the story becomes more complicated. This "double existence" seems to describe not only the identity of thought and extension, but also the division of existence between partiality and wholeness. The objectivity of modal existence, while finite and artificial, can be sustained because no other practical, communicable human cognition would allow for our everyday striving for survival. All of the properties of finitude which contradict infinity, including the ontological reality of individual things and temporal duration, are distorting abstractions. Nevertheless, they are true insofar as they are necessary conditions for individual flourishing.

Kołakowski maintains that the moral function of Spinoza's system in its secularizing mission cannot do without this metaphysical gap between substance and mode, and the cognitive dissonance between intellect and intuition. He gives consideration to the prevalence of the concept of infinity at the forefront of seventeenth-century European culture, pointing out that one strand, picked up by Jansenism, was a theological representation of the all-powerful which served to inject "in the soul a sense of powerlessness that speaks the language of humility."[67] Alternatively, northern mysticism, in pursuing a capacity to unite with the divine through an "inner light" within the individual, saw in infinity an empowerment of the human. It was the latter empowering infinite which Spinoza sought to find in substance, a promise, building on his proto-mystical "intuition," that within the soul was access to infinity and eternity.

Consequently, while they are both crucial for the moral project of emancipation from religious authority, Kołakowski suggests that the Spinozist must differentiate between the view from mode and the view from substance. In this tendency, he mirrored the wholly un-Marxist reading of Spinoza presented by Martial Gueroult in the 1960s and 1970s, which held that "it is the incommensurability of idea and object, modal intellect and God/Nature (Substance/attributes), that is itself generative of absolute understanding," as summarized by Knox Peden.[68] This disjuncture between intellect and God means, among other things, that to describe substance as "prior" to its modifications is to propose not a temporal relation, but a metaphysical one, because the arrangement of events "in temporal succession is only a way of viewing the world through the human imagination. Time is therefore subjective, and the duration that belongs to particular modes depends on our knowledge of their existence as distinct parts."[69] Here Kołakowski, also like Gueroult, argues that Spinozism was fundamentally misread by Hegel, which Kołakowski communicated through a refence to Greek thought.

For Kołakowski, Hegel sought to make substance a Heraclitian negativity, a temporal dialectic consisting of a process. Alternatively, for Spinoza it is Parmenidean: "the concept of negation," in the sense of the finite as the negation of the infinite, "has no historical meaning, but a purely metaphysical one."[70] Eternity, as a property of God, is not a never-ending time, but the absence of time. This eternity, and substance's infinity, are wholly incompatible with the temporalized and quantified nature of the human

[67] Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność*, 126.

[68] Peden, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology*, 91.

[69] Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność*, 219.

[70] Ibid., 134.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

historical process perceived by the senses and intellect. Kołakowski wrote, in criticism of historical teleology,

> A sage sees the world in its entirety. The world as encompassed by one total intuitive vision … The elimination of time turns out to be a factor in the fight against the disastrous affects which flow from false imagination, from the belief that what has happened is more real and more necessary than what is happening now and what is going to happen.[71]

Kołakowski believed that intuition, including this elimination of time, was "a condition for rebuilding morality on new foundations."[72] Moral flourishing is the good which arises from proper knowledge of and orientation towards the absolute, regardless of the consequences of this knowledge.

This principle is elaborated in the final question Kołakowski examines which bore direct sway on his Marxism. He asked whether "man, whose behavior is entirely driven by factors beyond his control, is burdened with moral responsibility."[73] Kołakowski answers that for Spinoza, the good has no relationship with agency, just as morality is rooted in knowledge, and not in the consequences of action. Self-identification with the eternal necessity of substance is joyous regardless of its determined nature. Similarly, the experience of evil becomes no better just because it is necessary. The unreality of an autonomous subject and our ability to judge between good and evil bear no contradiction.

Spinoza's contradictory defense of both humanism and pantheism suggested to Kołakowski the inability to synthesize particularity and totality. For each of his humanist principles, Kołakowski found that Spinoza was forced to rearticulate religious questions in rational language. Explaining this paradox, he noted that "the emancipation of thinking was a fight for the validation of the attitude of rationalism which came before this attitude managed to bear fruit in the form of results which might call into question traditional beliefs."[74] This secularizing project therefore inadvertently incorporated some of the religious positions it sought to challenge. For example, as seen above, he saw Spinoza as aiming to humanize the infinite in order to empower the individual in contrast to the tendency, within Jansenism and other currents of Counter-Reformation thought, to embrace infinity's function as a humbling condemnation of worldly imperfection. However, in attempting to make this humanized infinity rationally intelligible, he was forced to develop a geometric pantheism which simultaneously left no metaphysical space for the reality of subjectivity, and consequently in its own way subjected the finite to the infinite.

This Spinozist dilemma bears similarity to the dialectic which drove Kołakowski's thought through his late career. In his 1988 *Metaphysical Horror*, one of the summaries of his thought, he explained that the axis of *horror metaphysicus* "has two

[71] Ibid., 221.
[72] Ibid., 285.
[73] Ibid., 326.
[74] Ibid., 13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

poles: the Absolute and the self, or the *cogito*," which cannot be synthesized without corrupting the former or reifying the latter.[75] This insolubility of the synthesis between individual and infinity condemns us to dwell in contradiction and without metaphysical certainty, seeing the world through both Spinoza's humanist eye of the practical intellect, and simultaneously his mystical eye of the intuition. The task of de-Stalinization was to accept this contradiction, and to see it in fact as the condition for moral freedom and self-realization, rather than as a contingency to be overcome.

Between substance and history

During the same years as he worked on Spinoza, Kołakowski restructured his socialist thought around the defense of irreducible moral responsibility. He remained skeptical that the patriotism of the Polish October would redress the insufficiencies of state socialism. After 1956 he began to a sketch a humanist Marxism which led in two primary directions. In the first of these he reinterpreted socialism as an ethical project to increase the capacity for moral power. The second developed a noninstitutional left centered on the concept of determination as negation.

Both projects drew from his reading of Spinoza, the influence of which is most clear in his 1958 "Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth." As noted above, the essay compares Spinozist cognition to the anthropocentrism in Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844. In claiming that truth's criteria are immanent to humanity's practical projects, and therefore that moral values are a conditional necessity for rational cognition, Kołakowski distinguishes his position from Kantianism. The "thing in itself" is an unintelligible category; the phenomenal world consists only of "things for us."[76]

The agenda for this revisionism was set throughout the thaw from 1953 to 1956. "The Death of Gods" exposed Stalinism's reliance on a pseudoscientific myth of history. By presenting itself as the mediator of a necessary and inevitable truth, the party justified its monopoly on power and conceived of communism as a teleological plan from above forced onto society.[77] In "Intellectuals and the Communist Movement," from the same year, he proposed that establishing a sphere of "untouchable truths" turned Marxism into dogma.[78] The problem was that Stalinism "had tried to catechize Marxism," as he and Baczko argued in 1955.[79]

His response was similar to Spinoza's biblical criticism. To consider the communist classics as historical documents subject to criticism was to empower the individual against the supposedly infallible Central Committee. Marxist principles ought

[75]Leszek Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, trans. Agnieszka Kołakowska (Chicago, 2001), 60.

[76]Kołakowski, "Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth," 49.

[77]Leszek Kołakowski, "The Death of Gods," in Kołakowski, *Is God Happy? Selected Essays*, trans. Agnieszka Kołakowska (New York, 2012), 5–19.

[78]Leszek Kołakowski, "Intellectuals and the Communist Movement," in Kołakowski, *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, 158–72, at 160.

[79]Quoted in Czyżewski, *Kołakowski I poszukiwanie pewności*, 52.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to be valued as contributions to the moral project which inspired them, but not as indisputable bases of a science.[80]

This embrace of criticism was part of a larger project to found socialist thinking on the moral flourishing of the individual rather than a science of history. This was the aim of his 1957 collection whose title, translated into English, was *Worldview and Everyday Life*. Drawing from his epistemology of the practical "thing-for-us," he wrote that the "meaning of each piece of information about the world is discovered in philosophy only when its practical and human meaning is discovered."[81] Against the fetishization of class and history as the first and final causes of the individual, he argued that they are useful abstractions, but are made intelligible only by cognition's more fundamental aim to read values into the world. Citing the Spinozist and Stoic doctrine that experience of this moral value is its own reward, one essay in the volume observed that communism "cannot, through the abuse of abstraction, be reduced to communist property relations … Communism is also the improvement of moral principles of collective coexistence, which constitute a goal in themselves."[82] By absolutizing class and history as prior to each individual's moral project—which is to say the experience of moral values—which make those concepts useful, one measures life by the yardstick of theory, and not the other way around.

Kołakowski continued this line of thought in the 1957 essay "Responsibility and History," perhaps his most important from the 1950s, which opens with an epigraph from F. H. Jacobi's letters to Moses Mendelssohn *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza*. The essay sets out to criticize the attitudes of intellectuals—himself included—who allowed themselves to accept Stalinist crimes in the name of progress by examining what he calls a "Hegelian problem": "Does the possession of a theory of progress replace or negate a simultaneous and non-contradictory use of criteria of moral behavior different from the criteria of historical progress?"[83] Kołakowski begins by analyzing how a philosophy of the negation of the significance of moral responsibility resulted from the historical moment of the 1940s and 1950s, observing that the "ideology of renouncing choice results from the confrontation of two social facts: the ideological consciousness of the anti-Stalinist left on the one hand, and a reality that bars this consciousness from asserting itself in social life on the other."[84] In light of history's seeming inevitability amidst the Second World War's resolution into communism under the shadows of the Yalta conference and the presence of Soviet troops, leftist intellectuals totalized the atmosphere of fatalism. Consequently, abstracting history and its experienced patterns into absolutes above the values and individuals which create it had dissolved history as a site for human agency into teleology.

[80]Leszek Kołakowski, "Permanent vs. Transitory Aspects of Marxism," in Kołakowski, *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, 173–87.

[81]Leszek Kołakowski, "Z czego żyją filozofowie?" in Kołakowski, *Światopogląd i życie codzienne* (Warsaw, 1957), 7–28, at 24.

[82]Leszek Kołakowski, "O słuszności zasady: cel uświęca środki," in Kołakowski, *Światopogląd i życie codzienne*, 84–101, at 92.

[83]Leszek Kołakowski, "Responsibility and History," in Kołakowski, *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, 85–157, at 132.

[84]Ibid., 108.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kołakowski offered several responses to this situation. One argument was a purely logical one. The use of moral judgment is not derived from the empirical ability of individuals to make decisions on the basis of their own will. He wrote that "in this respect we follow the ideas of Spinoza. The existence of the social fact that individuals are judged according to their moral behavior must be accepted in the same spirit as we accept natural laws."[85] Consequently, "though the values of historical progress are realized through crimes, they do not cease to be values, nor do the crimes cease to be crimes."[86] By translating the necessity of God into the idea of historical progress, this line mirrored a passage from *Individual and Infinity*, which found that "the good does not cease to be desirable because we experience it as a result of the necessary laws of nature … similarly, the evil of human action does not cease to terrify us, even if we know that it arises from necessity."[87]

Kołakowski pushes this argument further, building on the incompatibility of a Spinozist eternal substance with a Hegelian historical process. If history is held in Marxism to be an expression of an ultimate truth, then the description of this truth from within the historical process—a description which is itself historically conditioned—can never be fully adequate. It is the distortion of a human cognition which abstracts and appropriates historical data according to its needs. Consequently, as Kołakowski wrote in *Individual and Infinity*, finished in the same year as he wrote "Responsibility and History," viewing history in its totality would paradoxically require "the elimination of time" through an intuition vision. The moral project of this elimination of time is to refuse to submit the reality of the present and future to the weight of the past.[88]

Because our existence within history, as within substance, is characterized by the contradiction between our everyday, fragmented cognition of the past, and our aspiration to see history in its totality as the expression of eternal values, we are given the chance to make moral stands. We attempt to realize these values within history, despite the fact that we cannot know with scientific certainty whether we will succeed. "The true socialist," Kołakowski proclaimed in "Responsibility and History," "acts at the risk of losing."[89] He repeated this position in his 1966 "Historical Understanding and the Intelligibility of History": because there is no court of appeals outside history, identifying history as a meaningful process is ultimately an act of faith. The socialist project must claim this historical faith as its basis.[90]

In his 1958 essay "In Praise of Inconsistency" Kołakowski again drew from his Spinozist work to develop his ethics. He wrote that "all thought that can in any way manifest itself as a causative factor in practical conduct is the affirmation of a value,"

[85]Ibid., 130.

[86]Ibid., 134.

[87]Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność*, 327.

[88]Ibid., 221.

[89]Kołakowski, "Responsibility and History," 117.

[90]Leszek Kołakowski, "Historical Understanding and the Intelligibility of History," *Triquarterly* 22, *A Leszek Kolakowski Reader* (1971), 103–17, at 116.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and that "*the world of values is not logically dualistic*, as opposed to the world of theoretical thought."[91] Living ethically requires maintaining "a clear awareness of the eternal and incurable antinomy in the world of values," and accepting the burden of moral choice in the face of this antinomy.[92]

Kołakowski's embrace of this moral burden also attracted him to the "fatal 'either–or'" of existentialist thought, particularly to the conception of "absolute responsibility" as a subjectivizing moment in Kierkegaard and Sartre.[93] The influence of existentialism on his work is clear even when Spinoza is foregrounded, and the reception of phenomenology and existentialism was crucial in the development of his oppositionist intellectual milieu, as shown by historians like Michael Gubser.[94] On the other hand, throughout the 1960s Kołakowski criticized the attempt in existentialism and phenomenology to use "intentionality" as a first principle, arguing that a wholly subject-centered analysis of existence reduced external reality to nothingness.[95] This nothingness cannot support the reality of values, a reality which makes the "either–or" significant. He insisted that "the world of values has meaning only if we see it as something distinct from ourselves to be realized in the course of decisions which we make every day and always at our own risk."[96]

Simultaneously, his reading of existentialism bore similarities to his exegesis of Spinoza. He described existentialism, like Spinozism, as Parmenidean, because Being itself remains static, while only the subject creates time. He also compared Jaspers, like he had Spinoza, to mysticism.[97] Even his interest in absolute responsibility, a paradigmatic existentialist idea, found sources of inspiration in Spinoza's early modern moment. He described the nondenominational Christianity of Dirk Camphuysen, one of the seventeenth-century Dutch religious thinkers examined in *Religious Consciousness*, as "the most extreme expression of the theory of unconditional responsibility borne by the individual for his actions and beliefs."[98]

Since his interpretation of existentialism, Spinozism, and early modern religious systems like Camphuysen's and Pascal's were mutually informing, Kołakowski's fundamental interests in "Parmenidean" philosophies of time and the philosophical sources for unconditional moral responsibility can be read as an attempt to point out the contradiction between a conception of history as a teleological expression of absolute truth,

[91] Leszek Kołakowski, "In Praise of Inconsistency," in Kołakowski, *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, 211–20, at 214, original emphasis.

[92] Ibid., 214.

[93] Leszek Kołakowski, "Filozofia egzystencji i porażka egzystencji," in Zbigniew Mentzel, ed., *Pochwała niekonsekwencji: Pisma rozproszone sprzed roku 1968* (London, 1989), 318–38, at 324.

[94] Michael Gubser, *The Far Reaches: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Social Renewal in Central Europe* (Stanford, 2014).

[95] Kołakowski, "Filozofia egzystencji i porażka egzystencji"; Kołakowski, "Husserl: Filozofia doświadczenia rozumiejącego," in Bronisław Baczko, ed., *Filozofia i socjologia XX wieku* (Warsaw, 1965), 273–99.

[96] Leszek Kołakowski, "Ethics without a Moral Code," *Triquarterly* 22, *A Leszek Kolakowski Reader* (1971), 154–90, at 180.

[97] Leszek Kołakowski, "Filozofia egzystencji i porażka egzystencji."

[98] Leszek Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna* (Warsaw, 1965), 82.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and the nontemporal nature of values. This contradiction opens a space for responsibility rooted only in the present, in a yearning for ahistorical and atemporal nothingness common to Spinoza, existentialism and mysticism.

Between church and party

It did not take long for Poland's moment of hope in October 1956 to fade into disappointment. A group of party leaders known as the Natolin Faction emerged in opposition to reform, leading Gomułka to turn against liberalization. In 1957, he closed the revisionist journal *Po Prostu* and began vetting dissident intellectuals, including Kołakowski, whose apartment was wiretapped.[99] In a letter to the vetting commission, Kołakowski insisted "that those elements of Marx's doctrine which I believe to be both accurate and productive are, in my worldview, prominent enough to be its defining features," but the Central Committee was unconvinced.[100] In late 1957, Gomułka met with Kołakowski privately in Warsaw.[101]

Kołakowski decided months afterward to leave Poland for a year of research in the Netherlands and France. He had written in his travel request that he sought to investigate "the paradoxical social consciousness … of religious subjectivism" which emerged in the nondenomination Christian sects amidst Catholic Counter-Reformation and the Nadere Reformatie, or Second Reformation, within the Reformed Dutch Church in the seventeenth century.[102] This 1958 research would result in *Religious Consciousness and the Church Bond*, published in 1965, which explored movements that "in their most radical versions assume that there is a basic conflict between the fundamental Christian values and the institutional Church."[103] *Religious Consciousness* therefore offered space for historical and philosophical reflection related to his anti-institutional position, announced in the 1957 "Concept of the Left," that Marxism is an unrelenting negation of reality which cannot be reduced to "an organized political movement."[104]

Because *Religious Consciousness* is too long for a comprehensive analysis within the scope of this article, this section will focus only on the chapters which explore Spinozist variants of religious reform in the Netherlands. The Second Reformation played out within Dutch Calvinism in the seventeenth century as it combated radical Arminian, Anabaptist and "rationalist religious" movements which threatened the basis of the institutional church.[105] Among the most prevalent of these rationalist movements were those developed by the intellectual leaders of the Collegiants, a community of believers

[99]Bartłomiej Kapica, "Leszek Kołakowski and the Revisionists of Marxism: Their Stance on the Socio-political System of the Polish People's Republic, 1958–1968," *Polish Review* 66/1 (2021), 41–60, at 57, 55.

[100]Quoted in Kapica, "Leszek Kołakowski and the Revisionists of Marxism," 51.

[101]Kołakowski and Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy, czas niespokojny*, 162.

[102]Leszek Kołakowski, "Do Ministra Szkolnictwa Wyższego Prof. Dr Stefan źółkiewskiego," 1957, Signature 13159, Item 3, ALK, BN, Warsaw.

[103]Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna*, 6.

[104]Leszek Kołakowski, "The Concept of the Left," in Kołakowski, *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, 67–84, at 77.

[105]On the background to these movements see George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1992).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who had split from the Reformed church and advocated for a religious tolerance devoid of confession. Kołakowski focuses on Adam Boreel and Daniel de Breen, two leaders of the Amsterdam Collegiants who integrated mystical doctrines with the geometric method.

Boreel and de Breen argued that "canonical literature is to be interpreted in such a way as to adapt its content to the demands of 'natural' reason," but used this natural reason to reject earthly paths to salvation.[106] Boreel, in *The Golden Chain of Christianity*, bears the influence of Spinoza, with whom he was acquainted, in using a syllogistic structure of argument to prove the necessity of an act in which one "purges himself of his (human) nature and assumes a nature similar to God's."[107] Daniel de Breen preached of a coming cataclysm and utopia in rationalist rhetoric. Kołakowski was interested in their validation of natural reason in support of a rejection of everything, particularly the reliance on a visible church, which contradicts God's divine nature. Paradoxically this used reason to prove its own inadequacy, as a natural behavior, to salvation.

More important were Peter Balling and Jarig Jelles, members of the "Spinoza circle" of freethinkers and Collegiants in Amsterdam. Balling, to whom Kołakowski attributes the anonymously published treatise *The Light upon the Candlestick*, advocated an inward road to salvation which excludes the institutional church and discursive cognition. What gave this mysticism its Spinozist character was the "belief that knowledge of God necessarily precedes adequate knowledge of finite things, and that infinity cannot be grasped by its finite products," which consequently justified Balling's "rejection of all creeds and all dogmatic content, all positive assertions."[108] The thought of Jelles synthesized Spinozist rationalism with Erasmus's faith of the heart, Protestant irresistible grace, and northern mysticism. For Jelles, divine wisdom is the self-knowledge of God in which human beings are able to partake through Christ, a mystical *logos*. Only our "inner light," which Kołakowski compares to Spinoza's truth as its own measure, can lead the way to salvation.[109]

Kołakowski found between Balling, Jelles, and Spinoza a common "longing to be free of the bonds of finitude," expressed in a contradictory fusion of reason and faith aimed at delegitimizing the institutional church.[110] They fused the urge to empower the individual, including its natural reason, by defining it through an absolute which contradicts all natural qualities, thus finding themselves in an anteroom between reason and religion. Kołakowski explained that "those who had experienced the Spinozan revelation began to see reason without God on the one hand, and Christianity without reason on the other, as exclusive alternatives … very often the

[106]This translation is taken from Agnieszka Kołakowska's adaptation of a chapter of *Świadomość religijna* as Leszek Kołakowski, "Dutch Seventeenth-Century Non-denominationalism and *Religio Rationalis:* Mennonites, Collegiants and the Spinoza Connection," in Kołakowski, *The Two Eyes of Spinoza and Other Essays*, 43–83, at 47.

[107]Ibid., 45.

[108]Ibid., 60.

[109]Ibid., 65.

[110]Ibid., 72.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

paradoxical outcome of this pressure to choose was a forced escape into extreme irrationality."[111]

Kołakowski examines this plunge into post-Spinozist irrationalism, "a defensive strategy against the onslaught of scientific knowledge and secular thinking," through the case of Johannes Bredenburg, a thinker who for some time led a Spinozist faction within Collegiantism before swinging to an embrace of faith as the only safeguard against atheism.[112] Brendenburg offered an ideal type of *Religious Consciousness*'s dialectic between faith and reason. The cult of reason negates the church in the name of an inner criterion of truth; religion, feeling the pressure of this reason, incorporates it with unsatisfying results, producing a reaction in the cult of irrationality; this irrationalism, however, denies all natural paths to salvation in its condemnation of science, including the church itself, paradoxically serving the rationalist project of anticlericalism.[113] What emerges from this process, which he also saw in the case of Jansenism, also discussed in *Religious Consciousness*, is a reduction of religion to an inner moral impulse which cannot be rationally justified, and must be taken through an anti-empirical leap of faith or intuition, but serves reason's empowerment of the individual against the clergy.

The anti-institutional projects he began to explore in his 1958 year abroad contrasted with the authoritarian reality of Gomułka's Poland. Kołakowski was forced to once again affirm his loyalty in a 1958 letter to his University of Warsaw party cell, which maintained that his research did not contradict "the party's efforts toward implementing the principles of socialism."[114] His lip service paid off. In 1958 Kroński, Kołakowski's Hegelian mentor, died while occupying the chair of the history of modern philosophy at the University of Warsaw, for which Kołakowski was nominated by Baczko. In March 1959 he was confirmed with PZPR approval.[115] Despite this approval, Kołakowski's anti-institutionalism grew as he worked on *Religious Consciousness*, particularly in "The Priest and the Jester" and "Ethics without a Moral Code," which incorporated the Spinozist principle that the finite is grasped in a negation of the infinite.

"The Priest and the Jester," originally given as a 1959 lecture called "The Theological Heritage of Contemporary Thought," examined the dialectic between reason and faith, proposing that modern philosophy gives secular answers to religious questions. The essay examines the contradiction between worldviews which seek to defend absolute truths, and those which point out the incompatibility of such absolute truths with the cognitive and institutional tools at our disposal. Kołakowski's priest represents the institutional worship of the absolute, fetishizing a given representation of unconditional truth and therefore reducing the universal to the particular. The jester, on the other hand, refuses to mediate the whole through its finite parts.

[111]Ibid., 83.

[112]Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna*, 179.

[113]Ibid., 202.

[114]Leszek Kołakowski, "Do egzekutywy Oddziałowej Organizacji Partyjnej Wydziału filozofii UW," Signature 13159, Folder 4, ALK, BN, Warsaw.

[115]"Na Kierownika Katedry Historii Filozofii Nowożytnej na Wydziale Filozoficznym Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego w Warszawie," March 1959, Signature 13159, Folder 3, Item I, ALK, BN, Warsaw, Poland.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To do so is to totalize the particular and negate the universal. The task of the jester is therefore a perpetual criticism which unveils the contradiction between all institutional iterations of unconditioned reality while preaching no absolute itself.

Further developing the theme of a purely negative left was Kołakowski's 1962 "Ethics without a Moral Code," which criticized all attempts to catechize morality. Codes of action forcefully rank values in a naive guide to life's difficulties, denying the challenge of taking responsibility for our decisions. This responsibility is an ineradicable consequence of the subject's experience of an unconditioned sphere of values as real, and its simultaneous inability to grasp this sphere through subjectivity. His point was that "inherent in every moral decision is what we have called the 'cogito factor,' which means that the judgement of conflicting values cannot be separated from the point of view of the individual observer, that no cosmic or 'species' view is possible."[116] Only in an intuitive moral decision, which Kołakowski defines as "nondiscursive," can the subject affirm its reality in relation to the absolute.[117]

The left thus emerged in Kołakowski's revisionism as an individual call to pursue self-realization in an act of moral intuition akin to a nondenominational religion of inner faith. His aim was not to purge the absolute from all thinking, but to refuse to collapse it into the finite. The negative theology and anti-institutionalism of the *Religious Consciousness* years was thus an iteration of the project, developed through his anti-Hegelian and anti-Stalinist Spinozism, to define the metaphysically divided individual as endlessly striving towards the experience of moral values.

Kołakowski summarized his moral thought in a 1965 speech at a congress of the Polish Writers' Union, in which he spoke on the nature of intellectual responsibility. Touching on the problem of the universal and particular, Kołakowski described the writer as someone who seeks to "associate what is universally important with the individuality of one's own existence," and suggested that responsibility demands that values are not final but endlessly sought and rearticulated.[118] "To believe that the world of values is ready-made," that it can be expressed once and for all in a codex or party, "is to escape responsibility."[119]

Between faith and reason

As Kołakowski wrote *Religious Consciousness*, he embraced dialogue with Catholic socialists, particularly with a milieu of personalists and liberal religious thinkers who had begun carving out spaces for intellectual community outside the party.[120] This became a source of concern for the PZPR, which aimed to delegitimize his influence over students and dissident circles. A 1965 secret-police memo, describing a November

[116]Kołakowski, "Ethics without a Moral Code," 172.

[117]Ibid., 181.

[118]Leszek Kołakowski, "Głos w dyskusji na zjeździe walnym Związku Literatów Polskich," 12 March 1965, Signature 13288, Folder 3, ALK, BN, Warsaw.

[119]Ibid.

[120]Piotr Kosicki, "Channeling Erasmus in Communist Poland: Leszek Kołakowski, Vatican II, and the Reinvention of 'Counter-Reformation'," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 85/1 (2024), 87–120.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1965 discussion of *Religious Consciousness* hosted by a journal which fostered dialogue between atheists and Catholics, complained that the atmosphere was "carefree and cheerful." The informer noted with worry that "not only coffee, but also cognac was served."[121]

By 1965, Kołakowski had found that the problem plaguing Polish socialism seemed to be the opposite of that in 1953; there was not too much faith, but too little. On the basis of his reflection that the empowering function of reason relied on an ultimately irrational moral basis, he believed that single-party socialism had emptied its capacity to justify its own values. Important in his growing interest in faith was the influence of Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade, who saw religion as the expression of a "protoplasmic" yearning for "the stillness of time," which fit well with Kołakowski's interest in Parmenidean eternity.[122]

Two books from 1966 expressed that he had already intellectually embraced a certain form of faith as an extension of the line of thought pursued in his Spinoza scholarship. *The Presence of Myth* argued that myth is a necessity for humanity's search for meaning and freedom. He theorized that because freedom requires a moral stand beyond the empirical, all systems of thought rely on "an unconditioned reality, thanks to which the conditioned reality becomes intelligible."[123] The continued presence of what he had described in 1958 as Spinoza's apriorism, by which knowledge is produced on the basis of a moral project which precedes reason, emerged in his suggestion that "the value of the concrete is acceptable only when value precedes everything concrete."[124]

The second 1966 book, *The Alienation of Reason*, on the history of positivism, also followed this apriorism in claiming that searching for normative truths within empirical data exempts "us from the duty of speaking up in life's most important conflicts," which requires a non-empirical faith.[125] This condemnation of positivism revealed Kołakowski's diagnosis of modern alienation as a consequence of reason's attempt to wholly negate this irrational dimension of cognition, most extremely in systems of thought which attempt to know history scientifically.

The breaking point was October of that year. It was the anniversary of the 1956 Polish October as well as the millennium of Poland's Catholicism. Cardinal-Primate Stefan Wyszynski toured the country and banners were strewn across Warsaw reading "SACRUM POLNIAE MILLENIUM." The party created banners of their own, reading "socialism and fatherland, the Party is with the nation."[126]

[121]"Meldunek," 18 Nov. 1965, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (IPN) BU 0204/503, Warsaw.

[122]Leszek Kołakowski, "Mircea Eliade: religia jako paraliż czasu," in Zbigniew Mentzel, ed., *Pochwała niekonsekwencji: Pisma rozproszone z lat 1955–1968* (London, 1989), 27–32, at 29.

[123]Leszek Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, trans. Adam Czerniawski (Chicago, 1989) 1.

[124]Ibid., 57.

[125]Leszek Kołakowski, *The Alienation of Reason: A History of Positivist Thought*, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York, 1968), 204, 205.

[126]Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, vol. 1, *The Origins to 1795* (New York, 1982), 20.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kołakowski was invited to speak at a meeting of Warsaw history students organized by Adam Michnik. He improvised a few remarks on the legacy of 1956, suggesting that "we have not made any progress as compared with ten years ago."[127] He explained that "what is depressing about our situation is not primarily our actual, material poverty … what burdens us the most [is] spiritual pauperization, lack of breath, lack of hope."[128]

Kołakowski was interrogated shortly after the speech and, several days later, expelled from the PZPR.[129] In a 1999 explanation of this series of events, he wrote with the tone of a resigned heretic, or perhaps with the subtle wisdom of a priest, that "all this happened 33 years ago, and none of it matters now."[130]

Conclusion

Kołakowski's 1966 expulsion came before a wider crisis in 1968. In March, Warsaw students protesting party censorship were encircled, beaten, and arrested. An "Anti-Zionist campaign" followed which, by scapegoating Polish Jews, expelled dissenting party voices.[131] Kołakowski was dismissed from almost all of his academic positions within weeks.

Kołakowski and his Jewish wife Tamara, who had survived the Holocaust by fleeing to the Soviet Union, saw the anti-Zionist campaign as the "crystallization of [a] fascist movement" within the party.[132] He and Baczko commiserated in the following months over the anti-Semitic harassment suffered by their families.[133] In December, Kołakowski left Poland permanently.

Kołakowski would begin to write less on Spinoza than he had between 1953 and 1965, reflecting his disillusionment with secular modern thinking. While his work had never espoused a systematic "Spinozism," and also drew from existentialism and dialogue with Catholic thinkers, for a time it embraced Spinoza's contradictoriness in searching for post-Hegelian and anti-Stalinist paths for Marxism. Despite the productive elements of this fusion, the impossibility of seeing the world simultaneously in its whole and in its parts contributed to his Marxist discontent. From his Stalinist dissertation, to *Individual and Infinity*, which admired Spinozism's immanentizing project but questioned its coherence, to his observation in *Religious Consciousness* of the process by which Spinozist converts found themselves committed to irrationality, by 1966 he had come to see the ontological gap between mode and substance, and between alienated subjectivity and historical totality, as permanent.

The questions which drove his Spinozist work, and his Marxism between 1956 and 1968, however, did not leave Kołakowski. In a 1984 summary of his work for All Souls

[127]Leszek Kołakowski, "Proszę towarzyszy, myślę, że powiedzenie, iż świętujemy dziesięciolecie Października," 21 Oct. 1966, Signature 13288, Folder 4, ALK, BN, Warsaw.

[128]Ibid.

[129]Leszek Kołakowski, "Wyjaśnienie," 1999, Signature 13288, Folder 4, ALK, BN, Warsaw.

[130]Ibid.

[131]Jerzy Eisler, *Marzec '68* (Warsaw, 1995).

[132]"Wyciąg zrodło pp senator," 28 March 1968, IPN BU 0204/503, Warsaw.

[133]"Wyciąg z pp senator," 23 May 1968, IPN BU 0204/518, Warsaw.

College at Oxford, where he settled after leaving Poland, Kołakowski explained that, in planning to write what would become *Metaphysical Horror*, "I came to the conclusion that I am old enough to try to analyse, in my own way and on the basis of historical reflection, some traditional metaphysical issues, especially the issue of 'nothing' and time and their relationship."[134] This harkened back to his first investigation of time and eternity in *Individual and Infinity*. His 1995 book on Jansenism, *God Owes Us Nothing*, equally showed his continued interest in the seventeenth-century mystics examined in *Religious Consciousness*.

Modernity's mistake, for Kołakowski, was not reason's displacement of faith, but its confidence in immanentizing the horizons of the religious worldview, a yearning to find the stillness of time within time itself, which is to cast off human skin. Such confidence led to the absolutization of reason's partial grasp of the human subject, the confusion of a world viewed modally with the elusively infinite basis of that modality. When we fall prey to this trap, as he wrote in "The Two Eyes of Spinoza," we "observe our own bodies as through a pane of glass, imagining that we control them, like boys who play at pretending to control thunder by ordering a thunderclap just at the moment when it comes."[135]

Competing interests. The author declares that they have no known financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence this article.

[134]Leszek Kołakowski, "Report on My Work from September 1977," 20 March 1984, Signature 13175, Folder 3, ALK, BN, Warsaw, Poland.

[135]Kołakowski, "The Two Eyes of Spinoza," 6.

Cite this article: Daniel Edison, "'None of It Matters Now': Leszek Kołakowski between Marx and Spinoza," *Modern Intellectual History* (2025), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520