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Leszek Kolakowski and moral integration

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Abstract

How are consent and the rule of law possible in post-Enlightenment societies? The rule of law is necessary. But a rule of law based upon secular principles exposes various problems of relativism that compromise its validity. Leszek Kolakowski is a neglected social theorist in the West. One of his striking arguments on the question of the integration of society is that *no* valid moral principles exist in experience or logic. It is a position founded on his personal history which rejects both Marxism and capitalism. Kolakowski concludes that the moral integration of society requires a faith-based foundation. This article situates Kolakowski's position by identifying three stages in the development of his thought. It goes on to examine the role of phenomenological sociology in his outlook, especially the work of Husserl and Bergson. The faith-based conclusion that Kolakowski draws will be indigestible to many readers. Yet the questions that it raises about purposeful being and secure identity are especially pertinent in the fake news/post-truth climate of the present day.

Keywords

phenomenology, metaphysics, Marxism

Especially in Catholic countries, Leszek Kolakowski (1927–2009) is a staple figure in European social theory. In the Anglosphere, despite Kolakowski having spent most of his adult life in England, his work is not exactly revered as a primary resource (Lukes, 2011). Admittedly, the path he eventually took presents secondary commentators with serious doctrinal dilemmas. Some bear upon certain transitions in his thought that test in the project of categorizing his thought. In later life he amusingly described himself as a 'Conservative-Liberal-Socialist' (Kolakowski, 1990b: 228). In many circles, such

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a remark will be taken as evidence of flippancy. However, this is exactly the problem. The language of social science finds it difficult to classify a thinker who sees virtue in elements from contradictory positions. On the point that Kolakowski is making, it might be said that is seeking to de-polarize politics. This is not what many vested interests want to happen. Additionally, there is a much bigger hurdle. This has to do with the position he adopts in the final decades of his life, namely *sola fides* (faith alone), which advocates faith in scripture. In the 1970s it was one thing for a former leading Marxist to launch a systematic, comprehensive attack upon Marxism (Kolakowski, 1976). However, for many, after the 1980s, Kolakowski's ardent, public support for scripture, especially after the election of the Polish Pope, Jean Paul II, was indigestible (Judt, 2008: 129–146). Yet the move makes sense if one considers the details of Kolakowski's intellectual journey in post-war Poland and his position on the necessities for durable social moral integration. The path followed can be usefully divided into three phases.

Marxism (1945–1956)

Between 1945 and 1956, Kolakowski self-identified as a committed Marxist. He held that the imperatives of capitalism create the economic, political and cultural pre-conditions for the incubation and birth of fascism. Accumulation produces domination. Capitalism cannot survive. The class rule that Marx addresses results in serial business failures within the capitalist class. In surveying the conditions of the presently existing socialist societies between 1945 and 1980, Kolakowski concludes that this is not the precondition for the triumph of the proletariat. Rather, it is the pretext for authoritarian rule. For him, a neglected flaw in the consideration of Marxism is that it supplies no satisfactory basis for harmony between reason and faith. According to Kolakowski the crossover between morality and utopianism is the axis of Marxism. Even in his pro-Marxist youth, the absolute, totalitarian conviction placed by Marxism in the sovereignty of reason over all other values never sits well with him. In later work, he argues that myth is essential to human consciousness (Kolakowski, 1989b, 1990c). As such, no human society can simply live by formal rational thought and scientific method alone. Life with others requires the rule of moral law. Reason and science cannot provide this. Successful moral integration requires the matter of faith to come into play. However, at this time, if this thought preys on Kolakowski's mind it is subordinate to his conviction that historical materialism presents humanity with the best hope for the future. It must be noted that in 1945 he was only 18. The war years had been a time of trauma for him. In the early days of the conflict, his father, a writer on economics and politics, was executed by the Nazis. Most of Kolakowski's teenage years were spent in the shadow of serious personal jeopardy. As is perhaps well known, the Nazi government of occupied Polish territories was excessively harsh. Under the governorship of Hans Frank, the segregation and planned genocide of the Jews was particularly notorious (Cesarani, 2017). It is easy to see why these factors coalesced to dispose the young Kolakowski to embrace Marxism with open arms. He equates it with the moral rebuttal of both capitalism and fascism. The Marxist peers of his day believed that they were involved in nothing less than an awe-inspiring transformation of human history. Kolakowski is prepared to

give licence to the neo-Leninist notion of the legitimacy of the vanguard state. His rationale is simple. The vanguard state constitutes the quickest way to get the job done of creating the society of 'associated producers' rationally regulating their interchange with Nature (Kolakowski, 1957: 820).

Disarmingly, in the 1950s as life under presently existing socialism matures, Kolakowski's youthful utopianism changes. He becomes increasingly dissatisfied with the monolithic inflexibility, political intolerance and sub-optimal economic performance of Communist Poland, and the Soviet bloc as a whole. In airing these misgivings, he finds a receptive audience, especially among the young. Consecutively, it is impossible to deny, first, that the audience is rather small; and second, that the Polish authorities label Kolakowski's intervention as unwelcome. He is aware that his dissent is not well regarded. However, in the late 1950s, especially following the Poznan riots, he lives under a false dawn. The conditions for free speech in Poland steadily deteriorate. Dissent is brought to heel under party repression. But this was not a unilinear process.

Revisionism (1956–1970)

The false dawn that followed the Poznan riots was marked by the accession of the outwardly more liberal Gomulka regime. In this seemingly more receptive climate, Kolakowski becomes more outspoken. Whatever hopes he still nourishes for the Gomulka government are rapidly dashed. Kolakowski's critique of Warsaw's communist 'achievements' is officially scorned as 'revisionist' (Lukes, 2011: 203). The adjective is not meant to be complimentary. The authorities frequently plant secret police in his lectures and subject his writings to censorship. The vanguard state casts him as a public intellectual whose views are incommensurate with the best interests of the party and the country. His personal circumstances and academic career become more difficult.

In 1966, after a speech criticizing the government on the 10th anniversary of the 'Polish October' (the Gomulka liberalization), he is expelled from the Communist Party. He is eventually made redundant by Warsaw University. The official reason given is for fanning views among young people that are incompatible with the 'progressive' tendency in the country (Lukes, 2011: 203). His publications are banned, and he becomes the subject of round-the-clock police surveillance. Denied an appropriate means of livelihood, he is forced to look overseas for employment. In 1968 he is appointed as visiting professor in philosophy at McGill University. A year later he moves to the University of California, Berkeley. In Montreal, but far more acutely at Berkeley, he encounters the antinomies of liberalism. What first strikes him in San Francisco is the transparent obstinacy of received privilege. Leaving aside the persistence of the wealth gap, he cannot stomach the moral hypocrisy of the protection afforded by the state to key institutions of schematic preferment – for example, monied education, monied health care and disproportionate clandestine influence over the judiciary and the state, and the addiction to materialism in the shape of consumer culture. For Kolakowski, the western ideology of the state portrays society as an open contest in which any one with merit inevitably rises to the top. The reality is very different. The immorality of the market system is distinct from that of the command system. But it is immorality all the same. Additionally, he finds that the students at Berkeley confirm the hardline

Marxist critique of the West. Namely, western liberalism ends in decadence. In particular, the conservative component in Kolakowski recoils when he encounters the student radicals of the day:

I found the so-called student movement simply barbaric. There are of course ignorant young people at all times and in all places. But in Berkley their ignorance was elevated to the level of highest wisdom. They wanted to 'revolutionize' the university in such a way that they wouldn't have to learn anything. They had all sorts of silly proposals. For instance, they wanted professors to be appointed by students, and students to be examined by other students. (Kolakowski, 2005: 83)

In 1970, Kolakowski accepts the post of senior research fellow at All Souls College, Oxford. He knows perfectly well that Britain is hardly a society in which moral hypocrisy has been banished. However, for a variety of reasons he sees it is as more congenial. At the time of his migration, the British state apparatus is more firmly committed to respect the ethics of welfare than the Washington legislature and executive (1). In addition, the geographical proximity to the rest of Europe and, of course, especially to Poland, also suits him.

There is, then, in Kolakowski a dual revisionism. He rejects not one system, but two. After the war, for him, the neo-Leninist command system in Poland and the Soviet bloc initially seemed persuasive. Building the foundations was the necessary prelude to communism. In time, he becomes disillusioned. As the command system grew more entrenched, immovable and impassive, he saw that, despite its elaborate outward displays and promises of inclusion, the leaders had no real intention of devolving power in the direction of the associated producers. On the contrary, they consistently sought to monopolize power for their own purposes. Soviet-style Marxism produced 'the new class', just as Djilas proposed (Djilas, 1957). The western alternative was rightly critical of all of this. However, collaterally it turns out to be a system of orchestrated hypocrisy. It mouths freedom, liberty and equality. In reality, it practises asset protection, managed outcomes designed to advance accumulation and rituals of stratified entitlement.

Recantation (1970–2009)

In Oxford, Kolakowski rediscovers the critical humanism of his youth. Retrospectively, his forensic dissection of positivist philosophy can be regarded as a critique of the Enlightenment (Kolakowski, 1968). Kolakowski follows Kant in holding that it is untenable to confine valid knowledge to the perception and quantification of empirically accessible data. As he puts it elsewhere:

We ought to know that neither the empirically accessible universe nor the mathematical instruments we employ to describe it are self-explanatory and that the sought after explanation will never be found, as to find it would require concepts and images which cannot be derived from this universe. (Kolakowski, 1988: 9)

This serves notice on Kolakowski's methodological intent to elaborate the case that intuition and transcendentalism are valid sources of enquiry. This is developed at length in his later work on Husserl and Bergson. Here he outlines in detail the value of a phenomenological approach to knowledge (Kolakowski, 1985, 1987, 1988). Kolakowski is saying that there are fundamental questions of being that empirically based quantitative analysis cannot answer or avoid.

The moral centre of the Enlightenment project is the construction of universal justice based upon reason. Marxism was the child of this. Crucially, it also exposed its pretensions and hidden interests. Marxism is a 'disguised moralism' (Kolakowski, 1990b: 210). treats bourgeois rationality as an instrument of class domination. That is, it is concerned with price and utility over truth. The moral centre of a liberal democratic society is therefore specious. Bourgeois morality is not impartial or objective. It supports a moral regime that, in the final analysis, always operates to consolidate class rule. The political action that follows from this is obvious. Marxism seeks to use political action to unmask bourgeois class domination and nurture proletarian power as a transformative force.

Main Currents of Marxism is a herculean, vigorous and exhaustive critical interrogation of the Marxist project (Kolakowski, 1976). It examines Marx's writings as well as the various schools and sub-divisions in the western tradition of historical materialism. The dauntless inventory ends in an unsparing balance sheet.

'Marxism', concludes Kolakowski, 'has been the greatest fantasy of our (20th) century' (Kolakowski, 1976: 1206).

On the subject of Kolakowski's anti-communism, the western left tends to adopt a peevish manner (Jay, 2005; Miliband, 1981; Thompson, 1979 [1973]). It is as if they instinctively dismiss *Main Currents* to be a bad show that let the side down. If so, this condemnation is unjust. The fatal flaws that Kolakowski diagnosed in Marxist-Leninism did not blind him to the grave faults of capitalism. His disapproval of the divisive, fractious general consequences of private education in the West, the threat to the environment posed by industrial development, the inadequate effects of public investment in tackling inequality and poverty, the problem of unacceptable levels of economic inequality, and the negative effects on culture and civilization of the monetization of life are matters of record (Kolakowski, 1990b: 162–174). Neither the market nor a Stakhanovite five-year plan is capable of producing a robust moral centre in society. Indeed, to redouble faith in the market or the central plan merely reinforces the problem of the moral deficit that the Enlightenment unintentionally accrues. It narrowly and falsely equates development in science and technology with progress. The turn taken by Kolakowski is controversial. Something of the nature of the disquiet is revealed by an anecdote of Judt (2015). He recounts attending a talk delivered by Kolakowski at Harvard University in 1987. The subject is 'The Devil in History'. After the collapse of Sovietism, and, incidentally, at the height of postmodernism, the audience gather to pay their respects to the celebrated European denier of Marxist-Leninism. The audience are expecting a passionate denunciation of the dictatorship of the proletariat, economic inefficiency, political repression and state-licensed murder. What they get from the start is a lecture on the folly of mankind in believing that original sin can be overcome. Kolakowski is inviting his progressive, post-modern audience to consider that the Devil is a real presence in the world. On this reckoning, the Enlightenment and Marxism are projects of emancipation based on faulty

eschatology. The death of the old order (theological/metaphysical thought; class rule) does not create a society based on progress, freedom and harmony. A revitalized Leviathan rather than a triumphant Prometheus is the appropriate metaphor with which to gauge the effect of Soviet-style Marxism.

Outwardly, it promised a society in which the free and full development of every individual would be guaranteed. In reality, it thrived on torture, show trials, clientism, regimentation, repression, torture and murder. It was Hobbes without a heart. For Kolakowski, the logic of Soviet-style eschatology is flagrantly threadbare. In his view, the same applies to the liberal democracies of the West. The market does not deliver freedom for all, because it tolerates deep inequalities and the covert manipulation of the public sphere according to the interests of the power elite. The moral order of liberal democracy is a facade. It allows sectarian interests to pursue their own narrow ends against the common good. Sovietism and Marketism are polarized social systems. But in the eyes of Kolakowski they are equally damned. All humanist absolutist attempts to build paradise on earth are doomed.

Kolakowski's scepticism with respect to the questions of humanist absolutism and eschatology is central. The plenitude of his disdain cannot be accurately appreciated unless his personal experience of the descent from the ideals of Marxist-Leninism in Poland is properly understood. To speak plainly, the young Kolakowski affected to present Marxist-Leninism as a scientifically verifiable moral axis of society that theology and metaphysics cannot supply. To the older Kolakowski's way of thinking, Marxist-Leninism and science in general are bogus solutions to the task of providing a coherent, integrated moral centre in society. The sociologically interesting proposition that he advances is that moral integration is only possible if it is underwritten by acceptance of the mystery of indivisible, ineffable and universal purpose. Why must effective moral integration be faith-based? Kolakowski's answer does not mince words:

When absolute truth and metaphysical certainty disappear the truth *tout court* disappears as well; once we reject synthetic *a priori* judgements, the concept of truth is empty. To be sure, the distinction remains between what is *acceptable* and what is not, but to be acceptable does not mean 'to be acceptable as true'. It means 'to accord with experience', rather than 'to accord with the world as it really is'. (Kolakowski, 1987: 14)

Among his Harvard audience, many found this position to be post-scientific and therefore regrettable. Since his view of 'the world as it really is' has no evidence-based standard of verification, it has no utility. For Kolakowski, the equation of utility with ultimate value is exactly the problem. As his indictment of positivism showed, basing truth solely upon empirically accessible, measurable data provides only a partial picture of reality (Kolakowski, 1968). As Kant insists, reality also consists of absolute, necessary, indivisible forces that surpass human comprehension (Kant, 2007). Hegel is not a philosopher whom Kolakowski favours. He associates him with the intellectual starting gun of the calamitous Marxist adventure. Nonetheless, there is a phrase from Hegel that captures Kolakowski's objection to holding that science of the phenomenal world is the sole fount of valid knowledge. It is Hegel's term 'the concealed front' (1956: 30). For

Kolakowski, all viable social orders must have a faith-based transcendent ‘concealed (divine) front’.

The crisis of liberal democracy

Kolakowski’s rebuttal of Marxist-Leninism is detailed and widely celebrated (Kolakowski, 1976). In contrast, his criticisms of western liberal democracy are more scattered and therefore less immediately tangible (Kolakowski, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, 1999, 2005). Perhaps he felt it was bad manners to censure a culture that had respected him as a welcome and honoured recruit. Leaving that to one side, when all is said and done, Kolakowski never produces a full-length critical assessment of western liberal democracy. Even so, anyone with the inclination to investigate the question of what he thought about the issue has ample resources in his articles, book chapters and interviews. It is a task that offers no straw for complacency.

According to Kolakowski, western liberal democracy purports to be inherently progressive. It pursues the Enlightenment credo of advancing the values of freedom, egalitarianism and justice for all. Throughout the Cold war, ideologues used this self-image to bolster the argument of the alleged superiority of the West over its ‘command system’ rival. Although Kolakowski enjoins that western liberal democracy is superior to Sovietism, he balances this with the parallel argument that the West is not without grave delusions of its own. Most seriously, so far from providing moral gravity to society, western secularism has been the banker of arid cultural relativism (Kolakowski, 1990b). The most obvious and fatal symptom of this is the easy, perpetual resort to *context* as the decisive, active agent in explaining all forms of individual behaviour. However positive the underlying intentions might be, if human beings are theorized as mainly or only creatures of context, and their actions are interpreted as the consequences of external empirically accessible data, the result is ever the same: they are stripped of moral purpose. This is because individual choice in the ownership of action is compromised. The Enlightenment commitment to place secular, moral values at the nucleus of social integration turns out to be a confidence trick. The West’s assertion of moral superiority is built on sand. ‘There are no rational criteria of good and evil in the moral sense’, declares Kolakowski, ‘that is, no criteria sufficiently grounded in experience and logic’ (Kolakowski, 1990b: 171). In Kolakowski’s view, the grand mal in western civil society is not organized inequality, environmental vandalism or systemic hypocrisy. These problems are sufficiently severe. However, they are eclipsed by the contagious Enlightenment secular determination to find a grain of relative, empirically verifiable accountability in everything that threatens the integrity and stability of western liberal democracy. This can be illustrated by considering the expedient of locating context as the catalyst for bad behaviour. The hurt that individuals inflict upon others is interpreted as a product of the social system. Western liberals apply the defence that placing themselves in the shoes of those who live in want, misery or illness is inherently ennobling. Reaching out enables them to feel the pain of those who are unfortunate, miserable and in other ways in want. It enables them to give succour, and extend the hand of leadership, by means of remedial actions of one currency of worthiness or another.

Kolakowski objects to this because it ultimately leads to the subtraction of moral ownership from individual responsibility. Morality cannot be reduced to the act of state

labelling. If the bad that I do in life is the consequence of my oppressed gender or race, or the religion, class or nation to which I belong, or some other noxious permeation in my life, what sum of individual responsibility remains? Moreover, does cancelling the influence that is diagnosed as noxious guarantee liberty? To Kolakowski's way of thinking, the secular blessing that the West extends to damaged individuals who have endured harsh circumstances is not an adequate defence of bad behaviour. For one thing, western secularism and cultural relativism falsely presume that the moral majority consists of *damage-free* individuals. The credentials of integrity and wholeness comprise the foundation upon which they are able to judge defective behaviour in others. The problem with this is that although the traction of western market society may concentrate damage in some quarters (most obviously, the poor and oppressed), the nature of the constellation means that system pretension and self-deception means that no-one escapes damage. In contrast to the dominant western traditions of secularism and cultural relativism, extreme wrong-doing is not a matter of reading this or that datum of observable behaviour off this or that abstract, external humanist ethical system or arrangement of scarce resources. It is a matter of acknowledging evil to be a transparent and present reality, not a statistic (Russell, 1986: 259; 1989: 257). Evil is meaningless unless it is counter-posed with the divine, mysterious presence and grace of God. A society without a super-human centre is a society without a robust moral centre of justice, dispute resolution and general purpose.

A little more of Kolakowski's thought process about the moral deficit in the West caused by secularism and cultural relativism may be gleaned by turning to his oracular remarks on the place of celebrity culture in liberal democracy. Celebrity culture provides the litmus test for the lack of integrity and common purpose in western social relations. The tone is set by his observation that 'it is (not) an accident that the word "vanity" is close to "void" ' (Kolakowski, 1999: 15). He illustrates this by ridiculing Andy Warhol's statement that, in the future, everyone will be famous for 15 minutes (Kolakowski, 1999: 10). By implication, Kolakowski regards such ways of thinking as connecting with what he takes to be the faulty legacies of cultural relativism. He responds to Warhol's statement with two counter-arguments. The first is practical in nature, the second is a matter of logic.

The practical objection is that if everyone in the world's current population is permitted to have their 15 minutes of fame, on some kind of yet to be devised global channel of communication, something like 200,000 years would be necessary for all to have their brief spot in the limelight. To Kolakowski's way of thinking, practical necessity means that this will not, and cannot, ever come to pass. His logical objection is equally dismissive. The irony of mass accessibility to fame is that it exerts a levelling effect upon everyone. Fifteen minutes of fame is 15 minutes of forgetfulness.

Turning to the matter of logic, despite his insistence that Warhol's prediction is a worthless fancy, Kolakowski holds that celebrity culture today performs the function of bestowing a ceremonial sense of collective identity upon those who follow stars. Celebrity worship provides society with grounding and, paradoxically, the experience of escapism and a glimpse of transcendence. However, he rejects these emotional reactions as superficial. Given that contemporary celebrity is not generally connected to a creed, it amounts, in the end, to being nothing but an uncodified form of ritual affording

the 'dream feeling of identity' (Kolakowski, 2012: 208). After all, he asks pointedly, 'what kind of collective identity, can be attained through the worship of a footballer?' (Kolakowski, 2012: 208). Secularism is capable only of producing fashionable, makeshift narratives of belonging. They have the transience of passing sunsets. Those who trek to seek universal moral cohesion in contemporary society encounter a terrain of what has elsewhere been felicitously called, 'empty meeting grounds' (MacCannell, 1992).

Although he was not of a generation conversant with the term, Kolakowski's target here is what we would now call 'identity politics'. The absence of a trans-human moral centre aggrandizes human difference and perpetuates irreconcilable moral conflicts. Without a divine moral centre, claims of rational justice are simply wheels in motion for perpetually renewable identity struggles and sectarian power grabs. These struggles are intent upon maximizing ephemeral profile for the agents concerned. Thus, matters of utility, welfare and profile gradually come to assume the stamp of what society is. Ultimately, they are unsatisfying because they do not acknowledge the mysteries of wider general purpose and ultimate meaning. Instead, they culminate in a technocratic logic that treats questions of ultimate moral worth as inconclusive. It is a short step from this to deciding that there is nothing to be gained by pursuing them. In this pass, society becomes constitutionally unable to conceive of trans-historical content and post-identity forms of general purpose. As a result, the shadow of moral deficit looms larger in the felt reality of encounters and transactions. It leaves vacant the wider, insistent questions of why life exists, and what life is for. Sovietism tried to fill the gap with the iron laws of historical materialism. For its part, marketism elevates the sum of innumerable, unfolding individual transactions into a philosophy that maintains that flawed possessive individualism is the best that one can expect of life with others. Kolakowski will have none of it.

The alternative wager: Phenomenology and metaphysics

The perceived derelictions of market capitalism and Marxist-Leninism impelled Kolakowski to make a different wager. He turned to an alternative, neglected tradition of philosophy that could scarcely be more remote from historical determinism, secularism, the market or cultural relativism. This is the tradition of metaphysics and phenomenology, especially the writings of Spinoza, Erasmus, Pascal, Leibniz, Husserl and Bergson. These philosophical resources are used by him as ladders to a faith-based morality. Kolakowski sets a high store upon the question of ultimate reality. It is not empirically accessible in quantitative terms. But nothing empirical or quantitative can possibly be understood without it.

In his study of Husserl he notes that the philosopher looks at science and is impressed, most of all, not by its achievements but by the fallible subtraction of the perspective that it deploys (Kolakowski, 1987). Scientific method compartmentalizes the world into discrete and governable units, but sets the questions of immanent reality and transcendental consciousness to one side. Had not the direct experience of living under the 'science' of Soviet-style historical determinism proved unequivocally that the government of the people bears no necessary relation to social, cultural, political and economic substance? Furthermore, after the fall of communism, does not life in the so-called liberal

democracies show the persistence of hypocrisy and pretence? Kolakowski is genuinely aggrieved by the disfigurement of class relations and the latitude of proclamations of freedom, equality, justice and social inclusion in a society based upon organized inequality. Formally, he advances Husserl as a sorely neglected figure in the European tradition. However, anyone who is conversant with his works will know that there is more to this than meets the eye. He also wants to set the springs loose against the whole Enlightenment *imperium* of which western party politics is a part. The hidden objective of his study, and nearly all that is important in Kolakowski's subsequent writings, is to demonstrate that human experience cannot be reduced to the lineaments of a five-year plan, the providential hidden hand of the price mechanism, or any other secular, fetishized humanist system of the same kind (Kolakowski, 1988).

Kolakowski favours the traditions of metaphysics and phenomenology not because they offer methodological virtue over empiricism, but because they take seriously questions of transcendental knowledge, immanent reality and the unique, constitutive relationship between subjects and objects (Husserl, 1970, 2001a, 2001b). He pursues this line of thought in his engagement with another unfashionable thinker in the European tradition: Henri Bergson (Kolakowski, 1985). Continuous motion is the foundational principle of Bergson's metaphysical philosophy. Nothing is ever at rest. Every relationship between a conscious subject and an object is understood by him, and treated, as unique – that is, distinct and unrepeatable. For example, it may be allowed that what exists when you read the present paper is not unprecedented. The rules of grammar, the common customs of reading an academic article and a shared stock of knowledge in the field apply. All of this makes inter-subjective communication about the contents of the paper feasible. Conversely, to Bergson's way of looking at things, there is a constitutive relationship between object (the printed paper) and subject (the reader) that never existed before. Moreover, strictly speaking, there is no reason to believe that it will outlast the immediate moment – that is, the duration of reading. Motion is primary.

Bergson holds that common sense is fallible because it habitually communicates experience as if it exists in a general, motionless state. The error is compounded by empiricism and utilitarianism. Both are reprimanded for seeking to acquire knowledge of the world by imposing an inert framework upon it. Inter alia, he has in mind Kantian notions of categorical imperatives of conduct and Hegelian notions of the concealed spirit of development. Bergson is at one with Husserl in holding that science makes life governable and, to some extent, reveals its presumed orderly and predictable nature. However, in order to grasp the whole essence of things, transcendence must be taken seriously. Not only this, but reality is only constitutive of the transcendental juxtaposition between consciousness and duration, which rather gives the wooden spoon to materialism in explaining how things really are.

Bergson encapsulates this by the concept and method of *vitalism*. This is a notoriously opaque term in his philosophy. It appears to relate to an intuitive capacity to move beyond surface appearance via intuition. This is pivotal to his way of looking at reality and gaining certain knowledge about it. Frustratingly, what he means by vitalism is also formidably difficult to elucidate. It rests finally upon the cultivation of an attitude that enables true knowledge of ultimate reality to be grasped. As Kolakowski recognizes, the main problem with it and, more generally, with both metaphysics and

phenomenology is that they lack a coherent methodology (Kolakowski, 1985, 1987). Instead, their attempts at elucidation rely upon appealing to species properties in humankind, notably intuition and imagination. From a scientific standpoint this is unsatisfactory since it pre-empts operational testing and objectification. Science presents a badly upholstered view of reality (Kolakowski, 1987). It directs consciousness away from seeking to understand the transcendental, immanent ultimate reality of things. All the same, the methodological problem of phenomenology is how ultimate reality can possibly be disclosed. There is no requirement here to attempt to explore the contours of Kolakowski's deeply challenging account of the virtues of metaphysics and phenomenology over science (Kolakowski, 1968, 1985, 1987, 1988, 2004b). Suffice to say, he is drawn to metaphysics and phenomenology because they posit truly unfettered, transcendental consciousness – that is, the genuine free and full development of the individual. That is to say, they present ways of seeing and comprehending that elude the arbitrary bonds of embodiment, rationality, party and market. True to its Enlightenment roots, one of the most striking features of Marxist-Leninism is that it constantly preens itself for proposing a theory and method for achieving progress. The eschatology presented here is polychromatic. That is, it appears to celebrate a climax in human development in which diversity, liberty and free thought will reign supreme. In comparison with rival systems of thought, the outward nobility of Marxist-Leninism largely rests upon this bold claim. Conversely, the actual experience that Soviet-style command systems historically delivered was depressingly monochromatic – that is, it inflexibly refused deviation or depart from the party line. The infinite flux of emancipation became subject to the reflux action of control. For Kolakowski, not the least of the attractions of metaphysics and phenomenology is that both invert Marxist-Leninist convictions of historical determinism. In the *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx famously proposed that 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' (Marx and Engels, 1968: 181). Metaphysics and phenomenology hold that the exact opposite is the case. Namely, that it is the consciousness of men that determine their being, not vice versa. Broadly speaking, Kolakowski agrees.

Conclusion: God, and only God

Kolakowski applies metaphysics and phenomenology as a stepladder to see beyond what he takes to be the vision blocking the parapets of the Enlightenment. When it comes to addressing the question of the perquisites for a tenable moral centre capable of delivering a shared sense of guiding purpose, shared order and universal justice, he realizes that it is a ladder that must be kicked aside. If one reads the writings of Bergson and Husserl soundly, experience of temporality is presented as finite and unrepeatable. By virtue of this, it cannot precisely be exchanged. However, there is an irreversible dilemma about this way of looking at things that neutralizes any appeal that might be made upon its behalf in respect of operational merit. Life with others demands common rules and precepts. For Kolakowski, the Enlightenment, science, Sovietism and liberal democracy are so many contrasting secular solutions to the overwhelming problem of modernity: the death of Jehovah. In other words, they posit contrasting, absolute alternatives to God

by proposing some sort of secular legal, judicial system to deliver this-worldly rules and precepts by which life with others can justly proceed – for example, idealized constructs of pure communism or pure market freedom. This is not the only option available to them. It is perfectly consistent for secular thought to contend that society has moved into a stage in which it has exited out of the orbit of *all* moral standards. Thereby, seeking common secular moral rules and precepts is futile. From this it is a short step to declare that nature's needs must be allowed to prevail unabated. The first option leads to Adam Smith, Auguste Comte and Lenin; the second to Julien Offray de la Mettrie, De Sade and Nietzsche.

Kolakowski's enthusiasm for phenomenology begs an unsettling question. Is the emphasis of phenomenology on the uniqueness and finitude of experience any better? If something is unique, that implies that it is solitary. If the radius of what is meaningful is confined to individual consciousness, it is a poor basis for co-operation. The philosophies of Husserl and Bergson, for example, may turn out to be nothing more than a type of nominalism. This is because neither is able to produce convincing access to the ultimate reality of transcendentalism. The infallibility of the party and the perfectionism of the hidden hand may be obnoxious, but what future lies in the notion of the solitude of individual consciousness as any viable sort of cement with which to construct a superior iteration of society? Bergson's position, to which Kolakowski fully consents, is that while individual human consciousness is indisputably solitary, it is not incommunicable. Individual consciousness is not entirely *interior*. Since God is 'the active spirit of the universe', individual consciousness (in being active) must be in communication with this vital impetus (Kolakowski, 2006: 245). Bergson goes so far as to propose that, because consciousness is independent of the body, it has the attribute of surviving bodily mortality (Bergson, 1896, 2003). In this respect, Bergson's conviction and Kolakowski's assent go beyond rational discourse. They fall back upon a *sola fides* defence. This is hardly new. In taking on the hypocrisy and deceit of the Catholic Church, Luther implemented the same defence, and bolstered it by recourse to the principle of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) (Russell, 1989: 25–26, 51–53, 76–77). The biblical notion of a moral canon to life provides integrity because it presupposes God as the basis, and final arbiter, of the law. Kolakowski's attempt to update biblical narratives of Cain, Noah, Lot, Abraham, Job, Solomon, Salome and others for modern times could not illustrate adherence to this principle with more fidelity (Kolakowski, 1989a: 93–186). It is an undertaking pursued in the solemn conviction that technological and scientific progress have yielded manifest dividends and offered exalted promises that are miserably out of step with moral necessities.

In a famous essay, Kolakowski submits that human enquiry and knowledge are enmeshed in a contradiction between the attitudes of 'the priest' and 'the jester' (2004a). The priest lives aloof in the rectitude of absolute, unwavering belief; the jester is perpetually querulous in exposing the limitations and quandaries of absolutism. Kolakowski comes down on the side of the jester (Kolakowski, 2004a: 262; Michnik, 2010). However, in rejecting the absolutism of the Enlightenment/Marxist belief in 'progress' and 'historical materialism' by substituting a *sola fides* commitment to the reality of God, he reveals himself to be unable to escape the conflict between scepticism and absolutism. He declares boldly that 'God created the world for his own glory. This is

an indisputable fact' (Kolakowski, 1989a: 93). Is it really an advance in progress to replace humanist absolutism with trans-humanist absolutism? Kolakowski wants to simultaneously wear the face of the priest and the jester. Perhaps he is being ironic in suggesting that the certainties of the Enlightenment, concerning the cosmos and evolution, do not make humans indifferent or immune to transcendence. The latter may elude the properties of quantification, but it remains integral to human experience. In reading Kolakowski, the philosophical and sociological reward does not lie so much in the renewal of Christian faith. Rather, it lies in what he has to reveal and teach about the dilemmas of trying to live life with others without a shared secular, moral compass worth its salt.

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