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Author: Krzysztof Wieczorek

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Krzysztof Wieczorek

Why Should We Think Critically? Comments on the Critical Rationalism of Hans Albert

Abstract: Leszek Kołakowski draws attention to the fact that rationalism as a philosophical method and definitive certainty as the aim are mutually irreconcilable. Each rationalist philosophy must leave a margin for uncertainty, lest it transforms into dull dogmatism. This observation of the Polish thinker becomes a source of inspiration for Hans Albert. In his work *Science and the Search for Truth*, he agrees with Kołakowski that goals of philosophical endeavours need redefining and puts forward his own metaphilosophical proposal, which specifies what philosophy can and should achieve in the framework of critical realism. The author examines and evaluates Albert's proposal, referring to another view of the nature and role of philosophy as the assessment criterion—the one presented by José Ortega y Gasset in his study *En torno à Galileo* [*About Galileo*] and other writings.

Keywords: philosophical criticism, critical rationalism, thought of Hans Albert, thought of Leszek Kołakowski, certainty, dogmatism, metaphilosophy

One chapter of Leszek Kołakowski's book—short, but fundamental in the problems it discusses—*Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, is entitled: *Why should we think logically?*¹ The remarks and indications formulated there refer to the way in which Edmund Husserl justified the indispensability of logic within the bounds of the program of a final justification of knowledge that he constructed. Kołakowski notes that the idea of pure logic presented in the first volume of Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen*, “carries a well-developed embryo of his later theory of transcendental rationality”² and should be viewed in this context—as one of the tools (the most

¹ L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude* (Chicago: St. Augustine's Press, 1975), p. 16.

² L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, p. 23.

important, at that) serving to make the cognitive processes independent from all earlier systems of convictions, whether propounded by the exact sciences (with psychology at the forefront), or formulated on the grounds of ontology. According to Kołakowski, “Husserl builds his program of pure logic whose validity does not depend on psychology or on any other science, on empirical facts, on the existence of human species, on the existence of the world, on causal connections, on time.”³

It remains a problematic issue if Husserl’s arguments for the irremovability of pure logic from the basic instrumentarium of human cognitive action could be convincing for someone who does not share Husserl’s faith in the possibility of the simultaneous achievement of two fundamental goals of cognition—truth and certainty, as representatives of the current formed in the mid-twentieth century called critical rationalism do. This article discusses some qualities of this thought style.

The mentioned chapter of Kołakowski’s work is a part of the reflections, to which the author wrote the following introductory remarks:

Husserl appears here rather as something of a pretext for discussing the question of certainty. This pretext, however, is far from a pretext that could be arbitrary; and it would be difficult indeed to find a better one. [...] The goal was invariably the same: how to discover the unshakable, the absolutely unquestionable foundation of knowledge; how to refuse arguments of skeptics, or relativists; how to fend off the corrosion of psychologism and historicism; how to reach a perfectly hard ground in cognition. [...] I think that he did not discover this self-supporting foundation of our thought. But not only was his effort not in vain; I believe that the phenomenology was the greatest and the most serious attempt in our century to reach the ultimate sources of knowledge. It is of the utmost importance to philosophy to ask: why did this attempt fail and why (as I think) was it bound to fail?⁴

Here, we can formulate two comments. First: Kołakowski is convinced (and this is difficult to deny) that Husserl, throughout the course of his entire active career, dedicated to the perpetual perfection of his own philosophical project (understanding philosophy as a strict, reliable, transcen-

³ L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, p. 20.

⁴ L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, p. 3.

dental-eidetic science, being the reification of the self-awareness of the whole humankind⁵) believed unwaveringly in the possibility of attaining the goal mentioned in the above paragraph. Second: Leszek Kołakowski, though he respects and admires this conviction of his great predecessor,⁶ is far from sharing it. On the contrary: with full caution, he expresses his conviction that “an attempt to reach the ultimate sources of cognition,” which Husserl so heroically tried to do, could not have succeeded; and not because of the erroneous way chosen by the creator of phenomenology, but due to the objective nature of human cognition. In the concluding remarks to his book (whose presentation the author entitled *cum grano salis* “The moral of the story”⁷), he unambiguously stands on the side of the thesis that “all attempts to get at the epistemological absolute are bound to fail,” while “ultimate certitude is a goal that cannot be attained within the rationalist framework.”⁸ This view brings Kołakowski close to the representatives of critical rationalism. That is why it is not surprising that one of the most important creators of this thought current—Hans Albert (b. 1921), ties in (with approval, though somewhat polemically at the same time) to Leszek Kołakowski’s insightful critical remarks.

It is worth taking a closer look at the figure and views of Hans Albert. He is not a well-known figure in Polish philosophical circles,⁹ which is a pity, because he is surely among the most eminent European thinkers of the second half of the 20th century. Karl Popper formulated an exceptionally high opinion of him, writing in the introduction to the English translation of *Traktat über kritische Vernunft*, published by Princeton University Press:

⁵ This is how Krystyna Świącicka characterizes Husserl’s phenomenology. See also: Krystyna Świącicka, *Husserl* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1993), p. 37, 42, 52, and 101.

⁶ In this same place, Kołakowski adds: “I myself was strongly negatively dependent on Husserl.” L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, p. 4.

⁷ L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, p. 81.

⁸ L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, pp. 84–85.

⁹ Piotr Dehnel draws attention to this in the “Editor’s Note,” opening the anthology he edited, titled *Krytyczny racjonalizm. Karl R. Popper, Hans Albert. Wybór tekstów* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1992), p. 3.

Hans Albert is, in my opinion, by far the most important contemporary German social philosopher. He is equally important as a student of epistemology, especially the epistemology of social sciences [...] the depth and the width of his knowledge of the field [...] far surpasses mine and, in fact, leaves me gasping.¹⁰

It is difficult to take these words as perfunctory, conventional praise. Their credibility is confirmed by the long friendship between the two philosophers (they met in 1958 during one edition of the famous Alpbacher Hochschulwochen in the Austrian Alps—the same Alps that Paul K. Feyerabend mentions with nostalgia in his autobiography¹¹—and took to each other immediately, to which the extensive correspondence between them can attest¹²). In Germany, his position was established, above all, thanks to his active participation in the prominent debate on positivism (*Positivismusstreit*), which began with a stormy discussion during the symposium Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie in Tübingen in October 1961, with the participation of, among others, Karl Popper, Hans Albert, Theodor W. Adorno, and Jürgen Habermas, and was continued in following years in scientific journals. The papers and accounts of the discussion at that memorable meeting were published in a collective volume entitled, *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie*, which was renewed in over a dozen new editions published in subsequent years.¹³ Polish readers had the chance to familiarize themselves with a part of this debate thanks to the editors of *Literatura na Świecie*, which included a passage of Albert's polemic with Habermas in the issue from Jan. 1982.¹⁴

¹⁰ K. R. Popper, "Foreword," in: H. Albert, *Treatise on Critical Reason*, trans. M. V. Rorty, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. IX.

¹¹ See: P. K. Feyerabend, *Zabijanie czasu*, trans. T. Bieroń (Kraków: Znak, 1996), p. 70–71. Both scholars—Feyerabend and Albert—took part in one of these summer schools in 1955. Their acquaintance led to, among other things, the publication of a two-volume selection of correspondence in 2008–2009: *Briefwechsel*, Bd. I: 1958–1971, Bd. II: 1972–1986, hrsg. W. Baum (Wien: Klagenfurt, 2008–2009).

¹² See Hans Albert & Karl R. Popper, *Briefwechsel*, hrsg. M. Morgenstern und R. Zimmer, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2005).

¹³ See T. Adorno, R. Dahrendorf, H. Pilot, H. Albert, J. Habermas, K. Popper, *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie*, 13. Auflage (Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1989).

¹⁴ See H. Albert, "Mit totalnego rozumu. Dialektyczne roszczenia w świetle niedialektycznej krytyki," trans. M. Łukasiewicz, *Literatura na Świecie* 1982 nr 1 (126), pp. 302–338, and: J. Habermas, "Przeciwko pozytywistycznie przepołowionemu racjonalizmowi. W odpowiedzi na pamflet," *Literatura na Świecie* 1982 nr 1 (126), p. 275–301.

In the United States, he is known above all as a popularizer of German social philosophy; he also has the opinion of an original thinker among the creators and representatives of critical rationalism.¹⁵

The reason that Albert was interested in Kołakowski's interpretation of the fundamental goal of phenomenology and its inevitable failure will be more understandable when we take a closer look at the main epistemological assumptions of the author of *Treatise on Critical Reason*. These assumptions—in Wojciech Domalewski's understanding—are as follows:

Above all, H. Albert's critical rationalism is a conception of a new model of rationality [...] Rationality, in the classical sense, reaches back to the time of Aristotle, and is connected with the simultaneous acceptance of two ideals—the ideal of truth, and the ideal of certainty. This leads the classical conception in the direction of a search for the Archimedean point of cognition, some principle or set of principles that would allow us to justify our knowledge in an absolute way. The pattern for such a model was the axiomatic system of Euclidean geometry. However, in Albert's opinion, the two mentioned ideals cannot be reconciled. Their simultaneous acceptance leads to the so-called “the Münchhausen trilemma,” or the necessity of choosing between infinite regress (which is impossible in practice), a logical [vicious] circle (which is no justification at all, really), and the a priori breaking off of the justification procedure at a certain point, that is to say, settling for dogmatism.¹⁶

¹⁵ More biographical information on Hans Albert can be found in the autobiographical introduction to the book *Kritische Vernunft und menschliche Praxis* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977), in “Preface to the American Edition,” in: *Treatise on Critical Reason*, p. XI–XXIII, as well as in W. Domalewski's article “Filozofia Hansa Alberta i podstawowe idee racjonalizmu krytycznego,” in: *Krytyczny racjonalizm. Karl R. Popper, Hans Albert. Wybór tekstów*, pp. 5–22.

¹⁶ W. Domalewski, “Filozofia Hansa Alberta i podstawowe idee racjonalizmu krytycznego,” in: *Krytyczny racjonalizm...*, pp. 9–10. H. Albert writes extensively on the subject of the “Münchhausen trilemma,” its significance and possible consequences in Chapter One of his *Treatise on Critical Reason*; see H. Albert, “The Principle of Sufficient Justification and the Münchhausen Trilemma,” pp. 16–21.

It would not be nonsensical to compare this critical evaluation of the Aristotelian model of rationalism, formulated by representatives of critical rationalism, with the apology of Aristotelianism in epistemology once declared by Józef M. Bocheński. In a conversation with Dariusz Gabler published in the monthly journal *Znak*, the eminent Polish Dominican decisively states (let us remember that the text is not scientific, though it accurately portrays the essence of Bocheński's views): “a quality of the Aristotelian approach is rationalism—the conviction that everything is subject to the laws of logic beyond which there is only nonsense. [...] Every attempt at escaping from logic into the muddle-headedness of dialectic or irrationalism begins with foolishness and sometimes ends, unfortunately, with murder. Rationalism is connected with the completely natural conviction that true statements exist, that we, human beings, know how to cognize some of them, and even that we have already cognized many such statements.”

In direct reference to Kołakowski's argumentation, Hans Albert writes:

Kołakowski, who in many regards represents a position close to critical rationalism, [experiences] disillusionment resulting from his lack of success in seeking certainty [...] The dilemma of empirical skepticism and transcendental dogmatism, which states [...], is a consequence of the classical understanding of cognition and the related concept of science, which was overcome in Popper. The fact that we cannot improve critical rationalism with Husserl's ideas, which seems to result clearly enough from Kołakowski's analysis, is that his paths of reasoning with Husserl lead, it must be admitted, to a blind alley.¹⁷

We should add that in the cited passage, H. Albert refers to the following statements of Kołakowski:

He [Husserl] better than anybody, compelled us to realize the painful dilemma of knowledge: either consistent empiricism, with its relativistic, skeptical results (a standpoint which many regard discouraging, inadmissible, and in fact ruinous for culture) or transcendentalist dogmatism, which cannot really justify itself and remains in the end an arbitrary decision.¹⁸

However, when it comes to an evaluation of the consequences of this unpleasant assertion, imposed by the failure of Husserl's project, both commentators fundamentally differ from one another.

Kołakowski essentially does not see the possibility of getting out of this dilemma, and perceives the only comfort in a rather backbreaking intellectual construct. Namely, he states that though, in truth, each of the two component of the alternative, considered separately—in isolation from the other—carries with it more threats and potential negative con-

J. Bocheński, "Wszystko podlega prawom logiki, poza którą jest już tylko nonsens. Rozmowa z ks. D. Gablerem," *Znak* 1982 nr 3 (328), p. 83.

¹⁷ H. Albert, "Nauka i poszukiwanie prawdy. Krytyczny realizm i jego konsekwencje dla metodologii," trans. D. Sadowski, W. Bensari, in: *Krytyczny racjonalizm...*, p. 20–71, footnote 24. Albert's formulation, "Kołakowski's [...] paths of reasoning with Husserl," ties in to the title of the German edition of the book *Husserl i poszukiwanie pewności* that Albert used, which is: *Die Suche nach verlorenen Gewissheit. Denkwege mit Edmund Husserl*.

¹⁸ L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, pp. 84–85. Hans Albert refers back to the German edition of this work: L. Kołakowski, *Die Suche nach verlorenen Gewissheit. Denkwege mit Edmund Husserl* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977), p. 96.

sequences than real chances for cultural development, a decidedly positive value is the historical fact of these two positions' perpetual clashing. It is so due to the fact that this permanent conflict becomes the motor of tireless searches for a path to the goal, which—even if it remains in itself unattainable—provides culture with an invaluable impulse. The Polish philosopher expresses this thought in the following words:

I have to admit that although ultimate certitude is a goal that cannot be attained within the rationalist framework, our culture would be poor and miserable without people who keep trying to reach this goal, and it hardly could survive when left entirely in the hands of the skeptics. I do believe that human culture cannot ever reach a perfect synthesis of its diversified and incompatible components. Its very richness is supported by this very incompatibility of its ingredients. And it is the conflict of values, rather than their harmony, that keeps our culture alive.¹⁹

Hans Albert, on the other hand, draws his optimism regarding the fate of Western intellectual culture from other sources. As he noted in the passage cited above, Karl Popper was able to overcome—more effectively than Husserl—that supposedly unsolvable dilemma, and various continuations of Popper's solution follow suit, including the solution proposed and developed by Hans Albert. Let us take a closer look at this proposition, beginning with an indication of the way in which H. Albert's critical rationalism defines itself as the third component of the alternative, generated by the search for a rational path to the greatest attainable certainty of human cognition.

From a purely logical analysis of the problem situation, it follows that between dogmatism and skepticism there exists a whole group of intermediate solutions. The dogmatist believes that both the truth and certainty are effectively achieved in the process of cognition; Hans Albert describes this type of position thusly:

Perhaps we should once more recall the traditional intimate connection between the search for truth and the idea of certainty. Even today there are many people who

¹⁹ L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, p. 85.

assume that genuine knowledge can only be secure, irrefutable, undoubtable knowledge. All methodological procedures are to be evaluated in terms of their contribution to the attainment and identification of such knowledge. The problem is to give knowledge a secure foundation which can serve as a guarantee for truth. Thus, we need a criterion for identifying this truth, for without the possibility of such an identification there can be no certainty that we have indeed arrived at genuine knowledge.²⁰

At the opposite pole of thought, we find the skeptic, who rejects any possibility of cognitive certainty, and considers the truth an indestructible, utopian ideal. Intermediate positions are those, which either recognize the certainty of the results of cognition as possible to achieve, but do so at the cost of giving up a concept of the truth that could be operationalized, or accept the truth as the transcendental goal of human cognition, even if currently impossible to reach, then at least possessing the status of a regulative idea that determines the directions and immanent goals of cognitive acts.

As an example of such an intermediate position, let us cite the remarks of Leszek Nowak, formulated in answer to a survey in the monthly journal *Znak*, entitled “What is the philosophy I practice?”²¹ Nowak articulates the following vision of the philosophy he admits to practicing:

The term “scientific philosophy,” introduced in the 20th century by trends like positivism [...] led—this is increasingly common today—to the realization of programs that were not very fruitful cognitively. [...] Thus, the following task faces us: to find a theory of science that stands in opposition to positivist methodology, which would give other foundations to the program of scientific philosophy than positivism did. In my opinion, this idea is that science registers how things are. Thus, science is a reconstructive, not creative, activity.²²

Despite what—in Nowak’s opinion—positivists declared, scientific practice has much more in common with an artistic creation of reality than with a craftsman’s effort of reproducing what is given. This is tied

²⁰ H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” in: *Progress and Rationality in Science*, G. Radnitzky, G. Andersson, eds., *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 58, 1978, p. 207.

²¹ Pol.: “Czym jest filozofia, którą uprawiam?”

²² L. Nowak, “Prawda jest tam, gdzie nikt jej nie oczekuje,” *Znak* 1977 nr 11–12 (281–282), p. 1351.

with a similar approach to the idea of truth by scholars and artists. As Leszek Nowak writes further down,

neither science nor art makes use of[...] the classical concept of truth. The homogeneity of both of these areas of human creativity is visible in the fact that they use an essentialist concept of truth: truth consists in an accurate deformation of the object; accurate means one that takes into account all its aspects, that are indeed fundamental, leaving those that are incidental aside.²³

This deformation—treated as the point of departure for further transformations—is then continuously corrected, gradually approaching the real state of things. This explains why and how “science perpetually corrects itself: it constantly turns out that the initial idealizational theory is too abstract, that additional aspects and incidental phenomena must be taken into account, and in this way move closer to its idealized image of reality.”²⁴

In formulating his conception of philosophy, Leszek Nowak does not hide (despite the fact that his reply was to be published in a Catholic journal) that the source of inspiration for him was the Marxist epistemological project, in which the concept of truth is split by the distinction of two categories: relative truths and absolute truths. In his self-presentation, the philosopher from Poznań writes *expressis verbis*:

In my opinion, the fundamental ideas for the construction of such a theory of science are provided by Marxism. [...] In this way, from relative truth (containing what is essential in the phenomenon), on the way of continual and tedious corrections, increasingly complete relative truths are reached (encompassing, in addition, consecutive incidental circumstances); the ideal boundary of this process is absolute truth (presenting all the circumstances influencing a phenomenon, both essential and incidental).²⁵

In the interpretation of Leszek Kasprzyk and Adam Węgrzecki, the source of inspiration named by Leszek Nowak, Marxist philosophy,

²³ L. Nowak, “Prawda jest tam, gdzie nikt jej nie oczekuje,” p. 1351.

²⁴ L. Nowak, “Prawda jest tam, gdzie nikt jej nie oczekuje,” p. 1352.

²⁵ L. Nowak, “Prawda jest tam, gdzie nikt jej nie oczekuje,” p. 1350–1351.

holds a compromising position in the debate between relativism and absolutism. On the one hand, it must be acknowledged that absolute truths exist, which are not subject to change under any circumstances. [...] These are non-relative truths that contain full and complete knowledge. However the development of science proceeds in the future, they will always be true. On the other hand, it must be agreed that next to absolute truths, in various fields of human cognition, relative truths appear. They do not yet constitute a complete and fully adequate cognition of the phenomena to which they refer. They are an approximate and partial reflection of them, which is often visible in the course of the further development of knowledge. In the specific social and historical conditions in which these truths were born, they could have been the highest achievement. Only later did it turn out that they do not take into account various sides and aspects of the objects they refer to, that their content contains serious simplifications, or even mistaken formulations. Awareness of this state of affairs forces us to reject certain of these truths and to correct or supplement others. In effect, new relative truths appear that correspond to the current state of knowledge and gradual development of research tools. This does not mean that with their acquisition the cognitive process ends; for, reality is inexhaustible in the richness of its expressions, and, in addition, changes and transformations are constantly taking place within it. From this stems the necessity of a constantly renewed cognitive effort, as a result of which man reaches a fuller and more faithful image of being by virtue of new partial truths.²⁶

Hans Albert, though his position should also be placed in the intermediate space between dogmatism (called “absolutism” in the cited text by Kasprzyk and Węgrzecki) and skepticism, is removed from the above exemplification by serious differences. Let us concentrate on two of them. The first concerns the relationship between knowledge and reality. Leszek Nowak ascribed a naively realistic position to those thinkers belonging to broadly-understood positivist culture: “science registers how things are.” Albert is of the opinion that naïve realism is the domain of common-sense thinking, which should not be transferred to the field of philosophy or science. In his dissertation “Science and the Search for Truth,” we read:

Common sense thinking is generally thought to involve a tacit commitment to so-called “naive realism,” a view according to which reality by and large is as it appears

²⁶ L. Kasprzyk, A. Węgrzecki, *Wprowadzenie do filozofii* (Warszawa: PWN, 1972), pp. 167–168.

to be in our sense perceptions. The qualities of sense are thought to be the properties of objects, generally with some qualifications concerning the influence of unfavorable situations on perception. It is well known that this kind of view leads to various contradictions and absurdities which make a revision of this general interpretation of human knowledge necessary. [...] Now it goes without saying that neither philosophy nor science may be too tightly bound to common sense, since progress in knowledge has its root in the fact that we put the self-evident truisms of daily life into question.²⁷

The second, more important difference is connected with a different understanding of the idea of truth. Leszek Nowak took the side of epistemological essentialism, identifying truth with an “accurate deformation of sensually perceived reality,” which in scientific practice is most often achieved on the way of constructing (with the help of mathematical methods) idealizational models, which are a conscious simplification of the studied fragment of reality, to achieve greater clarity in perceiving and reconstructing fundamental qualities with a simultaneous purposeful examination of accidental qualities.²⁸ Hans Albert, in the point of departure of his reflections on truth refers not to the idea of scientific truth, but to the ancient intuition connecting the concept of truth with the accuracy of linguistic expressions describing reality. In his opinion,

the *idea* of truth involved is quite plausible. It need not be connected with the idea of a *criterion* [...], and it does not seem necessary to give a formal *definition* of it. The idea is presumably very old. It can best be elucidated with respect to a language suitable for representation, that is, a language which has not only expressive and signal functions, such as the communication means used by animals, but also exercises a representative function. [...] This regulative idea is a moment in the representative function of language—whether speakers of a language are aware of it or not—and it refers to the adequacy of linguistic products with regard to this function.²⁹

²⁷ H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” pp. 205–206, *passim*.

²⁸ For a much more extensive discussion of this subject, see: L. Nowak, *Wstęp do idealizacyjnej teorii nauki* (Warszawa: PWN, 1977).

²⁹ H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” pp. 207–208.

At the same time, further down, the author states that he does not see the possibility of the indication of a precise criterion by virtue of which we could ascertain and objectively evaluate that (intuitively, though only intuitively understandable) property of the accuracy of linguistic description. He writes, with astounding light-heartedness:

Those who begin by demanding a *criterion* of truth are generally looking for something *more* than a method of identification. They would like to have a *secure sign* of truth, a mark warranting the truth of a proposition or a system of propositions, and it is by no means obvious that the search for such a sign will be successful. So we cannot simply take it for granted that the failure of this search involves sacrificing the idea of truth.³⁰

Where does such an approach to the problem lead? It seems that the only counterproposal that Hans Albert can offer those who cannot come to terms with the inevitability of choosing between dogmatism and skepticism consists in accepting a permanent provisional state both in the methodology of science and in the general theory of knowledge. I do not see any other way of interpreting the meaning of the postulates gladly declared by the critical rationalist from Mannheim. Let us take a look at the following statement: “It may be that we can find procedures we can live with, even live with quite nicely, even though they offer no certainty and little security.”³¹ At the same time, we must remember that—according to Albert—the only possible source of claims as to the irrefutability of judgments and evaluations is the “connection of the idea of truth with the idea of certainty in the classical methodology of rationalist thought,”³² and this position (for reasons mentioned above) must be decisively rejected. Since we reject them, however, we have to replace them with something—*natura horret vacui*. What Hans Albert submits to potential advocates of critical rationalism in exchange for it is a particular version of cultural relativism. From the entirety

³⁰ H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” p. 209.

³¹ H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” p. 209.

³² H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” p. 70.

of the argumentation of the participant of the Kronberg Discussion³³ (oft-mentioned by him), a suggestive panorama of the totality of social reality emerges, equipped with a given system of culture—referring to tradition, but continually subject to change—within the framework of which we can distinguish a range of variations of practical activity, achieving more or less individual ends; among these, special attention should be paid to scientific practice. It appears to the author of the cited thoughts as a type of Wittgensteinian game with mutable rules that are subject to critique and revocable as soon as they stop satisfactorily contributing to the achievement of fundamental ends by the majority of participants in scientific activity.

Albert asserts that science does not differ from other areas of human activity in terms of the need for possessing effective and understandable criteria regulating the ways it is practiced. He writes:

the problem of adequate criteria is a very general problem. It is to be found in every field of social activity—in every kind of problem solving activity; in law, morals, politics, literature, the arts, etc.—and not merely in the enterprise of acquiring knowledge in science. As to the evaluation of the comparative adequacy of problem-solutions, the requisite criteria will of course have to be differentiated according to the *kinds* of problems involved [...]. Our knowledge of history shows that such criteria have *de facto* changed, often in connection with changes in the ideal of knowledge.³⁴

³³ This was an international meeting of scholars in the picturesque resort of Kronberg in Taunus, dedicated to the problems of the methodology of science and theory of progress in science in light of Karl Popper's thought. During the first part of the symposium, selected aspects of Popper's thought were presented in the papers of four representatives of the London School of Economics: John W. N. Watkins, John Worrell, Elie Zahar, and Peter Urbach. Next, the presented theses were thoroughly discussed by the meeting's remaining participants; among them were Hans Albert, Paul K. Feyerabend, and Wolfgang Stegmüller. The materials from the symposium were published in the volume: *Progress and Rationality in Science* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978). H. Albert's text *Nauka i poszukiwanie prawdy*, collected in an anthology edited by Piotr Dehnel in the Polish translation, is taken from this publication. See the English text: H. Albert, "Science and the Search for Truth," in: *Progress and Rationality in Science*, G. Radnitzky, G. Andersson, eds., *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 58, 1978, pp. 203–220 (ISBN: 978-90-277-0922-6 [print], 978-94-009-9866-7 [online], <<http://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-94-009-9866-7>>).

³⁴ H. Albert, "Science and the Search for Truth," p. 214.

Here, science is listed among the types of activities oriented towards problem-solving; it turns out in the further part of the text that Albert understands the status of methodology very similarly:

we can conceive of the *methodology* of science neither as a *normative* discipline in the usual sense, nor as a *descriptive* treatment of the behavior of certain experts—the scientists—but rather as a kind of *technology* related to a presupposed goal of cognitive problem-solving activity.³⁵

From this, it follows that both science and scientific theory (regardless of whether it takes on the form of general or specific methodology of science, or the philosophically-grounded theory of knowledge) should be understood not as activities satisfying given criteria and rule of conduct (for these are mutable and depend on the historical and cultural situation, so they cannot decide about possession or lack of possession of scientific characteristics by a given type of activity), but rather as a type of cultural game played to help reach certain ends. As Hans Albert asserts, “we must presuppose an interpretation of the aim of science, as well as certain views about the possibility of achieving this aim, e.g. about the real knowledge-situation of man.”³⁶ It is unclear who or what is to determine these goals and views; but since we assert their inevitable mutability within the framework of science, we deprive it of the valor of autonomy in establishing its own goals and criteria of scientificity. Indeed, in Albert’s view, it is not scholars who determine the formal framework and requirements for their activity; thus, they must be externally provided. Their current (historically mutable, as we know) form is determined by the following factors: in the first place—the broadly-understood cultural context, which always (depending on its current state in a given historical period) determines the “the aims of scientific activity, the significance and value of science”³⁷; then—currently-dominant views as the cognitive capabilities of man and their limits; they decide how we answer the “then the assumptions needed for this

³⁵ H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” p. 214.

³⁶ H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” p. 214.

³⁷ H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” pp. 214–215.

attempt will have to be conceived of as assumptions concerning real structures. [...]”³⁸; thirdly—currently binding ontological assumptions on the subject of real structures. “[...] If we are to explain the possibility of knowledge or cognition as a real process, we have to assume e.g. the existence of laws of certain kinds and the existence of certain kinds of circumstances.”³⁹

What, then, is Albertian critical rationalism in light of all the above-mentioned relativist assumptions and reservations? Above all—a spectacular retreat from the Husserlian (though not only Husserlian, as Kołakowski accurately noted⁴⁰) program of seeking absolute, irrevocable, and not subject to relativization foundations of cognition. Albert asserts, with cold blood and Stoic calm:

it has to be admitted that a secure, theory-neutral basis for knowledge simply cannot be produced. [...] We can easily admit that epistemology is not a closed and aprioristic discipline floating *above* the sciences. [...] Not even methodology can be a part of logic, as some formalists would have it, and even that would not make it immune to criticism.⁴¹

Is there anything that guards this essentially cunctative approach against falling into the radical relativism and skepticism that Husserl warned against on so many occasions?

It is certainly not easy, fleeing from the threat of arbitrary dogmatism (today we know, on the basis of many painful examples, that all dogmatism is inevitably arbitrary), to stop early enough to avoid its most natural opposition, or skepticism. Critical rationalists—among them Hans Albert—are aware of this danger. In his presentation of critical rationalism’s point of departure, Albert clearly distinguishes these three positions—dogmatism, skepticism, and criticism—characterizing the differences in their aspirations thusly:

³⁸ H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” p. 215.

³⁹ H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” p. 216.

⁴⁰ See: L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, p. 4.

⁴¹ H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” p. 216

The adoption of a general principle of justification which implies a guarantee of truth involves a trilemma of infinite regress, vicious circle or recourse to dogma. The only practical solution—recourse to a dogma—involves a suspension of the principle of justification itself. If one wishes to avoid this kind of *dogmatism*, and yet retain the idea of a guarantee for truth which is implied in the Aristotelian definition of knowledge, there remains the option of *scepticism*, which declares the whole enterprise of seeking knowledge to be pointless. Another possibility involves abandoning the demand for a secure foundation in favor of a critical epistemology of the kind outlined in the position paper, i.e.: the idea of conceding the fallibility of human cognition without giving up the search for knowledge.⁴²

For now, the above distinction is of a purely declarative character. All we learn from it is that criticism (more precisely: critical rationalism) aspires to be a way of overcoming dogmatism distinct from skepticism. In practice, though, what would the achievement of this task consist in? Hans Albert explains this intention thusly:

A consistent fallibilism of this kind is compatible with a *methodical rationalism*. Fallibilism denies that it is possible to justify problem-solutions in a manner that excludes doubt and error, but we can expose our hypotheses to a critical examination in order to find out if and to what extent they are preferable with respect to other hypotheses. [...] The attempt to provide a secure foundation for knowledge is no longer a tenable enterprise. The only rational alternative is to submit our proposed solutions to critical examination, i.e. to evaluate them with a view to possible improvements, to compare them with alternative solutions and to search for new and better solutions. This kind of examination and evaluation presupposes standards—criteria for evaluation—which are relevant to the type of problem which is to be solved.⁴³

We can already see the way in which the system of reference posited here by the critical theory of knowledge “shifts.” Albert recognizes the renouncement of all demands for the absolute legitimization of the results of human cognition not so much as necessary, but as rationally justified. It is difficult to avoid the reflection that this decision possesses a dimension that is not purely epistemological—that something deeper hides behind it. Let us

⁴² H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” p. 203.

⁴³ H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” pp. 203–204.

return for a moment to Leszek Kołakowski and his “paths of thinking with Husserl,” as the German publishers titled this work.⁴⁴ Kołakowski writes (in the chapter dedicated to the philosophical legacy of Descartes):

It turned out that once we gave up the idea of an apodictically certain (and not analytical) truth, we did not need, and we were not capable of building, any concept of truth at all; once we are unable to say how the world is bound to be, we are unable to say how it is, either [...] when absolute truth and metaphysical certainty disappear the truth *tout court* disappears as well [...]. To be sure, the distinction remains between what is *acceptable* and what is not, but to be acceptable doesn't mean “to be acceptable as true.” It means “to accord with experience,” rather than “to accord with the world as it really is.” Science needs no more.⁴⁵

To dot the “i,” we have to add, the sole place where we can attain—indispensable for endowing the apodictic concept of truth with meaning—metaphysical certainty. Kołakowski gives the following answer to this:

the distinction between moral and metaphysical certitude, [made by Descartes, consists in the fact that] we are morally certain of a judgement [...], if it is grounded to such a degree that we may accept it for all practical purposes and use in reasoning. Metaphysical certitude gives quality to judgements which makes them not only practically reliable but apodictically unshakable [...] to convince ourselves that there are such judgements we have to call in divine veracity. [...] It is only after the real existence of God appears as apodictically proven, [...] that we know what the “metaphysical certitude” is for.⁴⁶

The result of this reasoning is unambiguous: it is impossible to separate the epistemological absolute from the metaphysical Absolute. The former is conditioned by the existence of the latter in a necessary and irreducible way. Specifically, then, everyone who consistently takes an atheist position has no choice but to reject all epistemology that refers to ideas of absolute guarantees of the legitimacy of cognition. In the case of Hans

⁴⁴ L. Kołakowski, *Die Suche nach der verlorenen Gewissheit. Denkwege mit Husserl* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977).

⁴⁵ L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, p. 14

⁴⁶ L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, p. 13.

Albert (who, as he himself admits, rejected religious faith at the age of 14, and in his mature intellectual life frequently took part in discussions on theological matters from the position of atheism⁴⁷), this implication does, indeed, occur.

We are still missing a positive counterweight for what—for some or other reason—Hans Albert negates. Critical epistemology, if it is not to be a totally skeptical, and thus nihilistic answer to the “myth of total reason”⁴⁸ that Albert criticized, has to find an at least relatively solid foundation for itself. Everything that can be concluded on this subject from dispersed comments Albert made in numerous texts leads to the conclusion that this foundation is immersing real, human cognitive activity in the entirety of societal cultural practice. Just as in Hans Albert’s interpretation truth turns out to be a certain culturally-relativized property of language, in which specific people formulate their individual convictions orally or in writing, so, too, the legitimacy of scientific statements and all other statements laying claim to objectivity⁴⁹ can only be measured with the help of tools constructed on the basis of the current state of cultural competence of the societies of the potential recipients. This type of conviction brings to mind its historical prototype, namely the critical philosophy of culture of José Ortega y Gasset. It is worth taking a look at some of his thoughts to better understand the genesis and meaning of the proposition formulated by critical rationalism.

Critical thinking—Ortega asserts, taking an insightful look at the history of European civilization—unfailingly appears everywhere that we come in contact with a historical culture crisis.⁵⁰ The Spanish thinker characterizes this phenomenon thusly:

⁴⁷ See for example H. Albert, *Joseph Ratzingers Rettung des Christentums: Beschränkungen des Vernunftgebrauchs im Dienste des religiösen Glaubens* (Aschaffenburg: Alibri, 2008).

⁴⁸ See: H. Albert, “Mit totalnego rozumu,” pp. 302–338.

⁴⁹ Formulating the initial postulates of critical rationalism, Hans Albert simultaneously emphasizes that, “this philosophical understanding is not, in any way, limited to the problem of cognition, but concerns all different types of problems [...] it is of a general character and refers to all solutions of cognitive problems.” H. Albert, “Science and the Search for Truth,” pp. 203–204.

⁵⁰ There is nothing strange in this, looking at the fact that “crisis” and “critical” are closely-related etymologically. W. Kopaliński’s *Słownik wyrazów obcych* derives both of them (adding the word “criterion” to the list) from the Greek *kriterion*: “hallmark,” “judgment”; *kritikos*:

we are dealing with a historical crisis when—as a result of change—in place of the world, i.e. the system of convictions of the previous generation, a vital state ensues, in which man remains without convictions, and thus “without a world.” Man does not know what to do, because he really does not know what to think about the world. The highest degree of change is crisis, and this is why it takes the form of a breakthrough. Change [...] simultaneously takes on a negative—critical—form. Man does not know what to think about the world, but he does know one thing—or so it seems to him—that traditional ideas and forms are false, unacceptable. [...] Therefore, life, understood as crisis, is a state in which man has negative convictions.⁵¹

There is no room here to conduct detailed proof of the statement that a multitude of thoughts that we can find and cite in the texts of Hans Albert, betrays a state of consciousness very similar to the one described. It is based on deep disillusionment (Ortega even speaks of “deep contempt”⁵²) in regards to the views and theories that were up until recently considered credible and precise descriptions of the surrounding reality, and which are still accepted and valued in some circles. Their deactualization, if we are to apply Hans Albert’s doctrine to this phenomenon, is based on the fact that the statements belonging to the logical *residuum* of those conceptions lost (in the opinion of the addressees) that accuracy that constitutes their veracity, understood in the sense of critical rationalism. We come in contact with such situations—Ortega y Gasset notes—at least one every few generations, and they are a necessary condition of progress in the spiritual, intellectual, and scientific culture of humanity. Thanks to them, the process of “cleansing consciousness” of hitherto binding certainties and their consequences, which form a temporary system of convictions that—in favorable cultural conditions—fulfill the function of explaining the world, takes place; and more than just explanation—Ortega even says: the creation of the world.⁵³ He stands on the position that man lives in such a world,

“capability to distinguish, to judge, to evaluate; from *krinein*: sift, separate, choose, decide, judge. W. Kopaliński, *Słownik wyrazów obcych i zwrotów obcojęzycznych* (Warszawa: PWN, 1968), p. 417.

⁵¹ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Wokół Galileusza*, trans. E. Burska (Warszawa: Spacja, 1993), pp. 61–62.

⁵² J. Ortega y Gasset, *Wokół Galileusza*, p. 62.

⁵³ In the text entitled “Galileizm historii,” Ortega y Gasset describes the process of making ourselves at home in the world through the acquisition of certain convictions about the nature of reality: “facts in themselves do not reveal reality to us, rather, they hide it; that is, they confront us with the problem of reality [...] while their incredible multiplicity surrounds us, we slip

as he is able to construct mentally, drawing from the lexical resources and worldview models offered him by his socio-cultural surroundings.⁵⁴

Since these surroundings are subject to constant change, which occurs from day-to-day in a discreet and imperceptible manner, but once in a while its effects accumulate and evoke the state of crisis described above; accordingly, the systems of convictions that constitute what the thinker from Madrid calls the “multiversum,” i.e. a concentrated collection of individual notions about reality, anchored, on the one hand, in empiria, and on the other—in the collectively co-created social imaginarium,⁵⁵ are not given once and for all—in cultural borderline situations (Ortega calls them “transition periods”⁵⁶ or “extreme situations”⁵⁷) the process of their exchange ensues. The earlier systems are gradually replaced by new ones, which do not emerge right away in a ready form,

into chaos and confusion. To discover reality, we must for a moment remove the facts from our surroundings and remain alone with our reason. Then, at our own cost and risk, we imagine some reality, create an imagined reality that is purely a product of our minds; afterwards [...] a moment ensues in which we reject this imagined solitude, pure and isolated reason, and compare the facts created by the reality we imagined and the real facts that surround us. If they match up, this means that we have solved the riddle, that we have discovered the reality concealed and hidden by facts.” *Wokół Galileusza*, p. 9.

⁵⁴ Cf. J. Ortega y Gasset, “Idee i przeświadczenia,” trans. E. Burska, in: *Po co wracamy do filozofii?*, wybór i wstęp S. Cichowicz (Warszawa: Spacja, 1992), p. 209ff. The thinker returns to the question of the influence of socially-formed convictions on individual approaches to reality in his book *Wokół Galileusza*, writing: “when we discover ourselves as living beings, we discover ourselves not only among things, but also among people; we are not only on earth, but also in society. And these people, this society in which we live, already has some interpretation of life, a repertoire of ideas about the universe, binding convictions. So that what we can call the thought of our age becomes a component of our circumstance, it envelops, permeates, and guides us. [...] Without knowing how, we suddenly discover that we are already stuck in a network of ready solutions to life’s problems.” *Wokół Galileusza*, pp. 18–19.

⁵⁵ The concept of “social imaginarium” is taken from Charles Taylor’s work *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); but its content—in the version proposed by the book’s author—precisely corresponds with what Ortega y Gasset had in mind.

⁵⁶ “When [...] we transcend the level of cognition itself, and therefore science as a species fact, and uncover the vital function that inspires and mobilizes it, we will see that it only constitutes a particular form of the more decisive and fundamental form that is conviction. This will allow us to understand man’s conversion from one faith to another, and the situation he is in during the transition period, when he is stuck between two convictions and does not feel settled in either of them, that is to say, when he lives in a crisis of his essence in itself”—writes J. Ortega y Gasset in the introduction to his work, *Esquema de las crisis* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1942). Quoted after: *Wokół Galileusza*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ “The situation in which man begins to doubt the entirety of his life belongs to that order of situation that we call extreme, because man is not confronted then by a multitude of solutions, but [...] experiencing his existence as negative, zero, he tries to react to his situation and find a solution.” *Wokół Galileusza*, pp. 98–99.

but are shaped in the heat of discussions, polemics, the clash of ideas, doctrines, and paradigms. It is precisely such a process—only more complicated, longer-lasting, and engaging incomparably more active subjects than any previous crisis—that we encounter on the XX century historical stage. Ortega y Gasset was perfectly aware of this circumstance, since in his lectures that compose the book *En torno a Galileo*, delivered in Cátedra Valdecilla de la Universidad Central in Madrid in 1933, he weaved in several remarks of this type: “it is upheld, not without due reason, that the constitutive principles of the Modern era have been engulfed by crisis. In essence, a good deal indicates that Europeans are taking down their tents on the land of modernity, where a camp stood centuries ago, and are entering a new period of *exodus* towards a different historical environment, towards a different manner of existence,”⁵⁸ or further down: “for me it is obvious that man feels the need to gain an orientation only when he is disoriented. I think that this is the situation in which cultured people around the world find themselves today, including my present audience.”⁵⁹

There is no doubt that the intellectual movement known as “critical rationalism” that gathered under its banner such exceptional personalities of 20th century international philosophy as Karl R. Popper and Hans Albert, among others, should be viewed as a model exemplification of José Ortega y Gasset’s historiosophical theses. Both the critique of classical epistemology, which constitutes the fundamental backbone of this trend, and the continually emphasized polemic distance themselves from contemporarily dominant trends of thought—with the Neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School and philosophical hermeneutics at the forefront—and are completely natural—in the Ortegan “extreme situation”—expressions of “negative convictions,” which are the unavoidable points of departure in the search for a new formula for understanding reality. This formula, in rejecting both extremes—dogmatism and skepticism—

⁵⁸ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Wokół Galileusza*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Wokół Galileusza*, p. 98.

simultaneously breaks with the fundamental determinant of thought of the passing Modern age that is (according to Ortega) the simplicity of fundamental solutions. The thinker writes:

I would like to present certain ideas here, [...] which will allow us to understand what that great breakthrough is that occurred for the European, that fundamental turning point he found himself facing around the year 1600 and which created a new form of life, a new man—modern man, [...] who is above all a Cartesian man [50.] Lost in complexity, [that] man sees deliverance in simplicity. The slogan “to do without,” to retreat, to negate all richness, complexity, and plenty has become wide-spread [...] like the genius of simplicity, Descartes, who is not satisfied only with aspiring to it, but also provides it, thus reaching and closing that process, situating man in a new world that is simple, clear, and permanent—and this permanence is made up precisely of simplicity and clarity. His method boils down to the following reasoning: a simple idea is clear and distinct, and vice versa: what is clear and distinct, i.e. what is certain, is simple.⁶⁰

We can also see clearly and distinctly that critical rationalism is a consequence of the negation of that Cartesian ideal of *claritas et distinctio*, deeply and enduringly embedded in the spirit of the passing Modern era. The time has come to understand that in the real world and in real life nothing is certain, nothing is clear, and nothing is simple, and if this is the case, the task for our times consists in effectively freeing ourselves from the tempting, but deceptive, aspiration to simplicity. We must relativize, contextualize, critique both others and ourselves, giving up the hope that the ultimate meaning of being will ever be discovered, but, in exchange, awakening the hope that we will be able to enter upon the path of improving our methods and correcting the results of research and intellectual work.⁶¹ This hope, though built upon the failure (dramatic, but not inevitable) of the early Modern thought project, is critical rationalism’s greatest strength.

⁶⁰ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Wokół Galileusza*, pp. 50—99ff.

⁶¹ “The point is not, then, to justify any solutions, but rather to critically revise them, i.e.: evaluate them in terms of possible improvement.” H. Albert, “Nauka i poszukiwanie prawdy...” p. 64.

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Krzysztof Wieczorek

Dlaczego mamy myśleć krytycznie?

Kilka uwag o krytycznym racjonalizmie Hansa Alberta

Streszczenie: Leszek Kołakowski zwraca uwagę, że racjonalizm jako metoda filozofii i ostateczna pewność jako cel są wzajemnie nieuzgadnialne. Każda filozofia racjonalistyczna musi pozostawić pewien margines niepewności, by nie przekształcić się w tępy dogmatyzm. Do tej opinii polskiego myśliciela nawiązuje w swej refleksji Hans Albert. W pracy *Nauka i poszukiwanie prawdy* zgadza się z Kołakowskim co do konieczności zredefiniowania celów filozoficznych wysiłków, po czym formułuje własną propozycję metafizyczną. Wskazuje ona, co filozofia może i co powinna osiągnąć w ramach programu krytycznego realizmu. Autor artykułu dokonuje analizy i oceny propozycji Alberta, stosując jako kryterium ewaluacji inną koncepcję natury i powołania filozofii – tę, którą José Ortega y Gasset zawarł w swym studium *En torno à Galileo (Wokół Galileusza)* i innych pracach.

Słowa kluczowe: krytycyzm filozoficzny, racjonalizm krytyczny, myśl Hansa Alberta, myśl Leszka Kołakowskiego, pewność, dogmatyzm, metafizyka