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KOTARBIŃSKI'S ONTOLOGY OF HUMANITIES

Abstract. What is left of this initial project once Kotarbiński's textbook became obsolete – as Kotarbiński himself claims, perhaps too modestly, in the preface of its second edition, in 1959 – and also given the strong criticism of reism, particularly by Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz [1966]? My answer is that the philosophical project of reism then became a methodological framework for intellectual work in general, and in particular for humanistic studies, or what we today call the Human and Social Sciences.

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What were Kotarbiński's aims with his first book, *Elementy teorii poznania, logiki formalnej i metodologii nauk,* published in 1929? Firstly, he wanted to provide a manual for the course, "Logic and General Methodology", at the University of Warsaw, as he himself said in the preface. A second objective was to provide the initial formulation of a semantic and ontological theory, reism. This theory was meant to disseminate and promote Stanisław Leśniewski's ontological theory. The idea of reism was to transform Leśniewski's logical ontology into a broader metaphysical worldview and to apply it in different fields, among which was the methodological status of sciences.

What is left of this initial project once Kotarbiński's textbook became obsolete – as Kotarbiński himself claims, perhaps too modestly, in the preface of its second edition, in 1959 – and also given the strong criticism of reism, particularly by Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz [1966]? My answer is that the philosophical project of reism then became a methodological framework for intellectual work in general, and in particular for humanistic studies, or what we today call the Human and Social Sciences. I also think that Kotarbiński himself intended this as an objective for reism. This project is clearly expressed, in my opinion, in a paper by Kotarbiński, entitled "Humanistyka bez hipostaz. Próba eliminacji hipostaz ze świata pojęć nauk humanistycznych", "The Humanities Without Hypostasis: An Attempt to Eliminate Hypostasis from the Domain of the Humanities", published initially in 1952 (see KOTARBIŃSKI [1966]).

Concretism, somatism or reism are three names for the same theory. It "states that there are no other entities, and hence no other object of cognition, than physical bodies," says Kotarbiński (in KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], p. 481). In his paper, "The philosopher", he also claims that reism stigmatizes, "meaning speculation resulting from taking names of properties, relations, contents, states, processes, etc., as counterparts of certain beings" (cf. KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], p. 507). When someone claims that properties, relationships, contents, states or processes exist as entities in the world, or simply when someone behaves as if they exist as entities in the world, the person produces hypostasis. Under this term, "hypostasis", Kotarbiński designated non-concrete entities, or entities which are not reducible to concrete entities, and these alleged entities are, according to the Philosopher of Łódź, pseudo-entities. He gives examples of such pseudo-entities in the domain of psychology: "fatigue, pain, intelligence, and psychic phenomena in general, dispositions to experience and to act, psychic acts and content of such acts" (cf. KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], p. 481). All are hypostasis. He also uses this term to designate "various entities which are not physical bodies, such as paradigms, forms of sentence structure, meaning of words, and fictitious personages from literary works … historical facts, culture phenomena, social systems, legal institutions and the like" (cf. KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], p. 481). According to Kotarbiński, almost all objects of alleged knowledge in the Humanities are hypostasis.

A hypostasis is not a non-concrete entity, but it is not an entity at all. When we refer to it, we simply use an empty word or "*flatus vocis*", to use the phrase attributed to early medieval Nominalists or "*nominales*". In the best cases, hypostasis could be reduced to physical entities through a paraphrase procedure. This procedure allows us to move from statements including terms of hypostasis to other statements, which do not use them. This kind of procedure is based on a "concretist" ontology, which claims that only physical entities actually exist. It is an ontological requirement that hypostasis should be reduced in this way and thus ontology is an imperious standard for all linguistic meaning.

But why should we need to eliminate hypostasis if it comes spontaneously to mind when we work in the fields of psychology, sociology, history or literary theory, when we discuss cultural phenomena, legal institutions or social systems, or indeed, more generally, in the domain of Humanities? After all, what harm do these hypostases do?

I remember a remark made by my former supervisor, Frédéric Nef, when I was writing my thesis on Nelson Goodman, now a long time ago. Goodman is a nominalist. He begins one paper by saying that the world is a world of individuals (GOODMAN, N. [1972]). He defended theories which were not so dissimilar to Kotarbiński's and indeed both belong to a tradition of thought which goes back at least to Roscelin de Compiègne and Pierre Abelard. They

have all requested the removal of superfluous entities and used what was much later called "Ockam's razor", after the Fourteenth century philosopher William of Ockham. With this razor, one eliminates unnecessary entities. Goodman developed a mereological, strictly extensionalist, ontology in which any complex reality (he calls them *concreta*) is reducible to simple entities which he calls *qualia*. Technically, Goodman's theory in *The Structure of Appearance* (GOODMAN [1977]) is phenomenalist rather than physicalist in that the simplest realities in his system are phenomenal rather than concrete things. But Goodman believes it could also have been possible to construct a physicalistic system and considers that it is a matter of choice and not of correspondence with a ready-made reality. What is really important for Goodman is that all entities are of the same ontological type, even if they can be described as mereological compounds. There is a strong proximity between Goodman's mereological project and Leśniewski's ontology. In my youth, I did my utmost to make that kind of theory plausible and to apply it to aesthetics. However, as mentioned, my supervisor once asked me: "But why do you have to be nominalist?" For several days, this prevented me from advancing, which is the worst situation for a PhD student. I continually asked myself "Well, yes, why be a nominalist?" In a sense, I found the answer to this question in Kotarbiński's theory, although I don't have a true motivation to be a nominalist.

Surely, one can be particularly fond of desert landscapes like Willard V. Quine claimed to be, but this is only a matter of taste and certainly does not represent a philosophical justification for the use of Ockham's razor to shave Plato's beard, full, as one might say, of non concrete-realities – ideas, forms and other abstract entities. Some philosophers think that nominalism has the epistemic advantage in that it avoids errors by limiting the number of entities about which it is possible to be wrong. But is this a relevant argument? Nominalism requires complex paraphrase procedures to remove hypostasis from our theories and limit ourselves to indisputable entities, a procedure which in itself is a source of error! Curiously, ontological austerity, or the elimination of terms of non-concrete entities, often leads to semantic inflation insofar as nominalist paraphrase procedures are often very laborious. The Nominalist resembles someone who eventually makes himself ill by paying too much attention to his health.

In a sense, nominalist ontology, especially its mereological version, seems to be a philosophical mania. Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz showed that Kotarbinki's nominalism paraphrase program is more problematic than he thought. In particular, the argument that there could be only one legitimate semantic category – words corresponding to the experience we have of physical entities – is quite dubious. The whole story of this critique by Ajdukiewicz is well known and constantly repeated but, in my view, not very useful. What I am trying to show is that Kotarbiński's nominalism is less theoretical than methodological or even practical. He uses ontology to question undue scientific claims, and thus

sophistry spreads through the Humanities. One of the reasons why Kotarbiński never renounced reism, despite the strong criticism he faced, appears in his paper on hypostasis in Humanities. Ultimately, the term "reism" does not designate a respectable ontological or semantic theory and is instead a kind of battle cry against "*nazwy pozorne*", "onomatoids". These need to be countered because they are intellectually dangerous, and are indeed the worst calamities for sane and safe intellectual work or for serious thought. Reism is primarily, in my opinion (POUIVET [2006]), an intellectual ethic.

Peter Geach says that Kotarbiński's battle against onomatoids "is like the Irish hero's fight with his sword against the sea waves; for Kotarbiński is fighting against a strong tendency of natural languages, at least of the Indo-European family" (GEACH [1990], p. 33). Geach gives a very convincing example: "How readily we turn from 'When a man marries his troubles begin' to something like 'A man's marriage makes the beginning of his troubles'!" (GEACH [1990], p. 33). The term "beginning", in the second formula, is a pure product of language, and a true onomatoid. However, one may then be tempted to ask: "What is a beginning?" and even ask students to write an essay on what a beginning is and what is the essence of the beginning. Here is another example. At the time of writing this paper, I read the following sentence *Le Monde*, which is considered as a very serious French newspaper: "The persistence of unemployment, despite the efforts of government, is the only real shadow cast on the re-election of François Hollande who has succeeded in transforming the impact of terrorist attacks in a new Republican energy." It shows that a newspaper can do far more for the proliferation of onomatoids than for the dissemination of information.

In his fight against onomatoids, Kotarbiński undertook a major demythologization of the field of Humanities. For him, we never need to pretend that there is something other than concrete entities. We must beware of language's ontological proliferation and also of what the Second Scholastics philosophers called "*entia rationis*", "beings of reason". For a nominalist, beings of reason are beings of unreason. There is a strong temptation to believe that some realities do not exist in the same way as concrete things, but in their own way, which implies that modes of existence are numerous and varied. Kotarbiński devoted a large part of his work to warning us about this temptation and encouraging us to greater caution in this regard. In the field of Humanities in particular, we must practice a virtue of parsimony if we are to avoid the vice of talking about nothing while pretending to say particularly deep things.

We could find add other examples to what Kotarbiński was fighting against in the domain of Humanities. One of the most famous reifications is found in the immortal work of the greatest French philosopher. Descartes blithely moves from "I think" to "There is an ego that thinks". When I was a student I did

a course entitled "The Discovery of the Ego", a formula used in exactly the same way as, say, "The Discovery of America." The professor saw Descartes as the Christopher Columbus of Subjectivity. Descartes was also supposed to have discovered the ego in the same way as today we may discover that there is palm oil in almost everything we eat! Irony with regard to discovery made by Descartes seems particularly misplaced because it has profoundly changed the history of thought. To say that Descartes simply committed the fallacy of nominalising the personal pronoun "I" would seem a very poor understanding of what is considered a fundamental discovery by many philosophers. However, G.E.M. Anscombe (cf. ANSCOMBE [1975]) defended such a claim by saying that "I" do not refer to the self and it is likely that Geach thought the same. I suppose that Kotarbiński would agree with them, given what he says about onomatoids.

The same Kotarbińskian method could be applied to another discovery often considered to be famous. It is not difficult to notice that we are sometimes unaware of certain events which may even play an apparently causal role in the formation of our personalities. Should we conclude, like Freud did and many others since, that there is an unconscious psychic reality, the Unconscious, which conflicts with other psychic realities such as the so-called Ego and Superego? This would mean that a large part of the Human and Social Sciences would thus be based on pitiful semantic and ontological confusions, and even perhaps that the Human and Social Sciences would be no more than semantic and ontological confusions nonetheless viewed as marvellous discoveries.

I will now focus on an example given by Kotarbiński: intentional objects. The first reason is personal. The ontology of art has been my daily bread for over thirty years and the few pages Kotarbiński devoted to the ontology of art had a profound influence on my written work on this topic. The second reason is that Kotarbsinki's ontology of art is directed against another Polish philosopher, Roman Ingarden, and more generally against Phenomenology. Ingarden and Phenomenology are never quoted in Kotarbiński's paper on Humanities but there is no doubt they were the main topics of his highly critical views.

According to Kotarbiński, "an intentional object is that alleged object towards which we turn our acts when these are aimed in a vacuum" (KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], p. 486). Thus, we are tempted to think that a fictional character is an intentional object and an object to our thinking even if this entity is not in the empirical world and actually is not a real object. Kotarbiński adds: "in the opinion of many theorists of literature, a literary work just consists of such objects" (KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], p. 486). The thesis that a literary text is a series of marks on paper or other media which make it a physical thing has not found many supporters among literature theorists and philosophers, even those most likely to adopt materialistic theories (except Nelson Goodman who agrees

with this kind a characterization!). The result is that a work of art is quite often conceived as a non-physical entity, "built at least in part from meaning of words, from immanent images which are contents of productive images, and finally of imaginary things, persons and events" (KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], pp. 486 – 487). Thus, a work of art would be the correlate of an intentional activity of the mind, which constitutes its own object. "The somatist must firmly protest against all that" (KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], p. 487), says Kotarbiński. He firmly rejects the phenomenon of nominalization. This is not because one thinks that, for example, Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* is a non-physical entity – *Pan Tadeusz* – which is an object of our thought and perhaps of our aesthetic appreciation.

Some philosophers will insist that there are obviously different modes of existence. Like Ingarden, they will distinguish between the absolute mode of existence, which applies only to God, the ideal mode of existence, which applies to mathematical objects, the real mode of existence, which concerns physical objects, and the intentional mode of existence, which includes aesthetic objects or fictional entities. The very notion of the object, alone seems particularly apt for the production of hypostasis in that the term is so vague and indefinite that it allows all sorts of things from or outside the world to be added simply by virtue of a further qualification. An adjectival term can be added to the word "object"; an example would be an "aesthetic object" - an alleged object whose mode of existence is supposed to be aesthetic. The second way of producing hypostasis is to use a genitive term; one can for example speak of an "object of thought". For many thinkers in the Humanities, it seems to be sufficient to qualify an object to make the object exist in its own way. Do you need a new domain you are presumed to have discovered and in which you will therefore be the main specialist? This can be achieved by using the process of nominalization. The ontology of the Humanities is sometimes too easy and based on an uncontrolled transformation which takes thinkers from a completely free semantic analysis to a very generous ontology.

Kotarbiński claims, however, that "there remains the question as to whether a lyrical poem came into being only when it was externalized – for example, in the form of a manuscript – or when its author formulated it in his mind, when he felt as if he heard that poem recited by himself or by someone else" (KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], p. 487). Kotarbiński also realizes that it is not so easy, as a reist is tempted to claim, to eliminate intentional objects. He even concludes that the ontology of a literary work includes the authors of the works and their inner psychological life. Such a claim would be close to the eliminativist attitude in contemporary philosophy of the mind. Works which seem to be non-physical entities are in fact physical but not as things within the word and rather as processes in the brain. However, Kotarbiński is too smart to believe that such a solution is plausible and quickly proposes another solution. He says: "in the last analysis, there are, strictly speaking, no literary works, as there are no works

when people talk with one another or when they perform physical exercises" (KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], p. 487). I would say that we may dance a waltz with a person, but this does not mean that the waltz exists in addition to the people who dance or who make certain movements together. Accordingly, there are people who narrate, but no narrative exists in itself in addition to what they do and there is in fact no narrative, understood as an entity in the world!

Kotarbiński returns in his way to a fundamental distinction which is often made by scholastic philosophers between *actio manes in agente* – when I like or want something, but there is nothing in addition to what I do – and *actio transiens in objectum* – when I cut something or make a cake, and thus something is cut or made which exists independently of my act. Kotarbiński finally critically examines another scholastic notion, used by Franz Brentano and by Roderick Chisholm, that of intentional inexistence. Sometimes those who use this concept tend to act as if inexistence was by itself a mode of existence, but to inexist is not to exist otherwise – it is simply to not exist. One can say: "in the somatist's opinion, the literary historian has no objects of study other than texts and their fragments, their authors and their readers, and if the literary work is to consist of some other elements, then the search for such an object is a search for a non-entity" (KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], p. 488).

What, then, is the result of this discussion? My view is that, strictly speaking, there is no ontology of humanities as there are no literary works and legal codes. Kotarbiński says: "there are texts, there are authors of those texts, and there are readers of those texts; … a given legislator ordered that under given circumstances people should act in a specified way" (KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], p. 489). But there are no objects such as meanings of sentences, and it is the main reason why there are no literary works or legal codes. We could then conclude: "if a person demands that the humanities should study the history of sciences, of philosophical systems, and of legal systems, and understands this in the sense that they are the subject matter of the humanities, in the same way as minerals, plants and animals are the subject matter of natural science, he falls victim to an illusion and commits a hypostasis" [1966, 489]. If we agree with Vincent Descombes's idea that metaphysics is to make and unmake hypostasis (cf. DESCOMBES [2000]), Kotarbiński's metaphysics consists mainly of 'undoing' hypostasis. His metaphysics leaves us with just objects in the physical sciences while the Humanities do not possess own objects.

"University of Łódź" is not a hypostasis, because it has students, professors, a rector, rules and programs, and of course because we are here at the University of Łódź which is hosting this conference. But this is nothing other than what people make or remake, the story they tell, and the memories they have. The former Rector Magnificus of the University of Łódź said that, "in the strict, fundamental meaning of the world, only groups of institutionalized human

beings exist in a given way and function collectively in a given way because of the specified dispositions of human beings and other component parts including certain specified convictions and aspirations" (cf. KOTARBIŃSKI [1966], p. 490). If I understand Kotarbiński correctly, the University of Łódź does not exist, but still we can commemorate its Seventieth Birthday, appreciate its hospitality and admire the work done by the colleagues and students of this university. We thus see where we are led by hunting down onomatoids. The world contains only concrete material entities, inanimate things and people. Anything else must be understood as what people make with the things they use, among them texts, images, sonic sequences or corporal movements. Overall what we call works of art.

Peter Geach said that reism honestly made him perplexed. His perplexity is related to other difficulties than those already reported by Ajdukiewicz and others. I do not think it is important here to recall these difficulties. Indeed, Kotarbiński was so far from denying them that he joined the critical text of Ajdukiewicz at the end of the second edition of his book, *Elementy*. It seems more interesting to me to ask why the fight against onomatoids survived the logical and semantic criticisms made by great philosophers. The reason is, in my opinion, the role of this battle against onomatoids. We know that Kotarbiński wrote, in addition to his *Elementy*, another very famous book – his *Traktat o dobry robocie,* translated into English under the title *Praxeology*. But in fact, at least in part, *Elementy* already was a "treaty of good work", of good intellectual work. Finally, what is important in Kotarbiński's reism is more intellectual prophylaxis than ontological economy. In the Humanities, in particular, our good intellectual health is subject to risks inherent in the language we use, at least if we are not attentive to the phenomenon of nominalization. We need strict ethical standards to prevent a bad use of language leading us to produce the object we claim to study. Nominalization is always an intellectual temptation, especially in the Humanities. Only the sense of intellectual dishonesty when we nominalize may require us to avoid nominalization, or at least to remain vigilant about it, even if its possibility is inherent in the languages we use. Also, Kotarbiński had a moral sense that nominalization can be morally repugnant and even a moral fault in intellectual life.

Kotarbiński invites us to link the practice of Humanities with an intellectual ethic. This ethic is both individual and social. Individually, we should not be too easily satisfied by ontological vigilance in our scientific life. Socially, it would be desirable that cultural institutions protect themselves from and fight against the inherent tendency to nominalization in the Humanities. I am convinced that Kotarbiński's warning against onomatoids, and his defence of ontological parsimony, especially in the Humanities, has lost none of its intellectual necessity or ethical value.

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