

Transatlantic Encounters

Philosophy, Media, Politics. In Memory of Mateusz Oleksy

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Acknowledgments

This collection grew in most part from the conference held at the University of Łódź, Poland, September 23-27, 2008. The conference created a forum to think and debate on transatlantic relations with the theme “Transatlantic Encounters: American Studies in the 21st Century.” We would like to thank the Embassy of the United States in Poland, University of Łódź, Łódź City Council, and the Faculty of International and Political Studies, University of Łódź, for the funds that made the conference possible.

The volume *Transatlantic Encounters: Philosophy, Media, Politics* is also the outcome of an array of international collaborations that have developed over the years among individuals from the universities at different geographical sites. The perspectives they brought to this project from a wide variety of philosophical, historical, and political contexts, as well as those pertaining to contemporary mass media, have given this volume a particular richness. We thank all of them for representing the highest ideals of collegiality and cooperation. Sincere thanks are also due to Patrycja Chudzicka-Dudzik, Piotr Duchnowicz and Marta Kotwas for assisting to bring manuscript to production.

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Mateusz Oleksy – In Memoriam

Mateusz Wiesław Oleksy was born in Łódź in 1974 and brought up in Poland, blessed with loving parents, themselves academics. He graduated from Perry McCluer High School, Virginia, USA in 1991. Already he was an outstanding student, and in recognition of his achievements he was awarded President George Bush Academic Fitness Award. The same year he was admitted to Washington Lee University, Virginia, but decided to return to Poland and entered the Philosophy Program at the University of Łódź. In Virginia he polished his English by reading the works of Bertrand Russell and as a result his interest in philosophy was born. No wonder analytic philosophy became his first field of research. During the five year philosophy program Mateusz received scholarships to study at the University of Bochum (Germany) and the University of Utrecht (The Netherlands), as well as awards for scholarly achievements from the Minister of Education of Poland and the Rector of the University of Łódź. He graduated in Philosophy in 1996, having presented an MA thesis entitled *On the notion of indefiniteness in the philosophy of late Wittgenstein*. During his Ph.D. program in philosophy he received a scholarship to study at the University of Granada (Spain), and research grants at the University of Surrey (UK) and the University of Pittsburgh (USA). In 2001 he received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the Faculty of History and Philosophy, University of Łódź, and joined the Department of Epistemology and Philosophy of Science at the University of Łódź.

Mateusz's dissertation *Language and Action. A Study in Radical Practical Philosophy* and a few other early publications belong to the field of analytic philosophy of language or even to a borderland between philosophy of language and linguistics. What attracted him to analytic philosophy were features of its craftsmanship: care for conceptual precision and clarity of exposition when presenting one's views, the demand for convincing arguments and correct reasoning, the conviction that reconstructions should be penetrating and exhaustive. Mateusz's attachment to solid tradecraft is present already in his master thesis. Philosophizing did not mean for him inventing beautiful metaphors and writing reader-friendly essays. On the contrary, it was to engage in solid conceptual work. This allows us to appreciate his respect for Ludwig Wittgenstein and Charles Sanders Peirce. In Mateusz's doctoral dissertation Wittgenstein, Peirce, and Aristotle are the main heroes and for good reasons. In the works of all three he found ideas on the relation between thinking and acting, philosophizing and practice. He wrote that practice is "a way of acting which decides who the person that acts is." Of utmost importance for Mateusz was a question: "Who am I?", "How can I understand myself and my actions philosophically?". His doc-

toral dissertation is an outstanding piece of philosophical analysis. Already at this early stage in his career, Mateusz was able to combine detailed analysis with daring synthesis to reveal certain tendencies in philosophy. In his dissertation he also argued that “practice is a form of asceticism,” which should allow us to surpass ethnocentric closure, for example in language, and that it is “a form of therapy that is supposed to restore confidence in the life world.” This is an important idea. The problem of confidence and reliance on reality became one of the issues in his next important project – a book *Realism and Individualism. Charles S. Peirce and the Threat of Modern Nominalism*, which he submitted as a “habilitation” in the tenure procedure and which was published by the University of Łódź Press (2008) in a limited edition.

This stage in Mateusz’s academic career began when he received a Senior Fulbright Grant and spent the academic year 2003-2004 at the University of California in Berkeley. The Fulbright Scholarship was followed by two research grants from the Polish Science Foundation for especially talented young scholars. This support allowed him to write a book on Peirce, in which one of the central issues became a discussion between realism and nominalistic rejections of realism in reference to abstract terms and scientific theories.

Professor Wojciech Kalaga, who reviewed the book for the publisher, stated that “the whole project of the dissertation is original and meriting a close attention” and – for Kalaga – “the most original and boldest statement is the thesis, which the author admits Peirce might have rejected, that Peirce’s pragmatic realism is incompatible with scholastic realism and in fact replaces the latter at some point.” (p. 1, trans. by Marek Gensler). Indeed, in Peirce’s philosophy Mateusz saw a way beyond skepticism and doubts about the solid empirical ground of scientific knowledge. Peirce was also for Mateusz a thinker who helps us overcome the individualist slant of modern philosophy. Professor Kalaga emphasizes:

[Oleksy] presents a meticulous and convincing reconstruction of Peirce’s perspective, from which modern nominalism is seen as a “real and historically significant matrix of ideas cutting across the divisions of philosophical disciplines” and yet, despite its enormous influence, a nebular rather than monolithic system of ideas. ... his brief (caption) version of that matrix, presented on pp. 86-87 and covering three divisions: (1) metaphysics, semantics and logic, (2) epistemology, methodology and psychology, (3) social science and anthropology, is very well constructed, systematic and precise and thus helpful for the following discussions. (Kalaga, p. 2)

Also the last chapter, in which Mateusz reconstructs Peirce’s assumptions concerning the social, is undoubtedly a most crucial and original part. It contains “a novel attempt at constructing Peirce’s anthropology, even though Peirce himself apparently neglected that realm of inquiry” (Kalaga, p. 3). Peirce’s organicist social theory, which radically opposes an individualist and liberalist approach, has not been thoroughly studied. Mateusz asks “whether Peirce’s quite

radical communal organicism, radical in its anti-individualism, is indispensable as a social counterpart to his PR [pragmatic realism – B.T.], or whether the latter could perhaps be successfully combined with a more moderate communitarian view, more open to liberal-individualistic concerns,” for instance to “the minimal sense of individual autonomy, namely, the freedom to assent to a proposition.” In reference to this question Mateusz said: “The particular problem provokes a much more general question – one of the questions I am presently prepared to pose, but not to answer” (Oleksy 2008, 20) and he left us with this unanswered question.

We have lost “an excellent interpreter of the philosopher’s thought (at the same time ‘archeological’ and ‘abductive’), “one of the most important Peirce specialists not only in Poland but also on the international scene” (Kalaga, p. 6). But we have also lost a convivial colleague and a dear friend.

Philosophy students at the University of Łódź have been deprived of an excellent teacher and an unforgettable tutor of their Philosophical Club. Mateusz greatly contributed to its transformation into a powerful organization which organized conferences, numerous talks, artistic events, and public presentations of the work of students. All of this was possible because Mateusz was a professional authority for both his students and his peers. No one who entered academic relations with him could doubt his professional knowledge and competence; no student with a passion for philosophy could fail to notice and appreciate his unceasing ability to discuss philosophical issues. He was an authority but not, like many prominent academics, one shut up in an ivory tower. In his encounters with students Mateusz was a frank, slightly older buddy, always ready for the sport of good company. Friendly attitudes toward students, such as authority, are not a warrant of pedagogic success. This requires care, and Mateusz did care for students, as well as for colleagues and friends, without being sentimental. He knew how to praise and blame, how to demand and bestow. This rare combination of characteristics made him a charismatic teacher, a great academic, an irreplaceable friend, and a beloved son.

Mateusz W. Oleksy’s publications include a book, four book chapters, and over twenty articles published in Poland, Germany, and England. He also gave papers at numerous international conferences in Poland, Italy, and the USA.

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