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Władysław Tatarkiewicz (Poland)

STUDYING PHILOSOPHY IN MARBURG, YEARS AGO*

This book is appearing in Polish for a first time, yet it was written in a remote past, if you look at it in terms of a human lifespan. I wrote it little less than 70 years ago. I presented it as a thesis for my Ph. D. 69 years back, and 68 years ago I published it in a foreign language. The circumstances in which the book was written, unimportant as such, can however explain some of its properties.

I wrote the book in a small West German town called Marburg an der Lahn. It was as ancient as it was small, its timeless university also small yet looking back at an old tradition, famous especially for its philosophers in the small years of this century.

That I found myself out there was due to a combination of fortuitous circumstances: first, they closed down the university in my home city of Warsaw, a Russian university at the time, of course. The university was closed down following January 1905 student demonstration that called just too loudly for Polish to be introduced as the language of the courses. The closure of the university barred me from studying in Russia, so I left, to go abroad. Yet I did not end up in Marburg right away. I first studied in Switzerland, in Zurich, and in Berlin as well. At Zurich University, philosophy lectures were few and of poor reputation; like most Polish students I preferred to attend courses in natural science, like biology or anthropology. Berlin was different, though, as famous professors and first-rate philosophy lectures were not just many but too many, in fact. Old professors like Dilthey or Paulsen were still active in their faculties as the younger generation including the imaginative Simmel or the erudite Cassirer were coming on. If

¹ Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1886-1980) was awarded his Ph. D. in December 1909 for a thesis called *Die Disposition der aristotelischen Prinzipien* (1910). The book was translated into Polish as its author turned 90, in what was a jubilee gift, by Professor Izydora Dąmbska. The translation was published by Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe publishers in Warsaw in 1978. Professor Tatarkiewicz's foreword to it deserves to be recalled. The title is the editor's.

Zurich offered just too little philosophy, Berlin had too much of it, and in disconcerting excess too. I was exposed to a torment of divergent impulses. Two years into it, I felt I needed a quieter environment. Opportunities and attractions were many: artistic Munich, romantic Heidelberg, Greifswald with its scenic seascape, Bonn on the Rhine river a tough choice indeed, yet all was decided by pure chance.

A friend of mine told me to go with him to listen to a guest lecture by a visiting professor from somewhere; I knew neither the topic nor the man's name, but I went all the same. The lecturer turned out to be a professor from Marburg, his presentation excellent and inspiring. I was further told a couple of intriguing things about the tiny provincial town of Marburg, so I thought to myself that was what I want. So after Lent in 1907 I moved to the Hesse town of Marburg, staying on there for the next three years, until my doctorate.

Marburg was the antipode of Berlin. The city, or more properly town, had a university that was not bad yet small, with no intellectual attractions besides that. Surrounded by a picturesque undulating forest-grown skyline, the charming town lay on the slopes of the main hill, with its steep medieval lanes winding up to a Gothic castle at the top and down to a Gothic monastery, the seat of the university, at the foot of the hill. I found myself a placé to live in the lower town, with the forest right behind the house, and to get to the university I had to walk across fields.

I was put up for a room and living with an elderly widow of theology professor. The surroundings were nice and friendly, the room bright and quiet, giving a broad view from the window. Meals were served to several foreigners, among them an English girl later turned novelist who made a Polish student the hero of one of her books; a somewhat eccentric American whom I met half a century later in New York as a retired professor. We met our German colleagues and foreign pals during the courses. There were not many of them, yet enough not to feel lonely.

Few courses had to be attended at the university, so we had plenty of time to spend. There were two philosophy professors at the school: Hermann Cohen, the *causa occasionalis* of my move from Berlin to Marburg, and Paul Natorp. Cohen, the founder of the Marburg school of philosophy, even though he had not reached retirement age did look an old man; yet as a speaker he was first-rate. He was one of the first German Neo-Kantians and Friedrich Albert Lange picked him to succeed him as head of his faculty. Cohen's renown relied on three great and outstanding books on Kant, but during my stay at Marburg Cohen had dropped his historical pursuits and was busy writing his original works, the *Logik der reinen Erkenntniss*, *Ethik des reinen Willens*, *Ästhetik des Gefühls*. His was an extremely abstract brand of philosophy, pure construction, programmatically descended from Kant yet diverging from him in a drift towards extreme liberalism. Natorp, with his

education background in classical philology, was the author of that famous great book on Plato. He joined Cohen and then two headed the philosophical school that came to be dubbed the Marburg school.

The important thing to note is that both professors held the same philosophical position, putting forward the same views. Their views were clear-cut, extremist, self-assured and tolerant of none other. They left no room for hesitation. They constituted a closed system. A philosophy student showing up in Marburg acceded to the dominant view, or left very soon. I was among those who stayed on. It was not that I said to myself, now I have found the truth, or I have found myself. Rather, I have come across a thought that is serious enough, why don't I try to keep to it. Had the Berlin dishevelment not lingered in me any more, the Marburg determination might not have had so strong a hold on me.

The Marburg professors took Kant's philosophy as their point of departure, so at first their position was referred to as Marburg Kantianism. But by the time I arrived there all that had survived were only a few of Kant's propositions, as their whole doctrine had developed into a separate system. That they fully agreed with each other cemented their views. Someone studying in Marburg was likely to fall victim to the illusion that there was only one philosophy, or at least only one true philosophy, the Marburg one. Whatever was going on outside it in Germany or anywhere else was shrugged off as a mistake, so the professors just ignored it.

Some evidence of their sticking to the same position was provided by the fact that the two used to conduct doctorates together. Doctorates were few, incidentally; mine was the first one in four years, with the famous Nicolai Hartmann being my immediate predecessor.

During my second year at Marburg the relevant ministry decided maybe in an attempt to break up the "Marburg front" to appoint a third philosophy professor, Paul Menzer, who represented a different line of thinking: of empiricism and common sense. The older students, adhering to the Marburg doctrine, took no interest in the new professor. I never bothered to go to any of his lectures. I was wrong, but that was the prevailing attitude then.

If a third Marburg professor was ignored, any school except the Marburg one was even more so. We read no thinkers of the time. Of the older philosophers we read only the classics, who were viewed as predecessors of the Marburg philosophy. But they included properly only Parmenides, Plato, Kant, Descartes to some extent, and Leibniz, as well as great scientists such as Galileo or Newton: brilliant minds, yet only very few of them. I recall the outraged reaction of Marburg philosophy students when they heard that at a hearing of a candidate for the Ph. D. in Berlin Dilthey put to him a question concerning Averroism. Why should anyone bother to ask about such trifles!

The two Marburg professors were in agreement with, yet very unlike, each other. In Cohen there was something of a prophet or preacher, as he

extemporized his beautiful, occasionally high-toned, lectures. Natorp for his part had a philologist's nature, a scrupulous researcher who submitted his propensity and sense for the particular to a general philosophical theory. He used to read out his lectures, in a monotonous and uninviting manner. He was obviously pleased when students came to see him, but as a shy and awkward person he just did not know how to talk with them. In that he was quite unlike Cohen, whose very bad sight and impaired hearing did not prevent him quickly setting up rapport with students.

Foreigners made up a majority of philosophy students in Marburg: the Marburg school commanded greater respect in several countries than it did in Germany. Many Spaniards used to come, with Ortega y Gasset already then quite prominent, although of course he did not enjoy his later fame at time yet. I can remember more faces and more names: Pedroso and de los Rios, who later climbed to prominence in government and academia. There were also quite a few Russians were there, with Boris Vogt the most colorful figure among them. When I got to know him he had no less than 25 university semesters behind him. He used to joke his knowledge had grown so huge he couldn't get it moving nay more. In German it was, "Ich habe so immense Kenntnisse, da ich sie nicht mehr mobil machen kann". After the revolution he became professor at Moscow University. In the professors' eyes, there was one genius among the Russians, Dimitr Gavronskij; I never met him after Marburg and could say nothing about his life or works. There were also quite a few Scots in Marburg, but most of them as divinity students who rarely showed up at philosophy lectures. Of Polish students, I used to go together for several semesters with Bronisaw Krystall, later a well-known aesthete and connoisseur whom I keep seeing even now, seventy years after our Marburg meeting.

Of the Germans, I arrived in Marburg too late to meet Ernest Cassirer who graduated before me and following his habilitation for an academic job in Berlin lived in that city. During my Marburg days it was Nicolai Hartmann who got his habilitation in Marburg; I attended his inaugural lecture. The German Dozent and the Polish student developed a friendship that got us later visiting each other, he came to see me in Warsaw, and I went to see him in Cologne or Berlin where he had his academic posts. Yet my best friend then was Heinz Heimsoeth, the future outstanding historian of philosophy; for seventy years on, we used to relive our Marburg days in my place in Warsaw or in his in Königsberg or Cologne, as well as at countless congresses, meetings, or during our joint trips to France and Italy, England, Holland or Switzerland.

Lectures for students were held at Philipina Hall, in keeping with the German tradition, on Mondays and Tuesdays and Thursdays and Fridays. Natorp delivered his lectures from 3 to 4 p.m. The academic quarter, or the first fifteen minutes of the hour, was used by the professors for a chat in

front of the entrance. Cohen started at 4 p.m., and it was something like a tradition for the elder students to walk him home. Seminars too were held in the afternoon, once a week at one of the professors' places. The seminars were readings only of the classics, Plato, Descartes or Kant. They were almost entirely monologues of the professors, or their dialogues with the classics: Cohen used to talk with Plato, the students listening. Contributions by students, written or oral, were uncommon. My thesis for the Ph. D. was the first ever study I was told to write. I was challenged to work independently. I was not sure, though, that was all a good way to teach, and when I myself got to head my own faculty I had to come up with another way to lead seminars and teach students.

Now to the essential question, what was the philosophy the Marburg professors propounded? Starting with Kant, they moved far away from him. Kant used the contraposition of subject and object, whereas they held that objects have existence only within the subject. To Kant, the notion of "thing in itself" was a marginal notion; to them, that notion had no place at all, for the world is contained within the boundaries of thought. The sense only tell us about our reaction to the world; experience provides knowledge about ourselves rather than about the world. A natural view of the world is subjective and wrong. Matter, concrete things and events, the visible and audible world, are only an accumulation of subjective data. The mantra was: it is the exact science alone, mathematical physics, that tells us anything about the nature of the world. That is the only truth, while metaphysical theories are empty speculations. Our knowledge of the world is never finite, as it unfolds along with exact science. Any knowledge of the world we can have is as much as mathematical physics can deliver.

The bearing of that position weighed so heavy on those who got to know and internalized it that even the most outstanding minds of the epoch, people like Cassirer, Hartmann, Heimsoeth, left the university adhering to that view, and were able to develop their own different positions only later. Do I have to mention that my own case was very much like theirs? In their world view, the Marburg philosophers were close to Plato, and even more so to Parmenides. To them, the worst havoc ever wrought to philosophy was done by Locke and Hume, the founders of empiricism. But actually Aristotle himself, they believed, had gone astray. As for their contemporary philosophy, Natorp despised it, Cohen ignored it.

When early in my second year of study I went to discuss the subject of my thesis, he told me, "Why don't you write about Aristotle, that can come in handy in your country". He had no idea what was going on in Polish philosophy at the time, imagining it was still steeped in scholastics. But then, he hardly took any interest in philosophy in his own country, either.

My own curriculum at Marburg was in line with the spirit of the school, as I spent my first year reading Plato and my second year reading Kant. I

bought myself Aristotle's complete works in the Prussian Academy edition, a stolid five volumes, all and my work boiled down practically to a study of the Stagirite's original texts. In truly Marburgian style, I had to deal directly with my philosopher rather than with any recent literature about him. I did not go to the library, for I did not have to. My Greek, which I had shrugged off as an utterly futile exercise at my Warsaw philological gymnasium, suddenly turned out quite useful. Aristotle is not very difficult to read, especially compared to Plato, yet it takes some time to get used to his succinct style. The Prussian Academy edition included, apart from the Greek originals, Latin translations by Renaissance authors and the oldest late-Greek commentaries (Alexander of Aphrodisia was very useful), plus H. Bonitz's excellent index. Of Polish translations, the only one available at the time was Petrycy of Pilzno's Renaissance rendering, but I did not know of it then and I would have not used it a lot anyway, working as I was on Aristotle's theoretical philosophy as the topic of my thesis. I did keep Rolfe's German translation of the *Metaphysics* on hand, just in case, but that was no good translation. I had Zeller and Brandis' *History of Greek and Roman Philosophy*, but used it only rarely. I was not intimate to the literature about the Stagirite, philosophical as well as philological, that had grown to a huge body by the time, nor did I feel I needed that. Reflecting on that years later I found myself impressed by my courage, but today I think that under the enormous weight of other people's thoughts my own might have budged and I would never have written the book.

I have the two years clearly in my mind. I had plenty of time, with no other duties, or diversions, to keep me busy. I worked from the morning, leaving about noon. Then already, as in my later life, I got my best ideas while walking. In spring and autumn Marburg mornings often bring with them a fog, which lifts about noon; so leaving home I had a full view of the Gothic city in its perfect beauty before my eyes. I lived on the outskirts. The town quickly passed into countryside and hills with forests on them. The other day a thought flashed through my mind putting in perspective all the chaos of my initial perception of Aristotle's texts, those succinct and yet anacoluthic statements that went back countless times and in different ways to the same things. The idea that struck me that day was this: Aristotle's theses do not constitute one system (in fact they did not yield to attempts to arrange it into a unified system), but a multiplicity, or hierarchy, of systems. The moment that idea occurred to me all became clear: those systems would have to be distinguished.

My dissertation was ready in a short time. If a typical monograph is one that deals with a narrow topic yet take into account the entire literature of the subject, then mine was not typical at all, for its topic was the whole body of Aristotle's philosophy. I have got no chance for a discussion, as none of my colleagues took were interested in Aristotle. The professors were

in no hurry to spare me any advice, and I never talked to either of them on the subject of my dissertation, as such conferences were not customary at Marburg. I carried my finished dissertation to the professors, they made no corrections at all, and marked it off as a good study.

My starting position as a Ph. D. from Marburg implied certain desiderata. First, my attitude towards Aristotle should be disapproving; however, my sympathy proved to be stronger. Next, I should deal in abstractions, which I did; yet in my later work I dropped that habit.

As soon as in December 1909, my *rigorosum*, or the main hearing about my thesis, was called. Faculty members sat at a green table, asking questions. Candidates had to show up a tailcoat, fortunately I owned one so I did not have to borrow. The elder of the professors later praised me saying it was "a pleasure to listen to my exam", while the younger, as wont, said nothing. A professor of physics, one of my auxiliary subjects, was taken ill, so I was told to get my physics exam outside the philosophy faculty, at his institute; so mine was an exceptional *rigorosum*, acted out as it were in two stages.

So I was able to leave for Poland even before Christmas, to go back to Marburg briefly in February 1910 for my official promotion. I was also able to pick up copies of my thesis, which they released for publication and was just off the press; amazing how fast and efficiently they managed to publish books in the old times, compared to what is happening these days.

What did I owe to my Marburg masters? What did I refute? I did not adopt their basic idea of Aristotle's pluralism, which was alien to me. Nor did I owe them a friendly attitude towards him. But, as I now recognize, I picked their general philosophical framework for my own, as I did their mode of expression. Form turned out more vulnerable to influences from the top flight than substance; language more so than thinking. Even more, I owed my Marburg professors the subject of my thesis, and the courage to scrutinize great thinkers, to for the gist of their thoughts. The courage that was kindled in me at Marburg was something I relied upon vastly later, especially when I took to writing my *History of Philosophy*. I had developed a different style, my own, by then. I am not sure just how the change had come about, yet I know when it did: in 1915-1919, when I started as lecturer at the university. My little book of 1919, *On the absolute nature of good*, features a new style, both of expression and of thinking. It is visible even more in the *History of Philosophy* which I wrote in 1925 to 1930.

At first I thought I might try rewriting the whole book through, to purge it of my learned style in favor of my later, and own, style. However, I was convinced by Goethe's remark in *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* that "I have come to understand that the author will always damage his work, if he changes the story in the second edition".

I tried to paint a portrait of Aristotle on two occasions in my life. For a first time, it was then, before 1910. He then seemed to me a philosopher

in the line of Plato and Plotinus, a builder of a great system of notions, the unique distinction of which being that it was actually a multiplicity of concentric systems, a multi-story structure. It would really be a pity, if that vision of Aristotle was not accurate: for, of the many systems European thinking spawned, shouldn't there be at least one multi-level system? And, who was better fitted than Aristotle to produce such a system?

For a second time I tried to draw a portrait of Aristotle after 1925; by then I had all but forgotten that first attempt, recalling hardly anything of it. That time, however, I envisioned an entirely different Stagirite: as the most sensible of all philosophers, as one who found the golden mean, the most cautious one of all classics of cautiousness. I keep to that second picture even today. It got deeper traits in the 1930s, as I studied Aristotle's ethics, the ethics of moderation and friendship. It got yet stronger expression as I embarked on a study of his aesthetics in the 1950s, when I came across (in *Politics*) his definition of art as a noble pastime, when I found (in the *Eudemian Ethics*) his analysis of aesthetic experience in its entire complexity, and when I came across (in *Rhetoric*) his theory of beauty as the apprehensibility of phenomena. In all those I saw my vision of Aristotle as the philosopher of common sense reaffirmed. I came across that kind of philosophy at least on one occasion, namely in Kazimierz Twardowski, but he was clearly a descendant of Aristotle's. But for Aristotle himself, it is perfectly plausible a guess that so great a thinker could marry the two concepts in him: as a builder of a multi-story edifice, and as a master of common sense.

At first I had many copies of my Marburg dissertation, yet as time went by I handed them out, to be left with just one copy in hand. I do not recall peeking into it even once in all those years. I lost even that copy in 1944, when it burnt down along with the rest of my library. I have not seen my study since, and I can recall its contents only in a general outline.

One copy did survive, though, at the Jagiello Library in Kraków. My dear friend, Professor Izydora Dąmbska, took it in an act of great goodness, friendship and unselfishness, to translate my German study into Polish. That is really a wonderful gift for my 90th birthday. I myself could not do it better. Frankly, I could do that at all. But I am happy knowing that it has been done. One has to look back at the road one has walked in a lifetime.

It is a strange and strong emotion to see a book of so many years back. Did I write it? When I think hard my memory brings back myself of 70 years ago. I must say I do not have just respect, but I am truly impressed by that student's bravery as he embarked on an attempt to put together into a uniform whole the dispersed and age-old thoughts of the great philosopher. Today, I could not do anything like that any more, let alone taking up so daunting a job at all.

[1978]