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SEMANTIC ANALYSIS
IN THE WORKS OF WŁADYSŁAW TATARKIEWICZ

I

In reading of them [scilicet: other authors], if they do not use their words with a due clearness and perspicuity, we may lay them aside, and without any injury done them, resolve thus with uorselves.

Si non vis intelligi, debes negligi.

(if you do not wish to be understood, you deserve to be ignored).

Who wrote these words? Could it have been one of the “Lvov–Warsaw clique”, as one of our colleagues put it, possibly envious of the notoriety achieved by Herostrates? Well, no. The quote comes from John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

In the Foreword to his book *O szczęściu* [On Happiness] Władysław Tatarkiewicz characterized his intentions thus:

I first of all wanted this book to be scientific in character, to contain statements that would be maximally certain, clear and precisely formulated (Tatarkiewicz 1947, p. 7).

It starts with the concept of happiness, and goes on first to discuss problems of semantic nature (op. cit., p. 6).

It would be hard to say whether the claim about the relative character of happiness is the most important here or whether the key proposition is that the polysemy of the word “happiness” stems from various mistaken convictions relating to happiness... (op. cit., pp. 9–10).

The book’s first chapter is called “Four Concepts of Happiness” and starts off with this categorical opinion:

... when analyzing happiness one must begin with an analysis of words, with linguistic issues; we must explain what the word “happi-

ness” means before we can meaningfully talk about happiness (op. cit., p. 11).

The next paragraph reads:

... the foremost requirement science has with regard to language is that each of its words have just one, precisely defined meaning. In other words, science wants a single concept for each single word... Any discussion of happiness must therefore be preceded by an acknowledgement of the polysemy of [word “happiness”], by a distinction of the various concepts of happiness (op. cit., p. 12).

True to this declaration, the first chapter continues with conceptual distinctions. And there are still more of these in the three chapters that follow – “Definition of Happiness”, “Concept of Happiness and Variants Thereof” and “Fortunes of the Concept of Happiness” – several dozen pages in all, or about one-eighth of the entire volume. In fact, in subsequent chapters – “Pleasure vs. Happiness” and “Happiness and Unhappiness” – there is also no shortage of conceptual distinctions, in the form of oppositions that are so plentiful in Władysław Tatarkiewicz’s works, and so characteristic not only of his writing style but also inherent in the intellectual makeup and methodological stance of this author of *Historia filozofii* [History of Philosophy].

I see it as fortunate that Władysław Tatarkiewicz advocated clarity, precision and exploration of polysemy in this particular book on happiness, *O szczęściu*. It is indeed fortunate that he chose these particular pages to recognize polysemy as a source of mistaken convictions and to call for precise definitions of the meaning of words, that he began his book by insisting that a discussion of happiness must be preceded by semantic analysis.

The problems tackled in *O szczęściu* are axiological in nature and many a philosopher would say that axiology is a branch of philosophy in which clarity and precision of language are impossible to achieve, that when dealing with values we are condemned to using vague and hazy words, given the nebulous outlines of the universe of values.

Tatarkiewicz was fully aware that the problems he would be tackling in his book belong to that very philosophical discipline which resists conceptual precision more than other branches of philosophy do. He writes:

... needless to say, when discussing happiness one cannot be making the kind of certain, clear and precise statements that one makes in mathematics or logic. This is why the book begins with the quote from Aristotle who points out that not all discussions must display the same degree of clarity and precision (op. cit., p. 7)

The quote he refers to reads:

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clarity as the subject-matter allows; absolute precision must not be sought alike in all discussions (Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, I, 1).

I see this reference to Aristotle proposing to adapt the precision of discussion to the subject-matter under consideration as the second fortunate circumstance: it is moderation rather than radicalism that defines Władysław Tatarkiewicz who, while keeping a sensible distance from the call for clarity and precision, nevertheless echoes it and acts upon it in a manner most worthy of emulation. He was able to adapt clarity and precision to two purposes of his book which let themselves be reconciled only rarely:

I wanted this book to be scientific in character, but not only that – I also wanted it to be literary in form (op. cit., p. 7)

The fact that *O szczęściu* – together with other texts penned by Władysław Tatarkiewicz – is an example of literary values being blended with those of clarity and precision is yet another fortunate circumstance that I see here. This book is evidence that in order to satisfy the requirement of logical correctness of language we do not necessarily have to weigh the text down with meticulous, boring and pedantic distinction, nor do we have to abandon clarity and precision of a degree rationally matched to the nature of the considerations in hand.

Władysław Tatarkiewicz not only succeeded in combining literary appeal with semantic discipline but also achieved an important scientific result in its own right, namely he based analysis of meaning on historical material. In doing so, he provided the philosophy historian with valuable material for analyses other than of conceptual nature, while at the same time offering the scholar studying concepts an historical overview of concepts, describing their various modifications and differentiation and depicting the evolution of conceptions. I believe that by resting his analysis of the various meanings of his key word on historical foundations, Tatarkiewicz created a model of a certain type of semantic analysis and with it a model of semiotic interpretation of diachronic phenomena.

One other circumstance I see as fortunate is that Władysław Tatarkiewicz was not a disciple of the Lvov–Warsaw school of philosophy. The school's opponents and critics were thus confronted with a philosopher who came from the outside, who embraced the philosophical style of this school, who did not succumb to the influence of his professors during the four years he spent studying in Germany, and who made his own choice of philosophical style for his works. Once he made this particular choice, he stuck to it consistently. Incidentally, to justify this choice, he would have had to invoke Kazimierz Twardowski, and this although he won his assistant-professorship (habilitation) at Lvov University in 1919. He could also have quoted, say, Descartes, a philosopher miles apart from John Locke or representatives of the Lvov–Warsaw school:

Si de verbotum significatione inter philosophos semper conveniret, omnes fere controversiae illorum tollerentur – if philosophers were always to agree on the meaning of words, nearly all disputes among philosophers would be done away with (quoted after Laland).

II

The detection and exposure of the polysemy of words, the indication of equivocations caused by this polysemy and avoidance thereof in one's own texts, care to preserve clarity of thought and, consequently, clarity in speech and written texts; insistence on order and tidiness in thought conveyance, on precision of formulations reasonably adjusted to the needs in hand – all this is not part of some patented method or company secret in the hands of some particular philosophical factory or concern. To claim that the mentioned attitudes and procedures are the specialty or peculiarity of some single school would be to match the naiveté of Polish propagandists in the 1970s who replaced their “socialist labor championship” drive with calls to join the “Good Work Movement”, so called after the title of Tadeusz Kotarbiński's *Traktat o dobrej robocie* [Treatise on Good Work]: scores of factories responded with pledges to adopt the “Good Work Method” in their operations. Meanwhile, any good work, performed in various areas and using diverse methods not confined to the “Good Work Method” alone, is marked by qualities such as effectiveness, precision, purity, economy, simplicity, efficiency, rationality, correctness, thoroughness, etc. Any good philosophical work, regardless of the orientation it is representative of, differs from poor philosophical works in, among other things, the qualities listed above: univocality, clarity, order and precision, all of which together comprise logical culture.

“I see my foremost duty as a writer”, declares Władysław Tatarkiewicz, “to keep my argument simple and clear. When I am told that someone failed to understand what I was trying to say, I take this to be a serious charge indeed”.

And then he continues with words that instantly bring to mind John Locke's observation quoted at the beginning of this paper and what Kazimierz Twardowski wrote, using very similar language, in his treatise “O jasnym i niejasnym stylu filozoficznym” [On Clear and Unclear Philosophical Style]:

Let me repeat once again: a certain effort must be made in order for a theorem or concept to pass from the mind of the writer (or speaker) to the mind of the reader (or listener), and I believe it is better if this effort is made by the writer (speaker). I myself remained true to this assumption.

In my young years I often pored laboriously over unclear books written by others. Today, when I do not understand, I tend to stop reading. By doing this I may be on occasion losing something, but gains come

more often. Luckily, there is still no shortage of clearly written books to read...

...One should not demand genius from a scholar, but one can, and indeed should, expect and demand *o r d e r*. Order and clarity. Intelligence and taste are desiderata, but order is a scholar's duty ("Zapiski do autobiografii" [Notes for an Autobiography] in: Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *O filozofii i sztuce*, 1986, p. 13).

III

In demonstrating his concern for the reader and listener along with his desire to make an effort serving to ease their burdens, Władysław Tatarkiewicz speaks as an author of textbooks and lecturer – and hence as a teacher. A similar stance was adopted by his colleague (four days his senior) Tadeusz Kotarbiński who had this to say:

The main evil is not error but chaos. A person lacking logical prowess tends to think and speak chaotically... The mistakes such a person makes are most often those... in the nature of didactic bungling, involving the inability to explain something to another person... Our stress is primarily on logical culture in language (Tadeusz Kotarbiński, "Zadania swoiste logiki szkolnej" [The Unique Tasks of Logic Taught in School]).

Both Tatarkiewicz and Kotarbiński were authors of university textbooks that were published around the same time: Tadeusz Kotarbiński's *Elementy teorii poznania, logiki formalnej i metodologii nauk* [Elements of Gnosiology, Formal Logic and Methodology of Science] in 1929 and Władysław Tatarkiewicz's *Historia filozofii* [History of Philosophy] (volumes 1 and 2) at the turn of 1930 and 1931. Both textbooks were commissioned and published by the Ossolineum publishers in Lvov. Both their authors were university professors and the higher education institutions that were reopened or set up after Poland regained her independence in 1918 were in need of both lecturers and academic textbooks. It was thus due to circumstances, in part at least, that philosophers in Poland became teachers, unlike some of their German, French or British colleagues from before the First World War who penned works quite remote from didactics. The didactic aspect in its turn affected the style of our philosophers' considerations and it is thus no wonder that both Kotarbiński and Tatarkiewicz devoted space in their works to students:

The responsibilities of the teacher doubtless include also making sure that students understand the meaning of words as clearly and distinctly as possible. This responsibility assumes special proportions when teaching disciplines which library catalogues label as philosophical. The main defects of these disciplines, and at the same time the

causes of protracted disputes... do not consist in faulty observation or experimentation, nor in defective forms of inference, but boil down first and foremost to muddled thinking – and hence muddled articulation of thoughts (Tadeusz Kotarbiński, “O postawie reistycznej, czyli konkretystycznej” [On Reistic, or Concretistic Attitude]).

People reason defectively and communicate their thoughts in a faulty manner not so much in consequence of transgressions against sound inference but because of confusion stemming from vagueness of language (Tadeusz Kotarbiński, “Logika dla nauczycieli a logika matematyczna” [Logic for Teachers vs. Mathematical Logic]).

The above observation prompted Kotarbiński to utter another thought:

One must not forget that considerable scientific value may derive not only from production, but also from disinfection (Tadeusz Kotarbiński, “Główne kierunki i tendencje w filozofii w Polsce” [Principal Branches and Trends in Philosophy in Poland]).

In his turn, Władysław Tatarkiewicz quoted with approval the 13th-century French Dominican friar Vincent of Beauvais who wrote this in his *Speculum maius*:

principium omnium scientiarum est scientian de lingua, id est de impositione nominum rebus (the basis of all sciences is the science of language, which is to say the imposition of meanings on things).

Tatarkiewicz voiced an opinion in the same vein:

The polysemy of names is an important issue not only in semiotics but also in ethics and aesthetics.

His writings offer proof that he attached great value to word meaning analysis serving to achieve the proper *imposition nominum rebus* also in the remaining branches of philosophy and history of philosophy, as well as in theory of art and history of art. These are the titles of some of his works: “Próba definicji szczęścia” [Tentative Definition of Happiness], “Dwa pojęcia formy” [Two Concepts of Form], “Sztuka i język: dwa wieloznaczne wyrazy” [Art and Language: Two Polysemous Words], “Forma: historia jednego wyrazu i pięciu pojęć” [Form: a History of One Words and Five Concepts] (the latter two treatises were published in *Studia Semiotyczne* [Semiotic Studies]), and “Dzieje sześciu pojęć” [A History of Six Concepts]. Władysław Tatarkiewicz’s doctoral thesis was on “The System of Concepts in the Philosophy of Aristotle”; a year later, in 1911, he wrote “O pojęciu i sądzie” [On Concept and Proposition], and after a further seven years, in 1918, came “Pojęcie szczęścia a wymagania prawidłowej terminologii” [The Concept of Happiness and Correct Terminology Requirements]. Tatarkiewicz remained focused on concepts and their analysis throughout his life: in the years after the

Second World War he wrote “O pojęciu typu w architekturze” [On the Concept of Type in Architecture], “Dwa pojęcia formy” [Two Concepts of Form] and “Pojęcie wartości” [The Concept of Value].

IV

Although he was not a semiotician, Władysław Tatarkiewicz wrote about words in nearly all of his books and treatises, in every chapter of his *Historia filozofii* [History of Philosophy], he dwelled on words in his lectures, pointing out their polysemy, cautioning against the consequences of multiple meanings and indicating possible interpretations of seemingly univocal views, depending on which of the different meanings of a given word and which of the various judgements expressed by a given sentence is taken into account.

It should be said that this style in philosophical writing prevailed in the time and place of Władysław Tatarkiewicz's life. For a brief spell in 1910 he attended lectures by Kazimierz Twardowski in Lvov, and defended his habilitation thesis there in 1919. His colleagues at the same university faculty and philosophy department included representatives of the Lvov–Warsaw School, disciples of Kazimierz Twardowski, namely Tadeusz Kotarbiński and Władysław Witwicki. The latter wrote a two-volume *Psychologia* [Psychology], the third in the set of classic academic textbooks published by Ossolineum in Lvov (in 1925–1927), the basic compendium for students of what was then termed “exact philosophy” who were required to pass psychology as one of their three major exams. This textbook remained a fundamental source for students throughout the 1930s and well into the late 1940s. One cannot rule out the possibility that the close contacts maintained by this small circle of eminent scholarly personalities, the fact that they worked together in a small building, met as members of a small philosophical society, had the same students under their care, jointly supervised the Philosophical Club and sat on the same editorial boards – that all this somehow affected each and every one of them.

However, I do not think this was the reason why Władysław Tatarkiewicz sometimes uttered words which could well be attributed to the founder of the Lvov–Warsaw School or any of its prominent disciples – and this despite all the differences between the object and content of his studies and works and those of Twardowski's pupils. He was obviously prone to this style of philosophical analysis, although other possibilities beckoned and there was nothing to stop him from embracing other trends.

He remained under pressure from a different philosophical style for four years, first in Berlin when studying under Dilthey, Paulsen, Simmel and Cassirer, and then in Marburg under the neo-Kantists Cohen and Natorp. Nevertheless, he proved immune to this other philosophical style, and this although he won his Ph.D. in Germany, although, being a young man in his twenties, he was more susceptible to intellectual influences than a more mature individual, and although he could have been drawn to other philosophical styles in later

years in Poland – as was the case with Roman Ingarden, Blaustein, Chwistek, Lande, Krokiewicz, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz or Wincenty Lutosławski, all philosophers active in the same period and places as Władysław Tatarkiewicz. While not being a member of the Lvov-Warsaw school of philosophy, he still became one of the leading “lucidites” (as scholars writing in a lucid style came to be called).

Being fluent in several languages, Tatarkiewicz could read philosophical literature – and also belles-lettres works – originating from many countries. He devoured both in great quantities and stored them in his impressive memory. His familiarity with multi-lingual literature in several branches of the humanities – philosophy (and hence also in ethics and aesthetics), history, art science, literature and architecture – provided him with a broad and useful basis for choosing his intellectual path and manner of thought formulation. Also, by comparing foreign languages with our own mother tongue and with one another, we can not only get to know each of the various languages better but also obtain better insight into the nature of thought which in each language is reflected and conveyed in a slightly different way. On the other hand, comparisons of the various research procedures employed by the various disciplines and of the approach of each discipline to its subjects provide an opportunity to identify the valuable elements in scientific exploration and results formulation.

All these comparisons together with other intellectual experiences led Władysław Tatarkiewicz to the conviction that this particular style of studying and teaching philosophy – suffused with clarity – is the most appropriate and best suited to his own personal tastes and talents.

V

Let us review our various observations.

Władysław Tatarkiewicz believed that analyzing the meaning of words is eminently useful in any science, called for in particular in the humanities and downright essential in philosophy, if the latter is treated as a discipline of scientific research and the subject of teaching rather than as an exercise in belles-lettres or essay writing. Tatarkiewicz not only expressed this view but implemented it in practice – in his activity as scholar and teacher, historian of philosophy, ethicist, aesthetician, art theoretician and art historian.

The call for clarity and comprehensibility is prompted by both practical and theoretical considerations. We are not keen to spend time on untangling someone’s vague thoughts since it was the author’s duty to present them to us in a lucid manner. We do not want to exert ourselves in unraveling someone else’s formulations just because the author did not bother to do his duty and make our work easier for us.

The word *duty* transports us into the moral sphere. Authors ignoring their duty to their readers – and teachers doing the same with respect to their pupils – are all lacking in honesty.

The practical and ethical considerations aside, clarity and comprehensibility are also advisable for theoretical and cognitive reasons. The desired degree of this clarity and comprehensibility is defined by the methodological status of the scientific domain and discipline involved in the particular case and by requirements attached to the research or didactic task in hand. This theoretical consideration may be explained as follows: We cannot attribute a truth-value to a sentence having an intangible meaning. When confronted with sentences of this kind we are, unwillingly and unwittingly, becoming exposed to the danger of accumulating truths together with false propositions, thus acquiring a cognitive ballast which not only takes up precious space but often pollutes the intellectual atmosphere as well.

Władysław Tatarkiewicz's *semantism* is manifest in his research activities. Whether performing these activities or recording their course and results, whether in speech or in writing, he always made it a rule to give things their proper name, a name that would be defined as thoroughly as possible.

By giving proper names to objects we split the universe to which the name refers into its scope and complement. Meaning analysis thus entails classification. I believe that in the case of Władysław Tatarkiewicz *semantism* and *classificatory attitude* amount to something more than a specific scientific method – they are deeply ingrained features of his intellect.

Władysław Tatarkiewicz also exhibited a passion for and *inclination towards collecting and history*, and this was why his semantic analyses were always performed against a broad historical background. *Historism* is thus another of the features of his work.

An historian will note that some of the dichotomies arrived at through meaning analyses cannot survive in pure form. Accordingly, although Tatarkiewicz was especially fond of *antithetic treatments* – formulations in which a latter member contradicts the former – he often abandoned such oppositions and replaced the contradictory and mutually complementary subsets of the divided universe with types, and then proceeded to arrange concrete objects or events occurring in empirical reality according to the distance separating each from an ideal type of conceptual structure which he designed based on historical data. He was thus creating typologies and thereby indicating the gradability of features, their varying intensity in various things, at the same time teaching to use sharpened conceptual tools without hurting reality, without depriving reality of its vital organs. *Typologism* is still another feature we can attribute to the works of Władysław Tatarkiewicz.

Semantism, historism and typologism are aspects of Tatarkiewicz's activity having to do with his profession of *teacher*: they stem from teachers' motivations, serve the goals facing teachers and lead to beneficial didactic results: clarity, simplicity, transparency and brevity. (To summarize Tatarkiewicz with a summary more concise than the person being summarized is no mean feat!)

VI

I am among the oldest former students of Władysław Tatarkiewicz still alive today. I attended his lectures and seminars, socialized with him? charmed, along with everybody else, by his elegance, refinement and exquisite manners. I feel that those younger than me, who were not given the opportunity to meet him, were unjustly wronged. However, they can neutralize this malevolence of fate by getting to know his creative work (I do not hesitate to call it that – its artistic and aesthetic qualities are still fresh in my mind), by learning from his unsurpassed textbooks which are by now classics of university-level philosophy instruction.

It is a great privilege to be taught by eminent teachers. The appreciation of this exceptional privilege is not lessened by the awareness that one's own stature is diminished in comparison to the greatness of these teachers.