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Do Not Worry About the Future of Philosophy

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Barbara Skarga, Krzysztof Środa (Poland)

DO NOT WORRY ABOUT THE FUTURE OF PHILOSOPHY

Krzysztof Środa: *Occasions like this one are usually provoke questions about the first moment, the moment someone made up their minds to become an artist, a writer, or philosopher. When did you choose philosophy, and what happened afterwards, how did your life with philosophy go? After that first illumination and enthusiasm, did you also have moments of uncertainty, or disappointment? Did it occur to you, for example, that philosophy is not delivering what it promised to do?*

Barbara Skarga: You are asking me about my whole life. I do not know where to begin. I had asked that question myself before. Maybe if we hadn't had the war, I would have taken a different attitude towards philosophy. I do not know what it might have been, maybe a more professional, a less emotional attitude. I don't know. When I started studying it, philosophy wasn't really important or essential to me. It was a jumping-board perhaps. One that took me to the humanities, to a broader mode of thinking that still had the potential to produce something. But what exactly that something might be, I had no idea. I started my philosophy course when I graduated from Technical University. Had I started studying mathematics, maybe I would have ended up with mathematics. It's hard to say where my life would have taken me then. But I had come to see I wanted to breathe freely, and that was something humanism had in it. It is out of fashion today, this word "humanism". But apparently that was what I had wanted. My first encounter with the *Critique of Pure Reason*, with Kant, was like a lightning flash to me. There was something Kant threw open in me. Something he turned my mind to, putting all my previous stock responses in disarray. Something had happened. From that moment philosophy was on my mind. But then came a long break and I did not know if I could go back to philosophy. While my peers had long been graduates, I had to make a new start. Yet I did.

K. Ś.: *During those years you spent in a refugee camp and in exile, could you think about philosophy at all? Could it linger on in your? At least as a trace of something at the back of your head?*

B. S.: No, no, no. Why that? In a refugee camp the only thing that is on your mind is, can I make it through, no philosophy. That is a completely different life, one that keeps you from abstractions. You have got to be there, to know. I did not think of philosophy. All I could do was watch people. The only thing the refugee camp kindled in me I may find psychologically interesting was perhaps a curiosity for another world and for others. That curiosity has never left me. Philosophy in a camp? What you thought about there was how to get hold of a hunk of bread and not to die tonight, but, if need be, tomorrow. That is no place to give yourself to philosophizing. But then I left the camp and went on my way into exile, and I got a chance to read things. While in the camp I could do some reading, but no philosophy, it was either journals they gave us, or Russian literature, first-rate literature of course. So one day, while in exile in a district city, I saw Marx's *Capital* in a bookstore window, and I bought it. There were no other philosophical books. I thought I should perhaps read that work, as I never had before. All right, I made it through the whole book. I went to the same city one more time, called by police, and believe it or not, I bought myself another book, Engels' *Anti-Dühring*. Incidentally, I still have both books. I waded through that one, too. In Marx I came across a couple of things I found interesting. In Engels, there was nothing, nothing at all. But maybe the fact that I did buy those books says something about me? Maybe there was a deep-seated yearning in me, a desire to go back.

K. Ś.: *That is exactly my question.*

B. S.: Funny, you know, you are lost out there in some kolkhoz, and suddenly you find yourself reading, late into the night, to the light of a candle butt, reading Marx. And you are doing that even though it makes you furious, you do not accept it.

K. Ś.: *But perhaps the opposite is not true either, that the best setting to do philosophy is to be in a closed room and lead a very regular life, as was Kant's case? That's not a necessary condition to exercise philosophy, is it?*

B. S.: I see no rule there. Kant was so great that he found his ideas in his own mind, and that was perfectly satisfied with that. But we, the work horses of philosophy, need something more on top of our own thoughts – a stir from real life, from events, meetings, conversations we have. We lack the genius we could draw from to sow its seeds for others.

K. Ś.: *Your gave your latest book, Identity and Difference, the subtitle Metaphysical Essays. A pertinent line, as it is a voice in the dispute about metaphysics. The occasional doubt notwithstanding, and knowing that categorical answers sometimes just do not exist, you declare in your book your belief that philosophy is possible, and that metaphysics is possible. Your first publications were about French positivism, yet positivism, whatever its brand, has always heralded philosophers' abandonment of their previous ambitions, their renunciation of metaphysics. Positivism is philosophy scuttling to hide under*

the safe wings of science, and thus recognizing science's supremacy. So how had you come to change your interests?

B. S.: So you do see a change there. But I, looking back at what I did, and what I wrote, am sure I had been consistent all along. I never really liked positivism as such. I even gave an interview called "I don't like positivism". I never really had positivism in mind. I should prefer not to talk about my books, but you are making me to. So you may have noticed that all my books, if you had a chance to look into them, were about a current in a process of emergence or a current in deconstruction. I wrote about the rise of positivism as an intellectual formation in the making. I found that interesting. I wrote about French positivism after Comte because I wanted to see how that formation was changing after his death, to see its self-destruction, its futile orthodoxy on the one hand and thinking degenerating into that narrow-minded scientism on the other. I was interested in changes positivist thought as such was undergoing – in that case not only the philosophical thought but all its intellectual heritage: social, philosophical, political, that changes at some point in time. I sought to find out what had brought about the changes. In my *Limits of historicism* I gave up the idea of conducting concrete studies of any specific historical epoch. I set out to explore intellectual thinking as such, in its historical transformations, the dialectics of continuity and change of the questions it asks. No that kind of reflection cannot escape metaphysics.

K. Š.: *But what about positivism then? For it survived many crises of its own and is as alive as ever in philosophy today, isn't it?*

B. S.: It is indeed. Not so much positivism as a brand of scientism. That is what it should be called. Classic positivism is a 19th-century phenomenon. The one that followed was of course related to it, but then it took a different shape producing ultimately the analytical school. Yet if I was able to realize how futile that kind of thinking was then perhaps precisely because I studied the 19th-century transformation. I mean its philosophical futility. It is not science that can explain human thinking; indeed the opposite is true, for it is thinking that explains science. That is why you need to turn to thinking as such. Let us keep closer to Husserl than to the Vienna Circle or Russell. The question to ask is about thought, about consciousness. Or maybe the question to ask is about more than just that. A Heideggeresque question – about being?

K. Š.: *If we want to ask about more than positivists are wanting to know, we may be in for another problem: Many people believe philosophy is losing the race not only against the sciences but also, in a sense, against religion. First philosophers seem to have felt they were creating a chance for man to understand the world without invoking the authority of religion. Yet today philosophers themselves are perfectly aware that cannot possibly work, that philosophy shouldn't even contemplate such ambitions. Philosophy is asking questions, but it may not supply answers as categorical as religion can.*

B. S.: You just said, didn't you, that philosophy is asking questions. Even without categorical answers, those questions are important enough. You cannot escape those questions, for they concern us, our being here. How could we stop asking ourselves who we are, where we are headed for, what sense it all makes – even if we got no answer at all.

K. Ś.: *That may be an attractive perspective to philosophy, but someone outside the business of philosophy – may they now feel perhaps that asking questions that are known to be unanswerable is just one more game?*

B. S.: Let me answer that this way: some people see a poster announcing a concert of Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* at the philharmonic hall tonight. I am saying this because we did have such a concert a short time ago. Now those people were absolutely indifferent. At best it may occurred to them – funny that there are people wanting to swish their bows to and fro on their instruments. What for? It's nothing to do with real life. That's the case of philosophy, too. Some people just don't care about music, or about art, or they just don't care about questions that are the most essential questions. As Leszek Kołakowski deftly put it, they don't creep outside their skins. I am not hurt, I am just saying some people have better sensibilities than others. This "what for?" really is no good question here.

K. Ś.: *In your book you discuss at length the question of identity, human identity. Is it really necessary to reassure human beings telling them they are what they are? Don't people know that? If we want an ordinary person to ponder that question, to realize there is room for doubt – and for reflection – in it, then this question should be put in a less philosophical language. But is such a translation possible?*

B. S.: You cannot answer this in a word or two. In a way, each of us feel we are our own selves, but the moment we want to define who we are, all is gone. That is exactly my problem. I cannot define this "Me". I can't put my finger on it, or at it. We are our own selves, and yet we are not. At some point we feel lost. Is that a real problem? It is, to those who reflect on themselves, their existence, those who think of human existence, the existence of others. That is the old Kantian question. It is even older than that – going back to ancient Greece. It just is there, haunting our minds. All I wanted to do in my book was to show how extremely difficult it is to grasp this Me. I am not telling anyone that is an important question. I do not want to be patronizing telling anyone what they should think. I had no intention to do that. I just wanted anyone reading the book to join me in reflecting on that particular question. It was this elusion, this uncertainty, I had in mind. Isn't that good enough a reason?

K. Ś.: *My point in putting this question to you is a point of someone who has not yet realized such problems exists at all, problems that are largely of notional nature. Someone not aware that philosophers are at loggerheads with one another over the question of identity, including his or her own. That dis-*

pute – is it just an interesting intellectual exercise, or does it have farther-reaching consequences? Can a person with no philosophical inquisitiveness be drawn to by that dispute? Is such a person likely to feel threatened by any of the views put forward in it? Maybe there is hope in it? Or just the opposite – no hope at all?

B. S.: You would like philosophy to be pedagogy.

K. Ś.: *Not true.*

B. S.: You would like to know which consequences, positive and negative, does that have for society. That's what you are trying to get out of me, are you not? But I really don't want to tell anyone what they should think, all I want to do is dispel illusions that are cherished by many philosophers, rather than by people who do not engage in philosophy. This is no doubt an intellectual problem, yet not just that. In a sense, that is an existential problem as well.

K. Ś.: *Precisely. Certain philosophical answers stir hope – and one not only theoretical in nature – while other philosophical answers arouse anxiety. Philosophy is more than just curiosity. You will hear philosophers today saying, “Man does not exist”. “Man is dead.” Weird, these words. They are not just theoretical issues. Philosophical problems are not like chess problems that are likely to attract any analytical mind. The point of philosophy is more than merely to give your mind something to do.*

B. S.: If I say the question of man's identity is an existential problem I want to point out that this question concerns every thinking person in one way or another. First of all, it nags me. I think that is enough. However, I did not write my book to patronize others but to find out what at all can be said about that, or how can you go along trying to answer such a question. Other thinking people may find my modest book beneficial because they might want to continue, for better or worse, developing that motif, despite all my doubts – for I concede still having many doubts – that the problem of one's own Me cannot be articulated in a straightforward one-way fashion. I am sure, too, that very fact of asking this question is of significance. A wider significance, in fact, for there is clearly a tendency to delete the word “Me” from the vocabulary of philosophy, and of culture perhaps as well. That is done in different ways, with no pattern to it, and on different grounds that may overlap now and then. An entry like “the end of man” means different things to all people. If you read Heidegger saying that in his *Letter on humanism*, you know he does not mean to put an end to taking any interest in man at all. He just wants to make it clear there is no way philosophy can be built on a foundation of analyzing humanity, on anthropology, and he does have a point there. He strongly feels the thing to turn to first is what he calls being. The right way to go is from being to man, and not from man to being. That is it. But people like Foucault have a different explanation for that, and people like Derrida would put it still differently. I am not getting involved in an argument with them. The fact that sticks is that philosophers today feel, for whatever reason, that talking about

man is an awkward exercise. And, a non-philosophical issue, too. That is not the way to go. We may discuss language, we may talk being, we may talk structures of culture, all kinds of things, in fact – language, preferably. But in no case may we discuss the human individual. That smacks of philosophical heresy. Now I reject that position – one, incidentally, supported with superficial arguments – as I am sure it is utterly wrong. I am inclined to accept, though, that Sartre's humanism is shallow and leads up to nothing. Those are different things. I cannot accept that position because of its – well, let me out it this way: I smell a danger there. We are human. We cannot possibly escape that. We are humans – quite simply, and in a basic sense. Now this is a most important fact to us: it is of supreme importance to our being, our human existence.

K. Ś.: *Now, Professor, you are conceding something I was vainly trying to make you say. You thought there was something dangerous in that formulation – that bit about Sartre. While philosophy is pure reasoning, now and then something does happen in it that is capable of producing such or other effects. In that sense philosophers shall be held responsible not only for themselves or their curiosity. Are philosophers responsible to society, or to truth – or is that relation even a more complex one?*

B. S.: You know perfectly well there are philosophies, philosophical systems, that are subsequently interpreted contrary to what the philosopher had wanted hem to mean. There is no predicting that. No one could have foreseen how Nietzsche was later going to be interpreted. Nor can Nietzsche be accused of Nazism. Forget interpretations. But dangers you mentioned can no doubt appear in philosophy. In fact any intellectual activity has potential to spawn dangers, and science even more so. You know that perfectly well. But that is not to say we should stop thinking. Are there philosophies that actually threaten man, threaten culture? Certain propositions, certain currents, perhaps not philosophical ones – or I would not call them that – come to be voiced loud in philosophical systems, and I mean certain ideas of culture by and large that may turn out to be very dangerous indeed in their implementation. I wrote about that once – I should name two, just two beautiful ideas which, if materialized in actual practice, may have serious consequences. One is the idea of unity, the other of wholeness. Wholeness – to embrace the wholeness of being... Hegel ratiocinated about wholeness purely theoretically, but others used those ideas in their ideologies – Marxism, for one – that were totalistic ideologies. Then a philosophy that preached wholeness got dangerous, threatening the course of culture. The same is true of unity. If we insist to get all things uniform, if we seek to impose absolute unity on thinking, in action, or complete uniformity, then we are provoking the demise of culture. Culture wants conflict, exchange, discussion, denial, and so on. On the other hand, absolute chaos is impossible. Absolute dispersal, to use Derrida's word, no laws, no order, no target. Aimless wandering, to and fro. Such an idea is potentially

destructive in its effects. There is no thinking without a certain order, without differences, yet without order as well. NO society exists without differences, yet also without a basic order. We have got to stand somewhere in between, we have got to reconcile some things in us. Extreme positions can be said to be dangerous to culture. So are philosophies that preach such positions.

K. Ś.: *But is it possible at all to keep such extremism separate from philosophy? The job philosophy is to do is an ambitious job. It is not the job of a scientist, who is going to explore a crumb of the real world. A philosopher intends to make it to very distant destinations. Can a philosopher shake off such a maximalist striving? Is there any room for compromise between maximalism and sense in philosophy? Is philosophy condemned to incessant self-containment – with this being an illegitimate thing to do, that thing in turn being just impossible to do?*

B. S.: Not at all. That is not the point. You can go to far targets, and yet not to extremes. You can move along very far in a direction that is aware of contradictions and of a necessity to keep them in harmony. But that is not to say you should move just in one direction. That would be a limitation, a distortion of philosophical thinking. Philosophy is critical thinking. It must not be impervious. Do not confuse that with commitment. Going far is going far in seeing things beyond those extremes.

K. Ś.: *One more question, about contemporary Polish philosophy. It seems to have had its heyday in times that were hard – in the late fifties, in the sixties. Many texts were written at that time that are important even today. Kołakowski wrote his most important works then, and Ingarden was still active at that time. Can we say philosophy's prestige rises, and philosophers feel better, in difficult times, than in a normal democracy – where they are less important, with the general public no longer interested in their work? Does that put philosophy in conflict with democracy – haven't we witnessed such an antagonism from Plato's times? Perhaps those two worlds are strange to each other, at least at the beginning, and have to learn understand each other?*

B. S.: Philosophical talent is born at all moments. Leszek Kołakowski was born in those times. Maybe he needed a kick, maybe he had an urge to speak out against the world as it was then? True, he wrote his best books and articles at that time. There is little we need to say about Ingarden. He is among our greatest and most outstanding philosophers. But you touched an interesting point. Are some epochs more favorable to the exercise of philosophy than other ones? Maybe they do? Maybe they provoke that kind of thinking? Think of the former half of the 19th-century, the period after the French revolution. Germany. Hegel, Fichte, Schelling – those were answers to that time, to the calls of the epoch. A good case in point is I think Lévinas. He did say some of his ideas in his pre-war studies which show the path he was to go, but his greatest contributions came as reactions to the war and the Holocaust. So maybe you are right. We mentioned Kant, and while he wrote of eternal peace

you will find no reaction to events of his times, nothing of that is to be found in his works, especially not in his theoretical works. But perhaps something of that is reflected in the metaphysics of morality, a subject certainly not indifferent to the world of its times. Kant was not really so shut off completely out there in his Königsberg. He knew about different things, read a few things, watched things happening. So maybe there is a point in that after all? Even so, I would rather not generalize this, I should put it as a conjecture, like this: certain situations, tragic ones, may touch off important philosophical questions. To put it differently, the tragedy of man, the human being's involvement in different mutually contradictory situations, forces us, if not to make decisions, then at least to ask questions and to reflect on them. I do not think philosophy, or other domains of human activity, keeps aloof of what is.

K. Ś.: *I meant not only philosophy's inner life, but also that in difficult times the public is more likely to listen to what a philosopher has to say.*

B. S.: Probably that is so. Especially if the philosopher's words lay bare the real world man finds unbearable.

K. Ś.: *So perhaps the conflict between the philosopher Plato and Athens was just fortuitous? More generally, is the conflict between democracy, in which everyone can say what they want, and wisdom, which is a rare quality, and wisdom or philosophy – perhaps of a more fundamental nature?*

B. S.: Are you afraid philosophy is going to perish once democracy has come? Well, that is pretty much like what a little known French philosopher named Cournot once predicted – when we have finally installed democracy and everybody will have found their proper places, there will be no conflicts, apart from trifling ones, and life will boil down to reading your newspaper. Later Fukuyama said the same thing, exactly the same thing as Cournot a century before him. But I do not really believe we are in for anything like that. Democracy is not equalization, and conflicts belong to it. Are you worried by a possibility of conflicts appearing in democracy? I would like very much mankind to take a time off on conflicts. Mankind has lived with wars all along. Even though we have now war in this place now, you see war everywhere around us. You are afraid of democracy, are you? Maybe we should dream of a peaceful democratic world. For we have not yet come to know it. We live amidst conflict and tension all the time. Do not worry, though, we are in for nothing like that. We are not in for peace, for peace so perfect that even dispute will have vanished. Not as good as it gets. Aggression appears to be so powerful a factor in man – and that is something that should give us something to think about – that reasons for fresh conflicts will certainly be found. Too bad, that. This is what we should be afraid of.

K. Ś.: *No reason, then, to fear for about the future of philosophy?*

B. S.: No reason to fear for about the future of philosophy.