

Book Reviews

Tomasz Mróz. *Selected Issues in the History of Polish Philosophy (Erasmus Lectures at Vilnius University)*. Edited by Nijolė Radavičienė. Vilnius: Vilnius University Publishing House, 2016.

This volume consists of texts taken from three lectures given by the author during his two visits to Vilnius University (in 2013 and 2015) at the invitation of the Department of Logic and History of Philosophy (and supported on both occasions by the Erasmus scheme).

The first lecture is entitled “‘Polish Philosophy’ or ‘Philosophy in Poland’?” Its subject matter is, essentially, the question of how researchers concerned with the history of philosophy should approach the task of defining the scope of their object of investigation. This is certainly no simple matter where the history of Polish philosophy—or, indeed, philosophy of any sort practiced in Poland—is concerned, owing to the complex and at times turbulent history of that country, and the way its distinctive currents of philosophical thought have unfolded in relation to the events and changes that have helped shape its course.

One thing to point out straight away is that while this might well at first sight seem a somewhat parochial matter for anyone whose focus of interest is not specifically connected with that particular country and its intellectual history, this is not in fact the case. Indeed, one of the virtues of Mróz’s treatment of the topic is that in seeking to instruct us about the multifaceted complexities of Polish philosophical history, together with the methodological choices and challenges facing those charged with in-

vestigating it, he makes clear why this is worthy of our attention in terms that have a wider philosophico-historical resonance.

Polish philosophy is, without doubt, closely intertwined with the historico-political developments of that country, and as such cannot be properly appreciated without due attention to the wider socio-cultural issues in play at various historical junctures in that part of the world. Equally, though, philosophy as practiced *in Poland* can in many respects only be characterized in a non-superficial way if one is willing to recognize its underlying theoretical consistencies as these pertain to its distinctive thematic concerns and intellectual proclivities. Hence one must also grant it an identity as a tradition that has persisted and flourished to some extent independently of the (historically shifting) politico-geographical boundaries associated with the fate of the Polish nation-state.

Mróz perspicuously charts the discourse internal to both Polish and Poland-related philosophico-historical research as these relate to how, exactly, this dual-aspected character is to be addressed. In this regard, he offers a balanced and well considered account of the competing voices that have emerged over the course of the last century or so. The role played by invocations of the notion of a “philosophical culture” as a reference point for such investigations (e.g., in the work of Barbara Skarga) is of particular interest, pointing as it does to the general need for an understanding of the intertwining of philosophical ideas with the values and orientations operative in actual everyday life in the wider social community that, at any given point in time, philosophers themselves are obliged to inhabit. One can easily imagine the historical treatment of other areas of philosophy benefiting from the sort of observations offered and perceptively explored here.

The subject of Mróz’s second lecture is “Plato’s Reception in Polish Philosophy (1800–1950).” The author divides the topic into three areas: firstly, the passive reception of his thought that we may encounter in nineteenth century Kantian, Hegelian, and neo-Kantian currents; secondly, the evaluative stances taken up towards him by proponents of these directions; and thirdly, the attempts made to integrate elements of Plato’s thinking directly into Polish philosophy. Mróz sets forth the thesis that for the key phases of the period under consideration, no common Polish interpretation of Plato as a thinker existed. While registering the importance of Plato for Polish Catholic philosophy, he also considers Tatarkiewicz’s role in assimilating—but also distancing the Polish reception of Plato from—the approach of the Marburg neo-Kantians, and he highlights the extent to which, in the late nineteenth century, the distinctive focus of that recep-

tion came, unsurprisingly, to be on ethical and political issues raised by the Greek philosopher's writings.

The author offers a fairly detailed account of the different approaches adopted by successive Polish philosophers engaged with Plato, from Pawlicki, through Lutosławski and Lisiecki, to Witwicki. It covers not only specialized issues, such as disputes about the chronology of the Dialogues, but also broader ones—most notably, the widely varying reception given to Plato in the light of the dramatic political developments affecting Poland in the years of the Second World War and its Stalinist aftermath. The fact that one and the same historical figure, the “father of Western philosophy,” could be regarded as offering a spiritual remedy to the ills of the twentieth century (Lutosławski), and be considered in some measure culpable with respect to his putative role in fostering the emergence of such totalitarian political systems as soviet-style communism (Witwicki), only testifies to the intensely dynamic nature of the politico-intellectual milieu in which this process of reception unfolded.

One feature possibly to be regretted here, I would say, is the lack of attention paid to the significance of Platonism for the thought of Roman Ingarden. Given the latter's significance within and beyond Poland as a major figure of the phenomenological movement whose ideas continue to prove influential and controversial both in so-called “continental” philosophy and in the Anglophone sphere (especially as regards analytical aesthetics, the ontology of artworks, etc.), this reader would have hoped to learn more about how the wider conditions obtaining for Plato's reception in Poland may have specifically shaped Ingarden's own particular exposure to, and adoption of, the Platonist tradition in ontology. (Outside of the bibliography, this philosopher receives only a single passing mention in the course of the lectures.) It must nevertheless also be conceded that the precise topic of the lecture is Plato's reception rather than the extent of his influence. That does make the omission reasonable, given that Ingarden was not specifically involved in contributing to the former during the time-frame under consideration.

The third and final lecture in the volume is concerned with “Wincenty Lutosławski's Vilnius Period (1919–1931).” Lutosławski emerges from Mróz's portrait as a striking and provocative personality (an opinion evidently shared by many of his philosophical contemporaries) who, though highly respected for his academic achievements, found himself in a largely alien intellectual milieu owing to the shift in early twentieth century Polish philosophy away from the strains of national Messianism, Romanticism, and Catholicism that he himself stood for and towards the

Twardowski-inspired direction primarily evinced by the Lvov-Warsaw School. The period of his career sketched here was, according to the author, possibly the most stable that the philosopher enjoyed over the course of his professional life, yet it left him very largely disappointed, feeling that he had achieved little in didactic terms. On the other hand, Lutosławski's experiences of Vilnius, of living through the May coup of 1926, and his travels to England to meet the likes of G. K. Chesterton and Arnold Toynbee, all certainly make for engaging reading as recounted by Mróz. For those not already well acquainted with this important figure from Polish intellectual history, this lecture offers a highly useful source of contextualizing information.

Mróz writes in a style that deserves to be enthusiastically commended for its analytical clarity and descriptive skill—and this both in respect of the manner in which subtle issues of historical elucidation and chronology are addressed, and as regards the elaboration of more strictly philosophical problems. The quality of the English employed throughout is admirably polished. Bearing the above in mind, one can readily envisage this book making a significant positive contribution to the dissemination of knowledge concerning historical issues pertaining to Polish philosophy—or, as one also might wish to say, to philosophical thought as it happens to have unfolded in a certain country called Poland.

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