


RESEARCH

Received: 25/02/2019 --- Accepted: 06/06/2019 --- Published: 15/12/2019

LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI: PHILOSOPHY AND THE YEARNING FOR ABSOLUTE

Leszek Kołakowski: racionalidad comunicativa versus mito

  **Saturnino Javier Moreno Barreto**¹. National University of Distance Education (UNED). Spain.
smoreno142@alumno.uned.es

ABSTRACT

In philosophy, we call the absolute to that which is detached from everything, that is by itself unrelated to anything. The absolute is, then and by definition, ineffable and incommunicable. It is only possible to reveal its contours through the myth. Without myth, says Leszek Kołakowski (1927-2009), knowledge is not possible. In this work, we will see that the thought of the Polish philosopher is articulated around the problem of the foundation and the limits of knowledge. It is a question that he understood as the longing of philosophy: to give a reason for that absolute that manifests itself in the philosophy of history under the aspect of the utopia of fraternity, and in epistemology as the utopia of certainty. We will defend, however, that this cannot be the longing of philosophy, since, inasmuch it pretends to provide knowledge, it cannot evade the limits of intersubjectivity. Consequently, we will explain that the theory of communicative action formulated by Jürgen Habermas provides a better account of a rationality that finds in ordinary communication the faculty of giving and asking for reasons about what we consider true and correct.

KEY WORDS: utopia – absolute – moral – foundation – myth – epistemology – religion.

RESUMEN

En filosofía llamamos absoluto a aquello que está desligado del todo, lo que es por sí mismo sin relación a nada. Lo absoluto es, entonces y por definición, inefable e incommunicable, siendo solo posible desvelar sus contornos a través del mito. Sin mito, señala Leszek Kołakowski (1927-2009), no es posible el conocimiento. En este trabajo

¹ **Saturnino Javier Moreno Barreto:** Bachelor of Information Science from the Complutense University of Madrid. Degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology from the UNED. Master in Theoretical and Practical Philosophy by the UNED. PhD in Philosophy from the UNED.

veremos que el pensamiento del filósofo polaco se deja articular en torno al problema del fundamento y los límites del saber. Se trata de una cuestión que entendió como el anhelo de la filosofía: dar razón de ese absoluto que se manifiesta en la filosofía de la historia bajo el aspecto de la utopía de la fraternidad, y en la epistemología como la utopía de la certeza. Defenderemos, sin embargo, que ese no puede ser el anhelo de la filosofía, pues, en cuanto pretende proveer conocimientos, no puede evadir los límites de la intersubjetividad. En consecuencia, expondremos que la teoría de la acción comunicativa formulada por Jürgen Habermas da mejor cuenta de una racionalidad que encuentra en la comunicación ordinaria la facultad de dar y pedir razones sobre aquello que consideramos verdadero y correcto.

PALABRAS CLAVE: utopía - absoluto - moral - fundamentación - mito - epistemología - religión.

LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI: RACIONALIDADE COMUNICATIVA VERSUS MITO

RESUME

Em filosofia chamamos absoluto aquele que está desligado do "Tudo", o que e por se mesmo sem relação a nada. O absoluto e, então e por definição, inefável e incomunicável, somente sendo possível desvelar seus contornos através do mito. Sem mito, assinala Leszek Kołakowski (1927-2009), não é possível o conhecimento. Em este trabalho veremos que o pensamento do filósofo polaco se articula em torno ao problema do fundamento e os limites do saber. Se trata de uma questão que entendeu como o anelo da filosofia: dar razão de este absoluto que se manifesta na filosofia da história sob o aspecto da utopia da fraternidade, e na epistemologia como a utopia da certeza. Defenderemos, não obstante, que esse não pode ser o anelo da filosofia pois, enquanto pretende prover conhecimentos não pode evadir os limites da intersubjetividade. Em consequência, exporemos que a teoria da ação comunicativa formulada por Jürgen Habermas encaixa melhor à uma racionalidade que encontra na comunicação ordinária da faculdade de dar e pedir razões sobre aquilo que consideramos verdadeiro e correto.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Utopia - absoluto - moral - fundamentação - mito - epistemologia - religião.

How to cite the article:

Moreno Barreto, S. J. (2019). Leszek Kołakowski: philosophy and the yearning for absolute. [Leszek Kołakowski: racionalidad comunicativa versus mito]. *Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación*, (149), 109-125.

doi: <http://doi.org/10.15178/va.2019.149.109-125>

Recovered from <http://www.vivatacademia.net/index.php/vivat/article/view/1162>

1. INTRODUCTION

The paradigm shift from a philosophy centered on the subject to a philosophy understood in terms of a rationality already inserted in ordinary language has allowed Jürgen Habermas to develop an ambitious social and political theory focused on the phenomenon of communication (Habermas, 2010). In this new paradigm, rationality is studied in the framework of a theory of argumentation in which the game of exchanging reasons validates, always provisionally, our knowledge of the world, of society and of normative certainties.

Faced with this communicative turn of philosophical theory, criticism emerges from those who find in some kind of absolute the only reference capable of definitively substantiating our certainties. Thus, in the face of this always precarious agreement that communicative action provides, emerges that thought: *if God does not exist everything is allowed* that Leszek Kołakowski raises (Radom, October 23, 1927 - Oxford, July 17, 2009).

This criticism is particularly pertinent in today's European societies in which the need to reconsider those values that support the coexistence of people who do not share the same worldview is once again in the forefront of public discussion. In front of those who defend a return to religion, to values forged in a vision of history cut to the needs of the moment or to the dialectic of the friend and enemy, it is pertinent to continue defending the illustrated values of freedom, equality and justice, which express themselves, in our opinion, in the act of free and unrestricted communication.

We want to start with a cursory analysis of "The Priest and the Jester", an article written in 1959 and capital to appreciate the evolution of Kołakowski's thought. In it, our author questions himself about the nature of those *enigmas* that perennially form part of human culture, issues originally expressed through myths and then channeled through theology and philosophy (Kołakowski, 1970). These are issues such as eschatology, theodicy, the relationship between determinism and freedom, the idea of original sin or the ultimate foundation of knowledge, ideas all aimed at satisfying the human need to endow the world with meaning. At the time he wrote this text, Kołakowski still belonged to the *philosophical front* of the Polish Academy of Science, an organ under the Polish Communist Party, and whose purpose was to combat the idealist currents of Polish philosophy, particularly the well-established neotomist philosophy (Jordan, 1963). In this context, he was required to liquidate religious issues as idealistic approaches incompatible with a materialistic view of nature and history, but far from it, it will defend the thesis that this yearning to unravel such questions responds to an ineradicable aspiration of human experience, an aspiration with which science, including Marxism, can coexist, but that in no case can suppress.

Says Kołakowski that this longing for an absolute that substantiates all the knowledge and establishes the distinction between good and evil has been assumed by the philosophy of history and by the theory of knowledge, channels through which run the ideas that were originally part, first of the myth, and then of theology. In the philosophy of history, it is presented in the form of a question about a rationality in history that assures us that it directs its march towards the full development of human values. The question of rationality in history is the question of whether human life makes any sense or is limited to be an accident in which events lack any significance at all.

This way, Kołakowski points out, the philosophy of history has come to take the place of Christian eschatology after the philosophical death of God initiated in the 18th century, assuming the idea that the end of history would mean the resolution of all existing conflicts, which will make possible “a state of endless happiness and infinite bliss” (Kołakowski, 1970, p. 283). This eschatology is expressed in philosophy through the idea of *utopia*, a reworking of the question of original sin, and of the satanic in human nature, which revolts against the omnipotence of the absolute (Kołakowski, 1970, p. 294), and a utopia that becomes a theodicy, insofar as it wants to give an account of the evils that happen on the road to the end, as the myth of which is debtor demands. Eschatology and theodicy allow political philosophy to deduce values from facts, an inheritance of magical thinking that resists being abolished by rationalism (Kołakowski, 1970, pp. 288-289).

In the theory of knowledge, the other great branch of philosophy, myth and theology manifest themselves, fundamentally, in the problem of revelation, which is nothing else, but to find that unconditional and indisputable knowledge that may be the foundation of all knowledge and that also allows us to experience the idea that at least something exists. The most important formula of this yearning is the Cartesian *cogito*, updated by positivism, the most successful attempt at a secular laicism of revelation (Kołakowski, 1970, pp. 294-299).

However, this longing for all that is expressed in the philosophy of history and in the theory of knowledge raises to philosophy a structural problem: Can a contingent language like the human one express the absolute, that is, what is alien to contingent? Doesn't communication find its limit precisely in what is inexpressible?

2. OBJECTIVES

In this text we intend to critically present the main arguments of the Polish philosopher to demonstrate their inadequacies, and at the same time, defend that a theory of communicative action gives a better response to the principles of autonomy

and universality that constitute the assumptions, without which it is not possible to conceive social relations based on inclusiveness and mutual recognition.

We will show how Kołakowski's thinking is articulated around the question of the limits of knowledge and the need for an absolute that gives reason for all knowledge. Likewise, we will show that, against Kołakowski's thesis regarding the impossibility of the ultimate foundation of moral and political precepts without reference to a myth, a philosophy based on communicative rationality can aspire to a foundation of knowledge and duty without resorting to other considerations than those that presuppose any act of communication. It is, it is true, about a precarious foundation that cannot be expressed in the strong terms of a transcendent reason, but such a foundation has the advantage of giving a better response to the imperatives of autonomy, universality and pluralism with which coexistence in modern societies should be governed.

3. METHODOLOGY

From the introduction, in which we have presented the terms of the seminal article "The Priest and the jester", we will show how the discussion about the utopia of fraternity and epistemological utopia are articulated in the work of Kołakowski. With the analysis of his work *Horror Metaphysicus*, we will see what motivates the desire for absoluteness in philosophy and the reasons that, in his opinion, the argumentative discourse cannot respond to those desires. Next, with the analysis of *The presence of myth* we will show how our author raises the question of the ultimate foundation of knowledge. Finally, we will discuss the difficulties of accepting a rationale based on myth and we will defend the adequacy of a theory of communicative action to account for a rationality that is expressed in procedural terms.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. The political utopia of fraternity

Main currents of Marxism, perhaps his most important work in political philosophy, addresses the question of the tendencies of the Marxist theory that explain the development from humanism to Stalin's dictatorship (Kołakowski, 1980, 2982, 1983). The answer lies, says Kołakowski, in his anthropology, centered around the extremes of determinism and utopism, as well as in the conception of history as the dialectical transit from human imperfection to the complete realization of the aspirations for freedom and equality. It is a conception of history that, as he already pointed out in his 1959 work, is indebted to the theological schemes of sin and redemption.

Kołakowski wants to highlight the question that, unlike religious myth, which places the final harmony outside of human history, Marxism implies the realization of that

harmony in history itself, which, in its opinion, predisposes the Theory to its totalitarian drift. The thesis of our author is in the line of affirming that, although Marx did not claim it, it is not possible to conceive that ideal of universal earthly fraternity without resorting to some form of tyranny. In an original argument, although somewhat forced, Kołakowski understands that, despite its materialistic approach, Marxism cannot detach itself from the concept of an essence that develops itself in the course of history, an essence capable of displaying all its potentialities until it achieves an existence without conflict and in perfect harmony. The point is that, unlike the Christian religious myth, the Faustico-Prometic motive of Marxist philosophy contains a faith in the unlimited faculties of the human being, without reference to his/her limitations and finitude, something that is constitutive of the Christian religious myth under the idea of original sin (Kołakowski, 1980, p. 406).

The Polish philosopher recounts in detail how the idea of the potential Absolute that is updated in history vertebrates all medieval philosophy, corresponding to the enlightened philosophers the merit of secularizing the idea by depriving it of the myth of natural harmony. Since then, the thesis of a return to a supposed natural state of perfection was no longer defensible, so all hope of salvation will look to the future in the form of a utopia (Kołakowski, 1980, p. 50). The context of action now becomes the story conceived as the struggle of the spirit for its freedom, a theodicy in which evil is the factor in the progress of the whole.

This social utopia is expressed in Marx, our author continues, not as a regulatory idea that serves to guide behavior in a certain direction, but as the scientifically endorsed conviction that it is possible to reach that state of affairs (Kołakowski, 2007, p. 20). This conception of history and politics is not even exclusive to Marxism, since Kołakowski observes it in almost all political, conservative or progressive speeches, either showing history as the story of the lost paradise and the struggle to put an end to that exile, or as the realization of a utopia in which satisfaction will be given to unfulfilled demands. He points out that Christianity inaugurated both paths, first as a story of the collective exile of a people and, later, as an affirmation of a utopy based on holiness and personal salvation (Kołakowski, 2000, p. 123).

Our author is quick to show that under this scheme of an eschatology, it is not difficult to understand how Stalinism could turn Marxism into a tyranny without distorting the starting thesis too much, for if, as Marx himself pointed out, the conflict had been a constant in human history and its cessation would not take place until communism was reached, it was easy to deduce that, upon reaching communism, the conflict could only be explained as a dissonance resulting from the survival of vestiges of capitalism. The most obvious and simple way to deal with these vestiges was to institutionalize the fraternity, which was the direct path to totalitarian despotism. And it is that Marx, Kołakowski points out, did not perceive that there could be tensions and

sufferings in human experience that do not necessarily derive from the existence of private property. If intrinsic evil is omitted, the result is that suppressing conflicts necessarily suppresses life itself.

Kołakowski will return repeatedly to this issue in several of the last articles of his life. In "Politics, that idolized" (1986) uses the Kantian concept of "inherent evil" to find the element that makes fraternal utopia impossible (Kołakowski, 2007), an element that gives meaning to Christian eschatology, but hardly finds resonances in philosophical literature except in the work of Kant. In his opinion, both liberals and socialists have relied throughout history on the possibility of a world where freedom, justice, equality, peace, fraternity and well-being are carried out, thus bringing that to fruition for what was already predisposed human nature. In front of them, conservatives have consistently reproached them for the omission of inherent evil, that is, the presence of selfishness and an excessive desire for domination in human nature. Kołakowski believes that human experience moves between these two contradictory positions (Kołakowski, 2007, p. 160), so every utopia of fraternity, which is the absolute rationality in history, must necessarily lead to tyranny.

What underlies in Kołakowski's approach is the perspective of a philosophy centered on the subject, in such a way that progress is explained as the transit of a macrosubject that spreads its potential in a history understood dialectically (Benhabib, 1986). This macrosubject is embodied in the myth of the redemption of humankind in Christian philosophy, in the unfolding of the Hegelian absolute spirit or the Marxist class struggle. It is, in any case, humanity understood as a single subject, a theoretical approach that cannot account for the plurality of human experience. At the same time, this approach is a vision that, to a greater or lesser extent, calls for a concept of human essence that Kołakowski seems limited to clarify, but never to overcome through an alternative conception of historical development as the achievement of agreements reached communicatively, that is, Kołakowski's philosophy remains as indebted to the subject-centered philosophy as the one of Marx himself can be. And a philosophy centered on the subject necessarily leads to the suppression of communication or its reduction to the mere transmission of information. We will have to go back to it.

4.2. The utopia of certainty

Faced with the desire for political utopia, epistemology consists in the search for absolute certainty, of the definitive source of human knowledge (Kołakowski, 2007, p. 14). The father of modern epistemological utopia is Descartes and his best successor, points out, is the positivist philosophy in its scientific aspect, a line of thought in which our author highlights the non-hidden interest of this doctrine to marginalize moral, political and religious issues for considering them meaningless. However, it is well known that positivism could not go beyond decreeing that the scientific method is the way that allows

us to certify as true any statement we make about a fact, provided that this fact is empirically observable. The problem is that this postulate is not an empirically verifiable statement. That is, from the positivist point of view, the decree does not provide any kind of knowledge, but it is constituted in another form of metaphysics.

Kołakowski does not doubt that positivism has meant a cleansing of the scientific method and thanks to that science thrives, which translates into the development of a greater number of skills to deal with an important set of issues that affect daily life. But this does not serve to grant positivism that the rest of the issues that do not fit that pattern can be closed because they are poorly formed.

Kołakowski rightly defends that there are at least two types of problems whose satisfaction depends on ensuring some kind of conviction about a series of ideas and values that do not produce verifiable phenomena. This is the existential question that would solve the situation of fragility of the human being in the world, for what is required of the existence of an absolute beyond the human mind, and the question of what our behavior should be about ourselves and the rest of beings, which requires demonstrating that there are moral mandates that do not depend on our will. He believes that such questions, religious and moral, cannot be resolved by science, for the reason that, unlike what happens with natural phenomena, in ethical and existential matters, fails the principle of intersubjective agreement on matters in which we cannot count on the presence of verifiable phenomena. The reason is that the objects of religion and ethics are values and ideas, and to reach an agreement regarding them is not enough, in his opinion, neither with the conviction of living in a world of systematic phenomena nor to have a language capable of intersubjective agreement.

However, Kołakowski fails to explain why it is not possible an intersubjective agreement on moral matters, because although it is true that in this area is futile to appeal to a phenomenal world identical for all, it cannot be ignored the fact that individuals perform in a social world governed by shared norms and that they recognize as worthy of respect. Thus, although it is true that the religious agreement is only possible among those who share the same framework of beliefs, it is possible to reach a moral agreement among persons belonging to different cultures or who have a different view of the world. And in both cases, dialogue and communication are always possible, although in the most controversial matters, the assumption is that the final agreement is not possible.

4.3. Metaphysical horror

However, it is worthwhile for Kołakowski to address the question of why those questions that evade the framework of what is scientifically observable have remained in thought since the origins of human existence. Our author will find the reason in the

anthropological condition of the human being, in the awareness of his own fragility, in the permanent feeling of precariousness about our destiny and in the fallibility of our knowledge. The moral question and the religious question are the reaction to the feeling of living in exile from a paradise that should be within our reach, an idea that has inspired philosophical thinking from Plotinus to Sartre (Kołakowski, 1990, pp. 24-30).

The sensation of fragility stems exclusively from uncertainty about the universe as a whole, about the order or absence of order that is immanent to it, and also about the survival and nature of our own self. But when we try to deal with these uncertainties, we stumble upon the absence of means to solve them and, continuously, we are bound to a kind of *metaphysical horror*. Let's see why.

Kołakowski points out that, as Descartes observed, the primary and genuine certainty is that of a self that thinks. It is true, he continues, that certainty cannot serve to substantiate all knowledge. However, that awareness of the self is the only certainty we can have (Kołakowski, 1990, p. 33). From that certainty, if we thought that all the objects in the world are illusory, our life would not change much, provided that we can continue to interact successfully with the objects, or with the illusions of the objects. That is the truth of pragmatism. A very different thing would happen if we became aware that the rest of the people, except oneself, is also a product of our illusion. That would completely change our lives, because by becoming aware of our exclusive existence, we would be overwhelmed by a feeling of unbearable loneliness as a result of the fact that we are nothing. This is one aspect of metaphysical horror: the consciousness of the self is consciousness of nothingness if there is no other absolute (Kołakowski, 1990, pp. 33-39).

That other absolute is the key to solving our situation of uncertainty and, therefore, it is not strange that on that idea all metaphysics has developed since the most remote times. For centuries, philosophy has managed to reach a consensus that such an Absolute must be the cause of everything else and, consequently, to exist as a necessary thing. From both ideas, their characters of "self-sufficiency, impassibility, infinity, uniqueness, pure actuality, timelessness [and] simplicity" are necessarily deduced (Kołakowski, 1990, p. 47). The problem, says Kołakowski, is that, with the recognition of such characters there is no way to avoid the consequence that this absolute, as a result of its perfection, is pure harmony without tensions, that is, nothing (Kołakowski, 1990, p. 51). And from nowhere there is no way to explain how that absolute can create the universe, how there can be any distinction between good and evil that is not relative or how it can give us some certainty. Thus, we return again to the metaphysical horror of the consciousness of nothingness.

This continuous encounter with metaphysical horror is the result of the lack of an absolute language that allows us to access existence and transcendence as they are,

which limits philosophy to express intuitions, including the most genuine, in a historical language and, therefore, contingent, and this language, Kołakowski points out, cannot be suitable for dealing with issues that, by definition, do not allow themselves to be grasped by concepts (Kołakowski, 1990, pp. 19-20). That limit of what is communicable is the reason why philosophy fails in its epistemological utopia. Failure that becomes a tragedy when it tries to replace the mythical order of the world, which resolves all our concerns, by another rational order, but which does not solve any enigma. Therefore,

The original sin of philosophy (or the Enlightenment) was to renounce this order to build another one, rooted only in Reason; this means to try to usurp divine rights, or to lift a tower that reaches the sky (Kołakowski, 1990, p. 129).

If we try to translate the myth into plot language, says Kołakowski, intrinsic goodness is defined as supreme harmony and this as the absence of tensions, that is, as nothing, and this way the starting point is reached: nothing cannot explain existence (Kołakowski, 1990, p. 50).

4.4. The presence of the myth

We thus observe an important change in Kołakowski's argument. In *The Positivist philosophy* one can observe the exquisite care with which positivism distinguishes from rationalism. However, that same year of 1966 he wrote a small volume not published until 1972. It is *The presence of myth*, in which Kołakowski systematically develops the thesis that myth is the only element capable of giving meaning to all reality, understanding by myth the constructions that, as *being*, *truth* or *value* allow us to harmonize "the conditioned and changeable components of experience" (Kołakowski, 2000, p. 9).

The sense of the world, which discovers the myth, also fosters the confidence that human values will last beyond the possible disappearance of physical reality, that is, that the aforementioned *truth*, *being* or *value* find a hold beyond the contingent human existence.

The need to find the meaning of the whole becomes even more pressing before what we experience as a *phenomenon of indifference of the world*. It is one of the elementary experiences of human existence, which is expressed through the negativities of life, in particular the anticipation of our own death (Kołakowski, 2000, p. 91 et seq.). According to our author, the experience of the indifference of the world puts us before an alternative: "Either we manage to overcome the alienation of things by organizing them in myth, or we cover up that experience in a complicated system of institutions that wear down life in the factuality of everyday life" (Kołakowski, 2000, p. 105).

A myth is not some kind of record that will be taken more or less consciously to structure reality nor something that can be decreed from an institution, as this would

make it lose its effectiveness. On the contrary, the attitude towards the myth must be born from an act of faith, because the myth is not knowledge and therefore does not need rational justification; with charity, because the myth impels us to a total union with the object of our desire, which is the aforementioned rooting in the being (Kołakowski, 2000, p. 63). That is, the myth, in its own essence, denies the validity of communication in those areas in which it operates, and this is so to the extent that, as we have done, we define communication as the act of giving and asking for *reasons*.

Unlike a myth, science, as Kant already understood, can only produce knowledge of conditioned realities, since knowledge of an object includes knowing what it is the cause of. It is not possible the scientific knowledge of the unconditioned, of what is not caused, that is why science has to live with a myth oriented to “discover the unconditioned reality that lends meaning to the conditioned reality” (Kołakowski, 2000, p. 13). And, in the face of analytical understanding, which is the organ with which culture, through science, tries to dominate nature through its *explanation*, the myth tries to *understand it*.

However, the question that arises is whether, in this approach, moral and political issues fall on the side of science or myth. Kołakowski points out that while it is true that pragmatic restrictions can be imposed on theoretical knowledge, it is more difficult to impose analogous restrictions to practical mandates, since for the good we have neither the help of logic nor that of shared perceptions of a world of objects that are presented to us all equally. Thus, he says, mistakenly, in our opinion, that the language about values cannot be sustained without an innate intuition or the existence of God (Kołakowski, 2009, pp. 188-189). Then in his consideration, only through reference to an absolute can be distinguished a distinction between good and evil, counteracting the illustrated ideology, for which the only valid norms are those that the human being gives himself (Kołakowski, 1997, pp. 28-29). We have already pointed out, and we will do it again, that the agreement on moral issues can be sustained by shared perceptions regarding the value of justice, which imposes pragmatic restrictions on political and moral thinking.

However, in rejecting this, Kołakowski must resort to religious worship to find in the taboo the pillar that sustains a moral system that wants to distinguish itself from a criminal system based on mere respect for the law. A taboo that functions as the necessary link between the cult of eternal reality and the knowledge of good and whose counterpart is the awareness of guilt (Kołakowski, 2009, pp. 193-195).

Indeed, our author considers that the basis of moral sentiment is the fact of feeling guilty for the commission of an evil (Kołakowski, 2007, p. 172). This bad conscience, he says, can only be manifested on condition that, somehow, the difference between good and evil is known, and above all, having the certainty that this distinction is not the result of one's own desire. Thus, Kołakowski rejects the idea of deducing the sense of

responsibility from rules that we have created ourselves because, if so, the concept of responsibility would be empty, without meaning or content (Kołakowski, 2007, p. 173). He believes that to experience responsibility there must be rules that, somehow we have not created, because if we had the conviction that we created them, we could change them for convenience and that would make the responsibility and feeling of guilt for an act will vanish (Kołakowski, 2007, p. 175). The taboo, whose origin is unknown, performs, for Kołakowski that function. Anyone who wants to act morally must be guided by conviction, and faith that such mandates are beyond human will and that their validity cannot be altered by vital contingencies, which include communicative acts. That is, the taboo is beyond what is communicable.

4.5. The utopia of communication

Kołakowski himself pointed out on an occasion that both the political utopia of the universal fraternity and the philosophical utopia of absolute certainty no longer enjoy the same esteem in the academic field as in the past (Kołakowski, 2007, p. 17). Indeed, there are not many Utopian political theories such as the one that represented Marxism, nor philosophical projects like the one Husserl once tried, or, at least, they no longer have the vitality they once had. It is possible that this is due to the fact philosophy has understood that its objective is not the search for a substantive truth, since that search cannot culminate with a result that is generally accepted (Kołakowski, 2007, pp. 17-19).

However, this statement should not lead us to the hasty conclusion that Kołakowski would gladly accept the thesis of a post-metaphysical epoch of philosophy, in the terms in which Jürgen Habermas (1999) has raised it. And even less of a philosophy that seeks rationality in the irrefutable assumptions of any communicative act (Habermas, 2010). On the contrary, the whole of the work of the Polish philosopher is a defense of the philosophy that craves the absolute.

However, once the thesis of the communicative impenetrability of myth is accepted, it is not easy to understand what is the role that corresponds to that post- *mythical* philosophy that he proposes us. That is, a philosophy that, following the kołakowskian program, recognizes that myth already provides us with all the meaning we can demand and that no translation into the argumentation language is required. The destiny of philosophy would be the one already decreed by Ludwig Wittgenstein when he said that what he could not talk about, the best thing was to shut up.

It is very unlikely that even philosophers who devote themselves to the study of religion would like to opt for a program that denies communication, especially those who do not accept the dichotomous vision that Kołakowski establishes between myth, understood as an insurmountable environment for argumentation, and a rationality understood in such substantive and transcendental terms. Such is the case of Carlos

Gómez, for whom the argumentation treatment of the *mystery* would even be possible on condition that this word be stripped of its dogmatic connotations, of its definition as that in which thought and speech are prohibited. In this sense, the mystery would correspond to the issues that *put the world in question*, which, a priori, does not imply a submission of the rationality to the religious dogma (Gómez, 2007, pp. 280-283) nor the submission of the religious legacy to an omnipotent rationality. Even religion can be subject to the exchange of reasons, a communication encouraged by the desire for a consensus that also does not have to be the ultimate goal in matters in which subjective beliefs have an important weight.

But it is much less likely that those who are engaged in social and political issues, the most susceptible of fraternity utopias, accept silence as a philosophical project. You can accept, with Kołakowski, the myth provides us with an explanation of the origin of society, culture and the state, which is the main motivational factor of good will and even that the circle of religious worship provides us with the most achieved order of meaning, an order in which facts and values are so inextricably linked that in a simple act of perception we intuit the bad and the good. However, it could be argued, despite Kołakowski, that this order of meaning does not match either the principle of autonomy or that of universality or that of pluralism. Thus, in a democratic context, we can only call valid norms those that individuals give themselves and that (a) fulfill for the conscience of duty (moral norms) or (b) because they are the expression of a general interest (Political norms), but those norms that are expressed as a mandate to be fulfilled cannot aspire to general recognition because God wants it that way. Kant linked moral autonomy with the concept of the dignity of a person by stating that the human being exists as an aim in itself, and not only as a means. As an aim in himself, the person has to assume that divine mandate as his own, to the point of accepting it regardless of its origin. Any heteronomy immediately breaks the principle of the dignity of the person.

The principles of autonomy, universality and plurality are linked, insofar as it is the principle of autonomy that, in a diverse and plural society, demands that the norm should be valid for anyone regardless of their beliefs. It is possible to think that, in an isolated and impermeable religious community, all individuals accept within their internal jurisdiction that the norms of their religion are just and worthy of being fulfilled, but if we abandon the assumption of that religious community and we are in plural societies of our time, the problems of legitimacy that might arise could not be solved anymore by appealing to the common order of sense. It is only possible to overcome disagreements by appealing to our communication skills, our ability to give and ask for reasons and our ability to reach agreements and to linguistically express our disagreements.

The principle of autonomy has to be redefined, then, in new terms, since the fact of pluralism makes it necessary to effectively include the perspective of all the others. In

this sense, Habermas reinterprets autonomy in the light of the Piagetian notion of decentralization: the individual becomes autonomous as long as he progressively distances himself from the ego and ethnocentric understanding of himself and the world, and he is able to distinguish between an objective world, a social world and an inner world, in such a way that he can carry out a discursive performance of validity claims susceptible to criticism. Being autonomous means being able to give and demand reasons regarding the world of objects, the world of norms and the world of values (Habermas, 2008). Being autonomous means, in short, being able to communicate with others.

Therefore, it is excessive to affirm that the Enlightenment constituted a catastrophe for having replaced that order of meaning religion provides by another order based on reason. In the first place, it is not clear that the Enlightenment can be accused of having invented pluralism or having broken the order of religious meaning. Conflicts motivated by different interpretations of what is valid and binding had motivations that have nothing to do with the philosophy of the eighteenth century. What Kant intended with his categorical imperative was to try to give back meaning to what no longer had, and if he had to resort to giving it a rational foundation, it was because the religious foundation had already failed. Social pluralism existed long before the Enlightenment; another thing is that, to a certain point, religion had success when suffocating it on behalf of some myths that were no longer accepted by all people.

This does not mean, nor did Kant pretend, that any religious imperative cannot be a candidate to become a universally recognized norm, since Kołakowski is right when he points out that the elementary maxims of action arose within the framework of a religious order and remain in force in the consciousness of believers and unbelievers. But their recognition as norms does not depend on their origin or on their being considered independent of human will, as if that, apart from being able to prove itself, guarantees that they are not arbitrary.

Philosophy aims at answering one of those *enigmas* or one of those questions that have been part of human culture since its inception, a question to which Kołakowski, perhaps, does not pay the same attention as others similar. This question is whether it is possible to aspire to a life based on equal justice for everyone. A justice that, in short, constitutes a communicative utopia in which our ability to give and ask for reasons is always an arrow indicating the path to emancipation and not a point of arrival that expresses the complete realization of a supposed human essence.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article, we have wanted to contrast two philosophical perspectives: the one that defends the need for an absolute that accounts for all knowledge and the one that

understands that philosophy has to renounce such pretension for the benefit of a rationality understood in communicative terms. As a representative of the first perspective, we have stopped at Leszek Kołakowski's arguments, which are summarized in the idea that the appeal to the ultimate truth of the facts of the world and the certainty of the statements of ethics and politics cannot be verified ultimately without reference to a myth. However, we have seen that the implementation of an absolute implies conceiving it, necessarily, as ineffable and incommunicable. We have argued that the desire of philosophy is not to define said absolute, since it aims at being a provider of knowledge, cannot give up inter-subjectivity, the possibility that any knowledge is accepted by all through an open and unrestricted discussion. Consequently, we reached the conclusion that the best way to comply with the requirements illustrated of autonomy, universality and plurality is through a rationality understood in communicative terms.

6. REFERENCES

- Benhabib, S. (1986). *Critique, Norm and Utopia. A study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gómez, C. (2007). Ética y Religión, en Gómez, C. y Muguerza, J. (Eds.), *La aventura de la moralidad*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Gómez, C. (2009). Leszek Kołakowski: La importancia de seguir pensando lo irresoluble. *Isegoría, Revista de Filosofía Moral y Política*, 41, 311-321.
- Habermas, J. (1999). *Pensamiento postmetafísico*. México: Taurus.
- Habermas, J. (2008). *Conciencia moral y acción comunicativa*. Madrid: Trotta.
- Habermas, J. (2010). *Teoría de la Acción Comunicativa*. Madrid: Trotta.
- Jordan, Z. A. (1963). *Philosophy and Ideology. The development of Philosophy and Marxism-Leninism in Poland since the Second World War*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel.
- Kołakowski, L. (1970). *El hombre sin alternativa. Sobre la posibilidad e imposibilidad de ser marxista*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Kołakowski, L. (1972). Ethics without a moral code (1962). *A Leszek Kołakowski Reader, TriQuarterly*, 22, pp. 153-182.
- Kołakowski, L. (1980). *Las principales corrientes del marxismo. Volumen 1: Los fundadores*. Madrid: Alianza.

Kołakowski, L. (1982). *Las principales corrientes del marxismo. Volumen 2: La Edad de Oro*. Madrid: Alianza.

Kołakowski, L. (1983). *Las principales corrientes del marxismo. Volumen 3: La crisis*. Madrid: Alianza.

Kołakowski, L. (1990). *Horror metaphysicus*. Madrid: Tecnos.

Kołakowski, L. (1997). *Modernity on Endless Trial*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kołakowski, L. (2000). *La presencia del mito*, traducción de Cristóbal Piechocki, Madrid, Amorrortu, 2000.

Kołakowski, L. (2007). *Por qué tengo razón en todo*. Madrid: Melusina.

Kołakowski, L. (2009). *Si Dios no existe... Sobre Dios, el diablo, el pecado y otras preocupaciones de la llamada filosofía de la religión*. Madrid: Tecnos.

AUTHOR

Saturnino Javier Moreno Barreto

Bachelor of Information Science from the Complutense University of Madrid. Degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology from the UNED. Master in Theoretical and Practical Philosophy by the UNED. PhD in Philosophy from the UNED.

smoreno142@alumno.uned.es

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6081-8478>

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=MmS6o0AAAAAJ&hl=es>