

Education as the Way to Freedom – the Example of Stefan Amsterdamski

Grzegorz Trela

Department of Philosophy
Jordan University College

Everything is endlessly repeated and everything happens only once (Samuel Beckett).

These words of the Irish Nobel Laureate Samuel Beckett reflect the nature of human history in a nutshell. From the macrocosmic social or species-specific perspective, it is the permanent transmission of the **ever-repeating** struggles, passions, ambitions, conventions, intentions, failures and successes, intrusions of evil and flashes of holiness from the past to the future. At the same time they are unique and **unrepeatable** from the microcosmic perspective of individual experience. In the dialectic entanglement of what is repeatable and of what is new, the wisdom of the ancient maxim becomes visible which reads: *Historia magistra vitae est* (history is the teacher of life).

In each period history releases new intellectual challenges, socio-political escapades, economic capers and moral dilemmas; consider, on the other hand, how often they are simply the old and well-known vicissitudes of life with perhaps a new shape or a new face. The twentieth century, for example, brought new challenges that societies were compelled to confront, challenges that were occasioned by murders, felonies and repressions on a massive scale... but were they really new?

By enabling the specific “hatred industries”, it had become possible through the scientific and technological revolution to plan and execute killings of genocidal proportions and to instigate massive violations of human dignity. In this way, the scientists who used to carry out their research works far from social or political interests in the silence of their nineteenth century laboratories or the tranquillity of their nineteenth century private chambers, now

had to immerse themselves in the unfriendly social realities of the twentieth century.

The confrontation of social and political forces that were vying with each other needed some individual heroes who could inspire others by their wisdom, courage and moral attitude. The twentieth century had its heroes in this respect on a global scale (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Pope John Paul II), but also some locally celebrated personalities (e.g., Mwalimu Julius Nyerere in East Africa and Francis Arinze of Nigeria). In our paper we would like to present the figure of Professor Stefan Amsterdamski. He is a lesser known person but not less inspiring from the perspective of moral integrity, especially in our contemporary context that is so fraught with the crises that continue to be generated by the constantly evolving scientific and technological revolution in the milieu of those who wittingly or unwittingly, treacherously or timidly, pervert the tide of progress.

Each epoch and each generation requires those who innovate the patterns, i.e., the masters equipped to teach us our life attitudes. The testimony of an individual life is a priceless pattern not only because it constitutes the evidence of some meaningfully determined attitudes but also because it makes us aware that we are not lonely in our doubts or crises: other people have had to face them, too.

The twentieth century is not really the distant past, e.g., most of the readers of this text were already born before this century came to an end. Yet the twentieth century already belongs to historical time because it is no longer part of the present; and that is not only in the literal sense.

From today's perspective, the historical past of the twentieth century discloses the general fact that the lives of societies of that century were marked by two experiences, namely, totalitarianism and technology. The first one took the shape of enslavement of not only millions of individuals but also of whole societies and nations; the latter fundamentally changed not only the manner of perceiving the visual world, but also the manner of understanding human predicaments, both those that are individual and those that are social-national. In our current circumstances human predicaments on all levels seem to be perceived and understood less from a local

perspective and more from a global perspective. The stranglehold that totalitarianism has maintained almost forces everyone, from the isolated individual to the entire world, to think globally. The individual who encounters the all-embracing intrusion of totalitarianism into his or her life seems to be deprived of any chances – that is why the enslavement systems of the twentieth century are called totalitarian: they intervene in nearly all the spheres of human life.

The present author comes from a distant country, which apart from all the obvious culture-related differences, nevertheless shows some similarities to Tanzania such as the erstwhile attempt to establish its identity, on the one hand, within the matrix of totalitarian challenges and, on the other hand, the matrix of global changes occasioned by technology. The motto, *Education for Freedom and Utility* inspires our association with a master and hero of Poland, Professor Stefan Amsterdamski. His path of life seems to be an instructive and transformative pattern not only for young people in Europe but also worldwide, that is to say, everywhere where courage, wisdom and humanity are needed.

The twentieth century was an epoch of science. This was especially the case in its second half when societies became aware of the importance of scientists' intellectual underpinnings. Consequently their authority increased, and an ideology specific to science developed. The growing prestige of science and its irrefutable role in all the spheres of human life are beyond debate. No wonder that the philosophy of science was one of the most intensively developed areas of theoretical consideration of the last century.

What may be called philosophy of science was initiated by Vienna logical positivism, the mainstream that dominated up to the end of the nineteen fifties. The situation changed significantly in the sixties, however, after *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*¹ had been published by Thomas S. Kuhn. Certainly, he was not the only author responsible for the theoretical breakthrough that had been initiated by that time; Stefan Amsterdamski, a man of heroic

¹ T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1962.

stature upon whom we now intend to concentrate our attention is one of the important figures of that stream.

The first two parts of a trilogy planned by Stefan Amsterdamski² have seen the light of appreciation. Stefan Amsterdamski is the only philosopher whose vision of science has experienced a smooth transformation from a theoretical status to a practical one. He accomplished this in the form of a strategy aimed at a structural transformation of scientific institutions from socialism to a market-oriented economy.

His works have been translated into a number of foreign languages² and reviewed and discussed in the literature that pertains to his intellectual concerns. Stefan Amsterdamski's achievements become still more impressive if they are placed in a wider social-historical and cultural context. He has developed translation activities on a large scale. He translated some works by Polish authors into Russian and French. He translated monographs in the fields of philosophy, sociology, history of art (science and art), and economics written by B. Anderson, D. Bell, J. Bronowski, M. Bunge, H. Butterfield, R. Dall, R. Jacobsen, L. Fuller, J. Hallowel, W. Heisenberg, J. Kemeny, T.S. Kuhn, K.R. Popper, E. Panofsky, A. Rowse, B. Russell, E. Schrödinger, and others.

Who is Stefan Amsterdamski?

Stefan Amsterdamski was born in Warsaw in 1929. After the outbreak of the Second World War, he and his brother, mother and grandfather were deported to Siberia while his father remained in Warsaw which was under German occupation. He died in the Warsaw Ghetto.

After the war Amsterdamski returned to Poland and completed his studies in chemistry. It was at that point that he developed his interest in philosophical problems, especially in the field of materialistic natural history inspired by the mature works of Engels.

² Some works by Stefan Amsterdamski have been translated into English, French, German, Italian, Hungarian, Russian, and Serbo-Croatian. He personally published his most important monographs in English, Italian, French, and Russian.

In 1966 when he had reached the age of 37 and had qualified for both doctoral and postdoctoral status, he became the dean at Lodz University (UL), an institution with an extraordinarily noble stature in academic circles. At this time in his life he had achieved a name for himself on account of his brilliant academic career and excellent organizing ability. In a word, he was exuding the **ethos of scholar**. This ethos characterized him during his whole life.

He did not waver in his choice to interrupt his brilliant professional career, unprecedented as it was in the Polish humanities, in order to take responsibility for the professional shape of the institution whose co-founder he was. In March, 1968, despite the objections raised by the university staff, under the pretence of mendacious and fabricated allegations, he was dismissed from the dean's position in consequence of an anti-Semitic campaign against the ruling law. This was followed by further persecutions: he was deprived of the possibility of employment by any other academic centre, and suffered complete censorship of his works. Not only was it forbidden for him to publish anything; it was also forbidden for other authors to cite his works.

In the same month of March, in a mass emigration from Poland of all citizens of Jewish origin, Amsterdamski was under almost intolerable pressure to leave Poland. At the same time his first wife emigrated together with their daughters and his closest friends, B. Baczko, H. Eilstein, G. Kerszman, Z. Kochański, L. Kołakowski, and many others. Then, a heroic element of his personality came to the fore: he decided to stay.³ He stressed that *his ties with those*

³ Amsterdamski's decision may remind our readers of Francis Cardinal Arinze's heroic decision *at this very same time in history* to remain with his people who were suffering as refugees, displaced persons, sick and hungry during the Nigerian Civil War in Biafra. Even though he was a refugee, he kept his wits about him and organized relief for his compatriots whose only option seemed to be death. In recognition of Arinze's heroism as a refugee in the service of refugees, it was said of his labours: "It was one of the most effective and efficient distributions of relief materials in history." Later because of his obvious ties of trust and friendship with Moslems, Pope St. John Paul appointed him President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, a position he held for 18 years. While still holding this position, on 24 October 1999, Arinze received a special reward of recognition from the

who could not emigrate and had to stay was more important than any individual inconveniences he had to suffer in consequence of his decision to stay⁴. The situation partially⁵ changed in 1970 when the party mitigated its policy towards Polish society.

Though the work he initiated at Lodz University was efficiently manipulated by the authorities, a large part of the staff of the future Institute of Philosophy continued his program of professionalization aimed at securing the freedom of research works from ideological pressure. It is necessary to stress the attitude of responsibility taken by Stefan Amsterdamski after he had been dismissed from this university. With no employment and no possibility to take any, he still organized seminars for doctoral students and lecturers in his own flat. He stressed the need of protecting young people from the influence of Marxist ideologues and providing free access to contemporary advances in knowledge. Feeling responsible for the talented students, he served as a consultant for doctors' dissertations. Amsterdamski carried out a responsible work without any profits, while Władysław Krajewski acted as a figurehead in respect of those dissertations whose opinions were sometimes contrary to Amsterdamski's personal beliefs.

After Amsterdamski was dismissed from the university, state authorities destroyed his large *Introduction to Philosophy* in its entirety, even though it was ready for publication at that time.

In the seventies he was a co-author of the important open letters of intellectualists to the authorities⁶, and developed his

International Council of Christians and Jews for his outstanding achievements in inter-faith relations with the Jewish people. See F. Arinze (2005) *God's Invisible Hand: the Life and Work of Francis Cardinal Arinze (An Interview with Gerard O'Connell)*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press (editor's note).

⁴ In private conversations he used to say: *I will not give them (the communists) that pleasure.*

⁵ In fact, Stefan Amsterdamski found a job at the Polish Academy of Sciences but he was refused the possibility of teaching and contacting the youth involved in academics.

⁶ Amsterdamski was involved in the campaign opposing the amendments to the constitution of Poland (the so-called Letter of 59) and worked out "the letter of 14" where the Polish leading scientists protested against drastic persecution of those who participated in the workers' protests of 1976. These

conspiratorial and oppositional activities. He was one of the co-founders of the Scientific Course Society (TKN). The lectures of the secret university were often interrupted by violent intrusions.

Without the consent of the Communist authorities, Amsterdamski engaged in the illegal activity of editing issues of the TKN magazine, which were published and distributed unofficially. By the end of the seventies, the Secret Service arrested Stefan Amsterdamski following a denunciation; his flat was searched and his car was seized. In the period 1980-1981 he was one of the attorneys of the *Solidarność* trade union⁷ and so shared the responsibility for hammering out the law that concerned higher education. When martial law was introduced in Poland on December 13th, 1981, Stefan Amsterdamski was detained the night of 12/13th December and was imprisoned for about one year. Shortly after his release in autumn, 1982, Amsterdamski became a member of the *Social Committee of Science* which dealt with supporting the persecuted students.

By the end of the nineteen-eighties at the time when Solidarity was reactivated, there was a renewal of the hope that Poland, although still Communist, could experience radical change. This was at a juncture in history when Pope St. John Paul II, accompanied by such invigorating personalities as Cardinal Francis Arinze of Nigeria, was fuelling the world with a new hope by his relentless insistence on moral integrity, respect for human dignity and protection of inalienable rights.⁸

letters were acts of an uncompromising civic posture and so were identified as acts of courage that changed the history of Poland.

⁷ An independent trade union that opposed Communist authorities and had about 10 million members. The trade union leader, Lech Wałęsa, became a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate in 1983 and then became the first non-Communist President of Poland.

⁸ At this point in history, therefore, Amsterdamski's vision was not unlike that of Pope St. John Paul II, who undoubtedly was the central figure in the rejuvenation of hope for Poland. But the hope was not confined to Poland. The editor notes that it was during the late nineteen eighties that John Paul's close collaboration with the already-mentioned Nigerian Francis Cardinal Arinze was giving a new vitality to the religious dialogue with the Islamic Brotherhood that would have repercussions in many countries. This dialogue helped to reinforce the conviction of people in Africa, in Asia, in South and

Amsterdamski was a member of Solidarity's delegation during the debate of the *Round Table*⁹, which focused on science education and technological progress. When *Solidarność* took over power, Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki appointed Amsterdamski to serve in the capacity of minister and so to take up the mission of a system-related transformation of science in Poland. It is with satisfaction that one observes how his reform of science in Poland became the pattern for similar transformations in other European countries after the overthrow of communism.

Amsterdamski avoided being involved in any strictly administrative activities. Nevertheless, he invested ardour into his efforts and so helped to materialize what seemed to be impossible and unrealisable. Another of his spectacular projects was that of the *Graduate School for Social Research* (GSSR), which he opened in 1992 at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. This was an institution where candidates could engage in doctoral studies on an eminent level of prestige since excellence was a hallmark of the institution.

The world had only rarely seen such an institution before its inauguration: in the reality of the market economy, oriented to the free interdisciplinary search for the truth by the most talented youth from all academic centres of Poland, other countries did not hesitate to send their most resourceful students as well.¹⁰ The studies were carried out in a research partnership with the most eminent specialists from Poland, United Kingdom, and the USA, to mention some. The school remained an institution where

North America, in Europe, in Australia and in the islands that if those responsible for political changes do not pay attention to God's involvement in the world, political institutions will soon lose their sense of morality. Religious and moral integrity was John Paul's persistent theme for all shifts towards political and religious freedom. Cardinal Arinze's priorities brilliantly mirrored those of Pope John Paul. Consequently after Pope John Paul's death, the Cardinal became a member of that select group called *papabile*, that is to say, a viable candidate for the papacy.

⁹ Negotiations between the communist authorities and representatives of the trade union aimed at the power to be peacefully transmitted by the communists.

¹⁰ In the course of the development of the GSSR, representatives from nearly twenty countries came to study there.

intensive seminars and lectures were conducted by several dozens of professors specializing in all the fields of social science and the humanities. Regulations of the school enabled its students to weave together interdisciplinary interests with a thorough professionalization and specialization in a given discipline and at the same time labour with an individual propensity for creativity. Consequent to its enterprising manner of doing academics, meaningful research programs came to flower that involved large numbers of students and publishable material abounded.

The GSSR remained a self-financing institution and received no grants from public sources; it also motivated students by providing handsome grants. As early as 1995, the GSSR won the prestigious Hannah Arendt award¹¹ issued by the Vienna Institute of Anthropology to the well-deserving and promising civic institutions of a Europe that was in the process of uniting. Let us add that GSSR is the only institution that won this prize twice (again in 1999) in the thirty-year history of this award.

The GSSR has remained an important research institution, a fecund source for professionals in the scientific and cultural milieu of Poland at the turn of the millennium. Stefan Amsterdamski, who had always been available for students and observed the highest academic standards in his directives to students, discreetly protected the whole undertaking.

Here is the recollection of Doctor W. Hanuszkiewicz, a participant in Professor Amsterdamski's last seminar:

The classes were fascinating for me because of a nearly chatty freedom in his manner of speaking about difficult problems – yet preserving precision in his notions. I cannot remember the topic precisely, but it was something about rationality in science: he referred to Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos, but also Monod and Kołakowski. I especially recollect the last classes. Amsterdamski knew it was the last seminar in his life – he declared this quite openly. We all knew that we had a dying man before us and still he conducted the lecture as if nothing was happening. There was something tragically beautiful in it; no trace of sentimentalism.

¹¹ Let us also add, that the prize was not only prestigious but also quite lucrative: one million US dollars.

Even now Amsterdamski appears to me in the guise of a Greek sage who manifests his mastery of philosophy at its most difficult – and probably most important – point, i.e., as an “exercise in dying”.¹²

The Principles of His Meta-Philosophy

Specifying the highlights of Amsterdamski’s academic career – highlights which are indeed inspiring – lie beyond the scope of this brief and succinct essay. His activities and their fruitful results would be enough to fill several significant volumes of a scientific biography. In the kind of essay I have chosen to offer *Africa Tomorrow* readers, however, there is one dimension to Stefan Amsterdamski that I ought to mention, namely his concept of the mechanisms of the development of science or, more broadly speaking, his meta-philosophy. In order to complement the image of Amsterdamski presented in this essay, I shall articulate some principles of this meta-philosophy.

From the very beginning of his literary activities, in his meta-philosophical considerations, Amsterdamski was seeking a personal path that would leave to the margins extreme and radical positions. Hence, he transformed the Latin formulation of the logical law of the excluded middle, *tertium non datur*, to read as a question, *tertium non datur?* In English this reads: “no third [possibility] is given”.¹³ Amsterdamski’s formulation replaces the

¹² Quotation from the authors’ private correspondence with Dr. W. Hanuszkiewicz.

¹³ The editor notes that ordinarily the law of the excluded middle means that a cannot be *not a* at the same time. One cannot say, “At the present moment Aristotle is dead,” and “At the present moment Aristotle is not dead” at the same time. But Amsterdamski added a question mark, as if to say, “Is this law always true?” Mathematics offers a simple example to explain that one cannot be too rash in one’s acceptance of the universality of the law of the excluded middle: Suppose that a is irrational; and that b is irrational. Neither variable in itself, therefore, is ever rational. There is no “third” possibility. But does there exist a relationship between these two irrational variables that can actually in itself be rational? In other words, is there a third possibility? The editor offers the following example: Consider a^b where a is irrational and b is irrational. Is there a possibility that a^b is rational? Let us see what happens if we actually

declarative statement with an interrogatory one: "no third [possibility] is given?" This question became a barometer for measuring his notions and syntheses and a means for him to identify the principal trends of his thought. Such an attitude can be most simply presented in the following way: determine aptly and precisely the opposite extreme positions and then search for a synthetic middle way, not an eclectic or critical one, which would be uncompromising in respect to the acknowledged ideal of science.

Amsterdamski's style of authorship remains a seemingly unattainable ideal of notional subtlety and ideal logical culture.

His attitude towards what constitutes the ethos of a scholar or, more broadly, towards what constitutes the world of values, has been summarized with precision by the editors of a commemoration book dedicated to Him:

... His was a public service. Contrary to his theoretical activities, he did not acknowledge any compromises or any search of a third way in his own decisions, assessments or activities in the social sphere. His duties were clear at this point and their implementation was driven by the categorical injunction: "*Tertium non datur*" and "*tertium datur*" – which are two versions of the same maxim which, in Amsterdamski's opinion, means intransigence in respect to values, on the one hand, and the search for an epistemologically valuable theoretical compromise, on the other. He is the master of both these spheres.¹⁴

There are several meta-philosophical beliefs espoused by Amsterdamski, which allow us to fully understand his social attitude. His *first* conviction:

examine the relationship by using an irrational number to replace each variable: $a^b = \sqrt{2}^{\sqrt{2}}$ is irrational when $a =$ the irrational number $\sqrt{2}$ and $b =$ the irrational number $\sqrt{2}$. But now let $a =$ the irrational number $\sqrt{2}^{\sqrt{2}}$ and let $b =$ the irrational number $\sqrt{2}$. This means that $a^b = (\sqrt{2}^{\sqrt{2}})^{\sqrt{2}}$. But if one performs this simple mathematical operation correctly, $(\sqrt{2}^{\sqrt{2}})^{\sqrt{2}} = (\sqrt{2})^{(\sqrt{2} \cdot \sqrt{2})} = (\sqrt{2})^2 = 2$, which is a rational number. Hence a third possibility is born.

¹⁴ E. Chmielecka, J. Jedlicki, A. Rychard, eds., *Ideals of Science and Conflicts of Value*, Warsaw: IFiS PAN 2004, 11.

... Philosophy is possible only as a conflict-rich plurality of various philosophies. [In my opinion] it is analogous to the case of culture where conflicting values feed one another and their conflicts liven up the culture which would be dead without them. Philosophy is alive through the conflict between different philosophies.¹⁵

His *second* conviction:

... Where any philosophy, no matter which one, takes hold, which does not mean attempts to take hold as each philosophy attempts to take hold, i.e. where philosophy appropriates the whole area of philosophical life which is usually filled with the above-mentioned conflict-rich plurality, any philosophy ends and a dictatorship begins. It is like that because the conflicts of values that particular philosophies attempt to solve are never definitely soluble but are articulated again in reflections on social life. Thus, all that area may be appropriated by any philosophy only by extra-intellectual means. Such an appropriation results in the glorification of a single system of values, which consequently leads to the erosion of all of them, including those which gain the Pyrrhic victory by force. This is what happens no matter what the glorified value may be, equality, freedom, spiritual salvation, national unity or the primacy of the state.¹⁶

The Tribute He Received and Deserved

When Stefan Amsterdamski celebrated fifty years of his life as an academician and seventy-five years of his life as a human being he received an extraordinary gift from his grateful doctoral students at the GSSR. It was a graphic representation of a replica of the Nicolas Copernicus monument that is situated at the entrance to the PAN building in Warsaw, but Stefan Amsterdamski is seated instead of Copernicus holding a symbolic building of the GSSR in

¹⁵ S. Amsterdamski, *March in Philosophy and Philosophy of March*, Warsaw: NOWA 1981, 5.

¹⁶ S. Amsterdamski, *March*. 6. The editor notes that Amsterdamski is referring to values that originate with human philosophers. Those values that originate with the one who ultimately gives meaning to every authentic value, namely, God, have an eternal foothold in God's truth and goodness. They never erode. See K. Wojtyła (Pope St. John Paul II), *The Acting Person*, trans. by Andrzej Potocki, Boston: D. Reidel, 1979.

his hand instead of a globe. The apex of the whole work – *toutes proportions gardées* (with everything kept in its proper perspective) – with the inscription, *To Stefan Amsterdamski – from Compatriots*.

Professor Stefan Amsterdamski is a man of stellar achievement in the field of higher education, a man who joins the august company of such contemporaries as Pope St. John Paul II, Umwalimu Julius Nyerere, Francis Cardinal Arinze, and St. Teresa of Kolkata. He is a man who joins all those individuals whose ardour has penetrated the intellectual and spiritual fabric of the world during the twentieth century. We hope our brief account will turn out to be inspiring for those who know that education is a way to freedom and to a humanity replete with intellectual, religious and moral integrity.