

DARIUSZ ŁUKASIEWICZ

Kazimierz Wielki University  
Institute of Philosophy  
dlukas@ukw.edu.pl

## TADEUSZ KOTARBIŃSKI ON GOD AND RELIGION

**Abstract.** The aim of the paper is the presentation of the main reasons of Tadeusz Kotarbiński's atheism and an interpretation of his position in terms of the conceptual apparatus used in contemporary philosophical debate on atheism. William Rowe distinguished three types of atheism: friendly atheism, indifferent atheism and unfriendly atheism, a divide widely accepted in contemporary debates. It seems that Kotarbiński's position is a form of unfriendly atheism. However, the final conclusion will be that William Rowe's conceptual apparatus is not a satisfying tool for an evaluation and interpretation of Tadeusz Kotarbiński's views.

**Keywords.** Atheism, belief, theory of evolution, evil, God, religion.

It is a well known fact that Tadeusz Kotarbiński proclaimed atheism as a metaphysical thesis, saying that there is no God (KOTARBIŃSKI [1962], p. 9). He regarded a belief that God exists as false and irrational (KOTARBIŃSKI [1962], p. 13). In consequence, he also regarded as false and irrational other religious beliefs such as, the belief that God is a guardian of all people and animals or that there is an afterlife. He called such beliefs "phantasms", "daydreams of a sick imagination", "obvious untruths" (KOTARBIŃSKI [1962]). Kotarbiński's atheism was not a result of long-lasting considerations, since he accepted this view as a very young man and he defended it in all his writings. Therefore, we cannot say that Kotarbiński's atheism was a consequence of his reism. On the contrary, reism formulated in terms of pansomatism was consistent with atheism, which rejects the existence of any spiritual beings. Kotarbiński's atheism was not a conclusion drawn from ethical considerations either. Kotarbiński never claimed that morality based on the Christian religion was inconsistent with human nature or was incompatible with human conscience. Neither was his atheism a product of an anticlerical attitude or a result of disappointment understood as a subjective response to the history of religion, the Church and Christianity. So why was Kotarbiński an atheist?

The first reason for his atheism was his conviction about the irrationality of religious beliefs. Religious beliefs are irrational because they are inconsistent with the scientific knowledge about the world. It is not religion but science

(cosmology, physics and biology) which explains the origins of humankind and the universe (KOTARBIŃSKI [1970], pp. 376–377). When describing his turn from a religious world-view which took place in his youth, Kotarbiński wrote:

There is no God who takes care of people. They are left alone like all products of nature which came into being as a result of the evolution of our animal ancestors (KOTARBIŃSKI [1962], p. 10).<sup>1</sup>

Darwin's theory of evolution and its philosophical consequences were particularly important for Kotarbiński's disbelief in a religious explanation of human origins. He stated that:

The achievements of biological evolutionism radically changed the system of values held by people thinking philosophically. Man could no longer feel like God's child, a reflection of God, a noble being who is in control of all other beings according to the will of the Almighty. Human faith in such a leadership collapsed because the subtle forms of structural and functional adaptations of plants and animals, which had induced an illusory idea of the divine providence taking care of every creature turned out to be a product of chance, mechanical adaptation, mutual relations of organisms with their environment, and a struggle for survival. In brief, all these facts provided evidence against the existence of any sympathetic cosmic guardianship. The illusion of the harmony of the world disappeared. The world has turned out to be a place of a mortal combat between species, and among individuals of one species (KOTARBIŃSKI [1970], p. 376).

The second reason for Kotarbiński's disbelief in God, already mentioned, was axiological, i.e. the existence of enormous evil and suffering in the world. There is a very well-known aphorism by Kotarbiński (repeated after Stendhal) saying that:

If there is so much evil in the world, it would be a blasphemy against God to believe in his existence (KOTARBIŃSKI [1986b]).<sup>2</sup>

It is worth noting that Kotarbiński was sensitive not only to human suffering, but also to the suffering of animals (including animal suffering caused by humans).

The third reason, let us name it "theological reason", was an argument from religious fatalism, i.e., the incompatibility of divine omnipotence with human freedom and moral responsibility. The argument consists in the claim that if there were an omnipotent being which decreed in the past what and in which way things would happen in the future (acts of human will and all beliefs

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<sup>1</sup> See also: KOTARBIŃSKI [1986a], p. 363.

<sup>2</sup> We find in his notebook written during the Second World War another aphorism which he himself regarded as a synthesis of all syntheses saying in Polish that "życie jest to bycie połączone z wyciem", and which could be translated in a free way as meaning that "to live means to scream" (KOTARBIŃSKI [1970], p. 438).

included), then the freedom of will of all created agents would be impossible (KOTARBIŃSKI [1986a], p. 226).

Thus, atheism in his opinion and *for him* was a true and rational belief, i.e., a sufficiently justified belief. Atheism was also coherent with his other semantic and metaphysical doctrines. Therefore, we are allowed to state that atheism was deeply rooted in Kotarbiński's philosophy. His atheism was not, of course, the main and most original of his philosophical achievements but he was probably the member of the Lvov–Warsaw School who declared his atheism most firmly and clearly (perhaps apart from Władysław Witwicki). Let us note here that other eminent representatives of the Lvov–Warsaw School, such as Kazimierz Twardowski, Jan Łukasiewicz and the so called Cracow Circle (Bocheński, Drewnowski, Salamucha and Sobociński), rejected atheism. Twardowski subscribed to a form of deism, Łukasiewicz defended nonorthodox Catholicism, and the members of the Cracow Circle started a new type of Thomism based on mathematical logic and logical analyses. Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz and Tadeusz Czeżowski – also Twardowski's disciples – represented an agnostic attitude.

Let us now consider the question of what Kotarbiński's atheism was like. I will not discuss here whether his atheism and arguments for it provided by him are fully convincing and cannot be refuted or at least partly weakened. I will rather try to analyse Kotarbiński's atheism with regard to its relation to theistic beliefs. As the starting point, I will resort to a typology of various forms of atheism proposed in 1979 by the atheist William Rowe. According to Rowe's typology, we can distinguish three forms of atheism:

- (a) A friendly atheism, which is a view (i) holding atheism to be true and (ii) holding that *some* theists may be rational in respect of their belief in God
- (b) An indifferent atheism, which is a view (i) holding atheism to be true and (ii) being indifferent concerning whether or not theists are rational in respect of their belief in God.
- (c) An unfriendly atheism, which is a view (i) holding atheism to be true and (ii) holding that no theist is rational in respect of their belief in God (Rowe 1979, 340).

We should keep in mind, however, that rationality is understood here in a deontological sense; namely, a given person is rationally justified to believe *p* if that person is blameless and has not violated his epistemic duties by believing *p*. Such a concept of rationality was not in use among the members of the Lvov–Warsaw School, but it seems that it is compatible with the concept of logical rationality typical of the School. According to the logical rationalism held by the representatives of the School, beliefs are logically rational if they are sufficiently justified, i.e., if there exist empirical reasons (evidence) or inferential arguments

supporting them. Now, it seems that logical rationality can be part of the epistemic duties of a given person: anyone who subscribes to logical rationality has a duty to accept only such beliefs which are formulated in a way which is semantically correct and for which there exists some empirical evidence or an inferential argument. Anyone is epistemically blameless who did not make a mistake deliberately.

Let us consider Rowe's friendly atheism in more detail. Friendly atheism allows us to assume that a theist or a believer may be rational while believing in God because

(1) he lacks evidence for atheism

or

(2) he is mistaken regarding the evidential force of the arguments for theism.

If either of the two cases above is present, a theist is making a mistake, and if he is making a mistake he is blameworthy for making a mistake. But friendly atheism allows for the rationality of beliefs when a believer expresses his beliefs in an understandable way (so that an atheist can discuss and refute them as false) and if he is arguing for theism in an argumentative way.

It is worth noting here that friendly atheism can be even turned into an even more friendly form of atheism than just friendly atheism is. Thus, in regard to case (1), when a theist lacks evidence for atheism, he is not necessarily blameworthy for his mistake. On the contrary, a believer can be rational and blameless. Such an evaluation is possible if we accept a modest version of evidentialism claiming that beliefs are rational if they are formed in accordance with the evidence one currently has. A theist – given the evidence he has at a particular moment in time – can rationally believe that theism is true or more probable than atheism. However, if we accept a radical or strong version of evidentialism, we are allowed to claim that a believer is irrational, which means that he is responsible for his mistake. It is so because a theist should strive for the broadening of his thought-horizon and gather more evidence over time. Thus, a theist can be rational in a synchronic sense by believing in accordance with the evidence he currently has, and he can be irrational in a diachronic sense because he has failed to gather more evidence than he currently has (JONBÄCK [2015]). It is, however, disputable whether a theist always has the duty to look for further evidence and whether he is always irrational and blameworthy if he fails to do so. Our evaluation of such behaviour depends on a given situation. A theist can be in a position which makes it difficult or even impossible to gather more evidence over time. He could have other obligations, more important ones, for example parental care. Such a person can be rational when believing in God although he does not have enough knowledge about atheism and he does not look for further evidence for atheism or theism. Of, course we could claim that

such a theist, say, a non-reflective theist, in such a situation should withhold his religious beliefs until he has gathered evidence for or against theism (Jonbäck 2015). If a theist does not withhold his beliefs, he makes an epistemic mistake for which he is blameworthy. But let us note that a theist is blameworthy for making a mistake only if he has direct voluntary control over his belief in God. The point now is that he may not have any control over his religious beliefs. It is possible that a belief in God has the same epistemic nature as the belief that Paris is the capital of France. If this is the case, a theist cannot stop believing in God as he cannot stop believing that Paris is the capital of France. Then, it seems that a believer cannot be regarded as an irrational person who is blameworthy because he did not withhold his belief in God. Such a modified version of the friendly atheism is called a “very friendly atheism” (JONBÄCK [2015]).

And we may also consider the second possibility (2) which says that a theist may be rational in his belief but is mistaken regarding the evidential force of the arguments for theism. Such a theist, say, a reflective theist, knows all the evidence and reasons for theism which are available at a given moment. It is also possible in this case to claim that a theist is not blameworthy in spite of his mistaken evaluation of all evidence and arguments both for theism and atheism. But there is still another epistemological possibility which is currently in the debate over the rationality of religious beliefs, according to which a reflective theist can regard correctly the evidence for atheism as convincing and yet be considered rational in believing in God (JONBÄCK [2015]). In this case, the reflective theist cannot resort to the classical arguments for theism. However, he can resort to a meta-epistemological consideration. He can be rational in his believing in the truth of:

(3) The belief that God exists constitutes knowledge.

In other words, he can believe that a belief that God exists is a typical case of knowledge. He can resort to – as Roderick Chisolm named it – epistemological particularism and not to epistemological methodism. Richard Fumerton has recently described these two positions quite aptly, so let me quote it:

Does one first decide what one knows and then try to learn from paradigmatic examples of knowledge the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge? Or does one discover first the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge and apply what one learns to discover what one knows? (Fumerton 2008, 36).

If we assume that neither particularism nor methodism are obviously true positions, it is quite rational to opt for one or the other. For a proponent of particularism, a typical way of choosing a particular case of knowledge as paradigmatic for knowledge is to appeal to intuition (JONBÄCK [2015]). If a believer (a theist) grew up in a theistic community, he might very well have the intuition that God exists, and therefore his believing in God is rational and blameless. The atheism claiming that reflective theists can be rational and

blameless in believing in God because they resort to particularism and regard the belief that God exists as a paradigmatic example of knowledge, is a “very, very friendly atheism” (JONBÄCK [2015], p. 70).

Thus, we have now a look at some possible forms of atheism and we can ask which of them is consistent with Kotarbiński’s position – if any. It seems that, from Kotarbiński’s point of view, indifferent atheism cannot be accepted. If you are a proponent of a universal, overwhelming care, as Kotarbiński was, then it makes a difference what kind of beliefs other people have: rational or irrational. It has special importance because rationality of beliefs and actions is much more valuable than irrationality of beliefs and actions.

Thus, could we classify his atheism as an unfriendly atheism in the sense exposed above? It seems that Kotarbiński’s atheism was a form of unfriendly atheism since he regarded religious beliefs as irrational. But perhaps it would be a good thing to ask at this point whether there are any reasons for a less categorical answer to the last question.

So, firstly, let us observe that beliefs (religious beliefs included) are always beliefs of real persons or, to put it in the language of reism, there are believing things, which can be called “persons” only in a certain secondary sense. Now, if we assume that the word “irrational” has a negative meaning and is closely related to the claim that irrational believers are blameworthy for making a mistake, then one should evaluate believers negatively as irrational persons. This is so because it is not possible to separate beliefs and persons, especially if Kotarbiński claimed that there are no beliefs but only believers. But it seems that it would be irrational from a praxeological point of view to divide people into two classes, rational and irrational, since effective and good work presupposes a high degree of cooperation between rational non-believers and irrational believers. My point is that there could be a tension between the theory of rationality of beliefs and the requirements of praxeology. This tension can perhaps disappear if we distinguish between logical and pragmatic rationality: believers are logically irrational but perhaps they are pragmatically rational.

Secondly, Kotarbiński described his atheism as follows:

I simply stopped believing in obvious untruths. I saw that all Church teachings are groundless. It is good for kids – [he writes] – I do not want to be deluded. I will grasp the reality as it is... Let us no longer be deceived (KOTARBIŃSKI [1962], p. 10).

We could try to interpret the phrase “it is good for kids” as a suggestion that rationality of beliefs depends on someone’s situation and not only on the objective conditions of logical rationality. Kotarbiński’s point could be that a belief can be good (rational?) for one person and bad (irrational?) in a sense for another. But this generous interpretation of Kotarbiński’s words can be easily

objected simply by saying that what is “good for kids” is good for nothing. And it seems that here again the distinction between logical and pragmatic rationality may be useful. Because of some pragmatic reasons, it is a good thing for kids to believe in the Church’s teaching, but it does not change the fact that kids with respect to their believing in God are logically irrational persons.

What else could be taken into account when we try to weaken Kotarbiński’s unfriendly atheism? – if it is an unfriendly atheism indeed. We can resort to the fact that Christian morality was for Kotarbiński a paradigmatic case of moral perfection. But, is it really possible to regard Christian faith as “an obvious untruth” and, at the same time, to claim that Christian morality is a paradigmatic case of moral perfection? Well, perhaps only in terms of psychology, but not in terms of logic.

Having considered some possible ways how Kotarbiński’s atheism could be transformed from an unfriendly atheism into a form of friendly atheism, it is clear that it is not possible to turn Kotarbiński’s atheism into any form of friendly atheism. His atheism is really unfriendly.

But I think that there is something wrong in the very distinction between friendly and unfriendly atheism. A friendly atheism in all its forms can be regarded as a form of paternalism and elitism. This paternalistic approach can be formulated in the following way: a friendly atheist seems to speak to a believer: your beliefs are false or even obviously false and my beliefs are true or even obviously true, but I understand why you believe in the obviously false propositions and why you cannot stop believing in God. Because I can grasp all these things, I find your beliefs untrue but rational. Elitism consists in the fact that atheists consider themselves to be a rational minority in possession of the truth. It seems to me that, in order to avoid both paternalism and elitism, it would be sufficient simply to modify the previously mentioned definition of friendly atheism by saying that a friendly atheist is anyone who regards atheism as true but who does not exclude that he can be mistaken and theism can be true. And what about rationality of beliefs? Well, if we agree that there is a real choice between particularism and methodism and that none of the meta-epistemological views are obvious, then we may think, if we are atheists, that theists are rational in their believing in God, but let us add that it also seems to be the case that, if we are theists, we should take atheism as a rational position for exactly the same reasons we are ready to treat theism as rational if we are atheists.

Let us come back to Kotarbiński’s position. If unfriendly atheism is not paternalistic, and if friendly atheism is paternalistic, and Kotarbiński atheism was not paternalistic, then his atheism is not friendly indeed. But, if it is true, there is nothing wrong about it. Why should we think that Kotarbiński’s atheism was not a form of paternalism? The very idea of popularizing logical culture, so typical for the Lvov-Warsaw School, presupposes that it is possible and valuable

to address logical culture and arguments also to people believing in God, because it is possible to convert them to the scientific world-view and to atheism. The last presupposition makes sense only if we regard humans as rational beings able to think logically. And I think that if we regard people as rational beings, even when they have irrational beliefs, we do not take a position of paternalism. If we interpret Kotarbiński's unfriendly atheism in such a way, then I think that his atheism has some noble, honest and deeply human character. The only problem with the last interpretations is Kotarbiński's reism: there are believers but no beliefs.

There are two other solutions regarding the problem of rationality of religious beliefs, different from those proposed by Rowe and suggested by Kotarbiński; these were solutions elaborated by other followers of the Lvov–Warsaw School. The first of them consists in the distinction between logical and pragmatic rationality. This distinction was preferred by Kotarbiński's disciples Marian Przełęcki and Klemens Szaniawski, and now Jacek Jadacki. According to the doctrine of two kinds of rationality, religious beliefs are logically irrational but they can be rational in the pragmatic sense. The second of them consists in the distinction between many kinds of beliefs and the domain of discourse. According to the doctrine of the plurality of the domains of discourse, theistic and atheistic beliefs are parts of different world-views and as elements of world-views they can be evaluated with respect to their rationality in the way typical for the domain of a world-view but not to science or even philosophy. Beliefs which are part of a given world-view are rational if they are coherent with other beliefs of a given world-view, they are intersubjectively communicable (that is understandable to those people who do not hold those beliefs) and they are not incompatible with scientific knowledge. It seems that Kazimierz Twardowski had such an idea of rationality of religious beliefs (KLESZCZ [2012], pp. 176–220). Thus, it is possible that both theism and atheism are rational in this sense, provided only that they respect the criteria of rationality crucial for the world-views. That position was held by Tadeusz Czeżowski and Izydora Dąmbska (KLESZCZ [2007], pp. 23–24). Now, it seems that Jan Woleński subscribes to this weak notion of rationality of religious beliefs (WOLEŃSKI [1996]).

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