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Polish Philosophy of Culture Today: A Promising Route for Contemporary Philosophy¹

Introduction

It has been my observation that Poland is unique for having a philosophy of culture tradition that has theoretical depth and insight into the origins and role of philosophy, popular breadth throughout Polish philosophy in a variety of departments, institutes and programs, and for its cultural relevancy. Yet, this tradition is largely unknown in philosophy/philosophy of culture circles in the English-speaking world.

For example, the University of Warsaw (UW) Department of the Philosophy of Culture was created for Stefan Morawski (1921–2004) and was led by Zofia Rosińska for over 20 years, who helped the department blossom into a vibrant and dynamic center of philosophy of culture teaching and research. The department had

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its roots in a kind of culturally relevant philosophy practiced in an earlier period in the UW's history. The UW philosophers like Leszek Kołakowski, Władysław Tatarkiewicz, Tadeusz Kotarbiński, and many other younger scholars, under the influence of philosophers such as Henryk Elzenberg, were committed to a philosophy that was more than mere scholastics, that emerged from and responded to the problems of cultural and personal life. This culturally attentive philosophy included resistance to the communist regime that then ruled Poland, especially in the protests of 1968, for which reason the Institute was punished by being put under the authority of the political science faculty.²

Although many philosophy of culture traditions – for example the German/American tradition as pioneered by Ernst Cassirer (and others such as Gottfried Semper) – also have theoretical depth, the expansive influence they deserved did not always come to fruition, nor did their vision of culturally relevant philosophy come to be realized. This failed realization was largely on account of the destruction of institutions and material culture in the Second World War, not to mention the loss of hope and good will it entailed. The Cold War further stymied their energies. Today in the US, Philosophy of Culture is almost unheard of as a field. There are, to my knowledge, only two American philosophy departments that specialize in the field, one at Texas A&M University and one at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and they are on the margins of the formal discipline. In the Polish academy, philosophy of culture is a distinct and well-respected field. As it has gradually established itself, the Polish tradition has achieved a unique balance between broad based reflection and sensitivity to the needs of the times that should be studied to learn how to further empower philosophy of culture to be attentive to and relevant for its contemporary situation.

It is for this reason that with the generous support of the Kosciusko Foundation and the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA) I carried out a research project on Polish Philosophy of Culture. This research included plans for an edited collection of historical figures in Polish Philosophy of Culture (yet to be translated into English and published) and a collection of contemporary leaders on philosophy of culture today in Poland and the United States (with plans for publication underway). In addition, in 2019 I carried out email based interviews of seventeen noted Polish philosophers from across the country who either identified as being or have significantly engaged with philosophy of culture, in order to better understand its current status in Poland today.³

In this essay I report on the findings of those interviews. I will explore how several distinct trends in contemporary Polish philosophy of culture have emerged as a broad philosophical orientation that although relying heavily on post-Husserlian/Heideggerian Continental Philosophy is distinctive from that tradition, as well as from purely historical orientations, and as distinguished from purely analytic and applied approaches. In the first section, drawing from the interviewees themselves and secondary source material, I will in broad strokes provide an account of some of the factors that have led to the different Polish schools of and perspectives

2) For more, see Piotr Osęka, "Marzec 68," *Znak* (2008): 285–295; H. Szlajfer, "Marzec jako doświadczenie osobiste," *Krytyka*, no. 28–29 (1988); Jacek Kuroń, *Wina i wiara. Do i od komunizmu* (Warsaw: Aneks, 1989). Unfortunately, to my knowledge there are no works available in English that recount the role of the UW Institute of Philosophy in the protests of 1968, and the fallout afterwards. For those interested in a quick overview, the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Warsaw has a brief summary of the events available on its website that can give a rough translation via Google Translate fairly easily: "Marzec 1968," <https://filozofia.uw.edu.pl/wydzial/historia-instytutu-filozofii-uw/marzec-1968/>, accessed December 22, 2020.

3) Interviews will be cited. The dates given for interviews, unless otherwise noted, refer to when I received a completed online response from the respective interviewee. Minor language editing, to correct errors of spelling and English language usage have been completed for the ease of reading. Original responses are potentially available upon request. One interview was translated from Polish. Another was transcribed from an interview held in person and then edited by the interviewee. Both aforementioned interviews will be demarcated in their respective citations.

on philosophy of culture. In particular I will focus on the fall out of 1989 as a decisive moment for contemporary Polish philosophy of culture, as well as the emergence of the Warsaw and Poznań Schools.⁴ Next, drawing on these schools, as well as others in Poland, I will point to certain trends that indicate a path forward for Polish philosophy of culture as a distinctive orientation in contemporary philosophy. In particular, I will look at how certain Polish philosophers (or related philosophers) see philosophy of culture as a kind of metaphilosophy,⁵ that breaks down the nature/culture divide, is culturally relevant, and even perhaps is a certain way of life. I then discuss where these figures see Polish philosophy of culture heading and what role they think it should play in these trying times. I conclude by making the case that these trends suggest a route for the survival of robust academic philosophy.

Historical Emergence of Polish Philosophy of Culture

As in Germany, Polish philosophy of culture largely emerged from and as a response to Neo-Kantian Idealism.⁶ It seems to have developed as a self-conscious orientation in philosophy between the end of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century. As Przemysław Bursztyka put it to me in his interview:

It seems to me that it is not coincidence that methodologically self-aware philosophy of culture appeared in the very specific moment of the history of philosophy – to be exact in the few decades between the end of nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. It is the moment when philosophy undermines the traditional, (post-)Cartesian set of unsurpassable oppositions organizing the field of philosophical reflection: thought vs. being, subject vs. object, consciousness vs. world, culture vs. nature and so forth. Nietzsche, Freud, Husserl, Simmel, Cassirer, Gestalt Psychologists, Martin Heidegger, John Dewey (and other pragmatists), Hermeneutics – to name just a few most emblematic figures – agree at least on two fundamental points (even if they do

4) The term “school” is ambiguous in the history of philosophy. As Sarah McClintock has clearly framed the issue, it really has three overlapping denotations, “1) actual institution of teaching and learning; 2) broadly aligned communities of discursive and nondiscursive forms of practice; and 3) doxographical hypostatizations of discursive practices.” Sara L. McClintock, “Schools, Schools, Schools — Or, Must a Philosopher Be Like a Fish?” in *Buddhist Spiritual Practices: Thinking with Pierre Hadot on Buddhism, Philosophy, and the Path*, ed. David V. Fidalis (Berkeley, CA: Mangalam Press, 2018), 77. Many philosophical schools in fact sit between all three denotations, in often loose and shifting associations. These schools, while often centered in particular locations, have rotating communities of discursive and non-discursive practice, develop through dialogue, and often even just proximity. Over time, such networks of influence are treated as distinctive schools of thought, that often later on are attributed to have canon doxographies. I think the legacy of such mutual networks of influence are worthy of the title “school.” For example, the most notable leaders of the Frankfurt School, Classical Pragmatism (as a school of thought), and the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism, in many cases held strikingly different views and foci, but through location and a common community of practice created a network of mutual influences whose legacy has greatly shaped philosophical thought and practice. Even the founding philosophical school of Greek antiquity, Plato’s academy, with philosophers as different as Aristotle, Speusippus, Xenocrates, and Crantor, was a community center for a diverse set of figures, rather than a rigid institution with a narrow and distinctive dogma (unlike some later Hellenistic schools). While the Poznań methodological School and the Lvov-Warsaw School were more formalized communities, the UW School of Philosophy of Culture is one of those more informal communities, and for the reasons above I still considered it a “school” even if some its methods, commitments, and foci are quite divergent, and even though it has no formalized doxography going back more than one generation.

5) By metaphilosophy, I mean the presuppositions about the task, nature, and orthopraxis of philosophy. Historically this kind of self-reflexive work was simply part and parcel of philosophy, but today it is distinguished as a subfield. Although in some sense it is a redundant term, I do think it is clarifying for readers less familiar with this aspect of philosophy, or who simply rarely reflect on or engage with this dimension.

6) Of course, earlier figures can be read as philosophers of culture.

not always conceptualize them in this way). First, the aforementioned oppositions are no longer operative, if they ever were. Second, both the oppositions themselves as well as their components – or rather their concrete forms – are the effects of more primal dynamic processes of structuration, signification and symbolization, but also of pre-reflective social *praxis*. In short, there is some originary realm which precedes all oppositions and distinctions by means of which philosophy and, more broadly, humans make reality comprehensible.⁷

In particular, in the interwar period figures such as Henryk Elzenberg, Florian Znaniecki, Marian Zdziechowski, Feliks Karol Koneczny, Leon Chwistek, and Konstanty Michalski in Catholic thought, followed this path. They saw the philosophical and social dualisms of the past as emergent features and tools for culture. As we shall see, some of these figures played an important role in shaping contemporary Polish philosophy of culture. Much of their work appeared as an alternative approach to the more positivistic Warsaw-Lvov School (which produced such noted logicians as Jan Lukasiewicz, Stanislaw Lesniewski, and Alfred Tarski), this orientation can also be seen in the field of art history at this time, for example “W. Łuszczkiewicz, M. Sokołowski; later W. Tatarkiewicz – the history of aesthetics.”⁸ These trends in some ways were interrupted during the World Wars, and in other ways only deepened in the following decades. The next distinctive phase in Polish philosophy of culture would further build on these traditions (and those in Continental Europe).

Polish Philosophy of Culture in Post-War Communist Poland

Szymon Wróbel discussed in his interview what he sees as the three great philosophical traditions of Post-War Poland, plus a fourth that arrives “almost magically” onto the scene:

In post-war Poland, there continue to be cultivated three great philosophical traditions. First, there is the tradition of the Lvov-Warsaw School, which began at the end of the 19th century in Lvov and was continued by those of its members who, for various reasons, found themselves in Poland after the war. The Lvov-Warsaw School comes out of a tradition of analytic philosophy – the philosophy of language and the language of science, developed further in studies on logical syntax and methodology of science. Secondly, there is a strong current in philosophy being connected institutionally with the Catholic University of Lublin and the monthlies *Znak* and *Więź*. It is where the Thomistic vision of God, of the world and of the human is developed, in other words the philosophy of religion, philosophical anthropology, and ethics. Finally, the third is a phenomenological tradition following the steps of Roman Ingarden, a disciple of Edmund Husserl who disunited from his mentor over the evolution of phenomenology in the future, which until today advanced his concept of person-event. The students of Ingarden have produced an inspiring and strong “methodology” impacting not only aesthetics, ethics, and the theory of literary works, but also anthropology and philosophy of culture... The Warsaw School of History of Ideas emerged *deus ex machina* in the country where those three philosophical cultures were professed, and reached its prime in the years 1956–1968. The specific situation of Polish real socialism is to be found in the fact that Marxism functioned largely as yet another spiritual tie with Europe. The main reason for this native socialism was that Polish

7) Przemysław Bursztyka, interviewed by the author, October 7, 2019.

8) Dariusz Dąbek and Maciej Woźniczka, “Polish Ideas in Philosophy: (Polish Philosophy and Philosophy in Poland),” *Filozofia*, no. 8 (2011): 42.

Marxists forming the Warsaw School of History of Ideas rejected scholasticism of Soviet dialectical materialism and opposed it with the help of Western Marxism and its sensitivity. Of course, the role of Marx and historical materialism is more problematic in this tradition.⁹

As he suggests, the Ingardenian phenomenological tradition, alongside the Warsaw School of History of Ideas, which he sees himself as an inheritor of, would be two critical resources for the development of Polish philosophy of culture during this period. Today, of the seventeen scholars I interviewed, one person explicitly referred the work of Ingarden as an influence, and six others emphasized the influence of phenomenology on their work. Two expressed the particular influence of Leszek Kołakowski's history of ideas on their work (or even as a direct mentor), and two others expressed their work as shaped by the history of ideas/philosophical history.

In addition, one might speak of a fifth great philosophical tradition in post-war Poland: the Poznań Methodological School. In fact, this tradition would help foster a distinctive approach to philosophy of culture.

The idea of methodology through a cultural lens stems from the milieu of Poznań Methodological School which is an inherent part of the Polish (and not only) intellectual landscape. Its works have contributed to the original academic achievements of the Polish humanities of the twentieth century. The Poznań Methodological School was one of the more unique and creative philosophic-methodological *Denkkollektiv* in the post-war Europe. It was founded in the mid-60s of the twentieth century by such scholars as Jerzy Topolski (1928–1998), Jerzy Kmita (1931–2012) and Leszek Nowak (1943–2009). The rise of this School was accompanied by publishing the first issue of the journal *Dissertationes Methodologicae* subtitled *Studies for the integration of science*. Since the mid-70s the Poznań Methodological School had developed in three parallel ways: one was set by Leszek Nowak with his idealizational theory of science [Nowak 1980]; the second — by Jerzy Kmita with his historical epistemology [Kmita 1988] and socio-regulative theory of culture [Kmita 1996]; and the third one — by Jerzy Topolski with his theory of non-source-based knowledge [Topolski 1976]. The thought style distinctive to the Poznań Methodological School is still present in numerous works which, explicitly or implicitly, refer to the notion of idealization, scientific understanding of culture or initial knowledge in historical research.¹⁰

It is this second trajectory led by Kmita and housed in his Cultural Studies Center, building on the work of Florian Znaniecki, that led to a distinct approach within Polish philosophy of culture. Both of the philosophers of culture (they identify as such) I interviewed from the Institute of Philosophy of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (which was the home of this tradition), Anna Pałubicka and Roman Kubicki, see themselves as mentees of Kmita. Further, Andrzej Szahaj of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, also sees himself as a part of this tradition. Both Szahaj and Pałubicka spoke directly to the influence of Znaniecki on their work.

Pałubicka in particular was a personal mentee of Kmita, and sees herself as a direct inheritor of this school:

I was lucky to start my philosophical studies in an outstanding philosophical center: The Poznań Methodological School... my philosophical interests were shaped by this school under direction

9) Szymon Wróbel, interviewed by the author, July 18, 2019.

10) Jarosław Boruszewski, "Methodology Through a Cultural Lens: The Poznań Approach to Philosophy of Humanities Against Alternative Meta-Methodological Orientations," *Sensus Historiae* 29, no. 4 (2017): 15–16.

of J. Kmita. In the moment when the original concept of science development, one that recognizes science as a branch of culture (compared to Th. Kuhn proposition, Edinburgh's school, L. Fleck), was rising, Poznań's cultural studies center was created by part of the Poznań methodological school centered around J. Kmita. During this time the social-regulative concept of culture was created, which at the same time marked out the object of studies for the philosophy of culture field and its research at the Poznań cultural studies center.¹¹

This school would provide its own account of the historical and normative role of science within cultural life, as well as of culture itself. As Pałubicka suggests, this school also incorporated and connected with greater movements happening in Western philosophy.

Polish philosophy of culture continued to develop in places like Poznań through its distinctive ability to both be sensitive to movements in broader European traditions of philosophy and draw upon them, while working from its own group of culturalist hypotheses on horizons of meaning and domains of knowledge as manifestations of culture. Maria Gołębiewska in her interview further clarified the development of this distinctive approach within the context of the macrolevel forces in professionalized philosophy in the mid-twentieth century that helped shape it:

Philosophy of culture appeared as a part of the academic humanities education in Poland, however, their dominant trends would change: from structuralism, phenomenological theses, and studies regarding communication (the 1960s), through hermeneutics (Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur), towards cognitive studies attempting to remove boundaries between culturalism and naturalism (the 1980s), and the so-called post-modernism (the 1990s). The process was related to certain intellectual "trends" that directed the investigative interests of numerous social and humanities scholars, however, the philosophers were less interested. In my opinion, the philosophy of culture appeared as an investigative standpoint along with the 19th century's culturalism, but the conclusions regarding culture as a specific social and political discipline had appeared in the 17th century (Samuel von Pufendorf's conception of culture).¹²

Polish philosophy of culture engaged with and drew upon a broad range of local and pan-Western great philosophical traditions, and used them for a particular culturalist orientation to questions across philosophy, the history of ideas, and sociology. It sought to address a broader variety of issues surrounding our socio-historical condition and prospects than was typical of the epistemologically focused philosophy that dominated at that time. Although it emerged from critical idealism as a way to explain the development and limits of culture, it soon engaged with questions in ever more diverse fields. By 1989, and especially soon afterwards, a commitment to culturally relevant philosophy had become critical to now self-identified Polish philosophers of culture.

Philosophy of Culture as a Response to the Transformation of Poland in 1989

One striking theme that emerged from the interviews is that the transformation of Poland from a Soviet controlled communist satellite state to an independent national government with a welfare-state capitalist economy, cata-

11) Anna Pałubicka, interviewed by the author, trans. Joanna Smętek, September 17, 2019.

12) Maria Gołębiewska, interviewed by the author, September 16, 2019.

lyzed the full flowering of the tradition, with a new generation explicitly identifying as philosophers of culture, or at least identifying their engagement with it. Andrzej Leder's story is emblematic of this development:

My interest in philosophy of culture developed in 1990, when the observation of the late modernity culture and of life after the “end of history” pushed me to search adequate analytical instruments of understanding. It was enhanced by the fascinating process of transformation in Poland. The new cultural phenomena appearing on the surface of the long-lasting social and cultural structure, the old attitudes, adapting to the new hyper-capitalistic ways – all this was worth analysis and description.¹³

Living through these changes led many Polish philosophers to try and understand the reaches and limits of the transformation of culture in which they were situated.

Experiencing this transformation, however, not only led to younger Polish philosophers wanting to better understand “cultural phenomena,” but inspired them to practice a philosophy that could be meaningful and relevant to contemporary society. This would ultimately be the case for Agata Bielik-Robson. But her philosophical education before 1989 did not advocate an integrated view of theory and cultural relevant work and practice, for political reasons as well as professional ones:

Before I studied philosophy as one would study chess. In the 80s we were all involved in political activities. My mother was a high level functionary in the Solidarity Movement. I was involved since I was 14 years old (high school) in Solidarity, then in the Independent Student Association (NSZ), which was the anti-communist group of students. We were obviously illegal. So yes, we were all very much engaged in political activity, but it was completely detached from our theoretical interests. Nobody told us before to connect these aspects of our life and work. Quite to the contrary, our teaching professors at the University of Warsaw were incredibly careful to keep everything absolutely separate, so much so that even, paradoxically, when we had classes in political philosophy, it was pure scholastics. We were absolutely discouraged from asking any questions about how this is relevant to what's happening to our seemingly communist society back then. They were all formal Marxists, or I would say only rather “former” Marxists, because they never showed one sign of any Marxist commitment when they were teaching. Marek Siemek who used to be a great Marxist, in the 60s and 70s, in the 80s, when I studied, even avoided mentioning the name of Marx. He was even afraid of mentioning Hegel; Hegel was already too close. So he worked on Fichte and Kant. He even refused to teach Hegel.¹⁴ The way we were taught, however, it was great. It was very high level stuff in German idealism. I have it really in my little finger even now. But it was a completely scholastic education. So '89 was also the year I graduated.¹⁵

After finishing her degree at the University of Warsaw, she was introduced to a different approach to philosophy during her PhD program at the Polish Academy of Sciences (Polska Akademia Nauk, or PAN).

13) Andrzej Leder, interviewed by the author, September 27, 2019.

14) This anecdote is intentionally hyperbolic.

15) Agata Bielik-Robson, interviewed by the author (in person), transcriber Joanna Smętek, July 10, 2019. This interview was the only one conducted in person. The interview was recorded and then transcribed. Prof. Bielik-Robson then was allowed to review and edit the transcript for clarity and precision.

It is at PAN that her work resisting Soviet occupation and her philosophical reflections began to integrate into a culturally relevant approach to philosophy:

It was a place of pure research, but somehow it was far more successful in keeping a finger on the pulse of the then current changes in society. It was much more attuned to surrounding reality and encouraged me to address these changes in sophisticated philosophical terms, to break my previous scholastic isolation.... . We created this vibrant group of young scholars, who experimented with all those languages: phenomenology, idealism, psychoanalysis, critical theory. Everything that we learned as pure systems, we were now mixing and applying to social reality. And also it was exciting because reality was not only changing, but suddenly more *real* than ever. In the 80s nothing really was happening, it was an impasse and a stand-still. In a way, we did philosophy in order to escape from reality; it was a strong escapist impulse, short of suicide. The motto was: "If you don't have the courage to take your life – then study philosophy." It all seemed so thoroughly hopeless. But philosophy at PAN after '89 gave us hope and a new interest in surrounding reality. I was 25 then, but it felt as if I saw the socio-cultural world for the first time as something interesting and alive.¹⁶

There was excitement in this approach to philosophy that could resuscitate hope and interest in "surrounding reality" (and in oneself) as of vital import, and something philosophy could help flourish.

Such an empowered approach to culturally relevant philosophical work is a theme we will return to later in the essay. For now, it suffices to note that again we find that Polish philosophy of culture draws on other traditions to reflect on and engage with an emergent cultural situation. For example, she mentions the work of her colleague Paweł Dybel (also interviewed) who "was pioneering in the psychoanalysis of culture – he was writing an interesting diagnosis on what was happening in Poland after 1989 in psychoanalytic terms, which I think was very good: the transition into a fatherless democracy was sort of difficult for the Polish people after '89 and psychoanalysis was a very apt tool to analyze it."¹⁷ Alongside her and Dybel, was Janusz Palikot,¹⁸ in a philosophy of culture research group led by Katarzyna Rosner. Rosner was another important shaper of Polish Philosophy of Culture at this time. Leder was in a different research group at PAN, but was a regular dialogue partner, and would come to many of their seminars.

Bielik-Robson sees her own philosophy of culture practice today as rooted in the explorations of the transformation of Poland that happened in this small philosophy of culture research group at PAN during that time:

Philosophy of culture is a fantastic vehicle which allows us to translate the abstract back into the concrete and I like it because it gives me a sense of the relevance to what I am doing. When I was 20 I was doing philosophy the way I played chess. But after '89 I changed, and now I have this imperative to be relevant. And I think I've got this from what I've learnt from Katarzyna and our first immersion in philosophy of culture.

As we shall see, the commitment to philosophy being *relevant* to and for culture (and ourselves) was not only a constitutive tendency at PAN in the years coming up to and after 1989. It was also at the heart of the Anthropological Philosophy of Culture School that emerged at the University of Warsaw during this time.

16) Ibid.

17) Ibid.

18) Now a businessman and politician.

Philosophy of Culture at the University of Warsaw

It was just at this time, the turn of the 1990s, that a Philosophy of Culture Department was founded at the UW. In fact, according to Rosińska, who, as already was alluded to, would become its chair after its founder Morawski retired in 1993, “the term ‘philosophy of culture’ was first officially used in Poland in the name of the department at the University of Warsaw’s Institute of Philosophy.”¹⁹

Morawski had spent his career in the history and philosophy of aesthetics, and was initially the chair of the aesthetics department at the UW, before he was expelled from his position after his involvement in the students’ protests in 1968. In the late 1980s, a little while after his return to Poland and to teaching in the Polish academy, he came back to the UW. He, however, was no longer just an aesthetician. He had come to the conclusion that aesthetics could not be carried out uncontextualized; it is too limited to account for itself and to transcend its own limitations, without contextualization within its communal forms of sensitivity and its communal imaginaries. Aesthetics is thus embedded in the social-historical life of culture. When viewed in such a way, he saw his domain of research as no longer aesthetics but philosophy of culture.

This account of aesthetics is held by many of those influenced by the Warsaw School of Philosophy of Culture, and especially by those interested in cultural phenomenology or post-phenomenology. The latter two approaches disavow the quest for transcendental reductions, and instead see their task as illuminating and tracing the phenomena of particular times and places within culture life.

In particular, one can find such a sensibility in the work of Monika Murawska of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts:

This link between aesthetics and culture is also evident in the writings of phenomenologists I have studied, for whom the aesthetic experience becomes a paradigm of experience as such. I would argue that every aesthetician (including me) considers him/herself a philosopher of culture, although certainly not every philosopher of culture considers him/herself an aesthetician.²⁰

In this account aesthetic experience (that is, the richest experience we have), and its artistic products, provide saturated insight into certain dimensions of culture. Artistic objects themselves are phenomenologies that provide the quintessence of insight from a particular moment in time and place. For that reason, aesthetics in this account *is* a kind of philosophy of culture, uncovering the different dimensions that make our cultural experience what it is through aesthetic/artistic experience and products.

We also find in aesthetic/artistic experience and products, though not exclusively, insight into the nature and shape of our values, the axiological dimension to our experiences in and of culture. It was the embedded structures of value and meaning that Rosińska turned to in her own work, building off of the aesthetic foundations of philosophy of culture at the UW, and turning in new directions.

She led the department for over twenty years and further developed her own approach to philosophy of culture: “Anthropological Philosophy of Culture.”²¹ On this account, “philosophy of culture helps to discern and underscore its [society’s] vertical and symbolic dimension, the values that emerge in it, as well as ideals, desires, and beliefs of both communal and individual character. It strengthens the sense of community and

19) Zofia Rosińska, interviewed by the author, July 29, 2019. The Institute of Philosophy is now an independent Faculty at the UW.

20) Monika Murawska, interviewed by the author, August 2, 2019.

21) For more, see Zofia Rosińska, “Filozofia kultury jako ‘filozofia spraw ludzkich,’” in *Co to jest filozofia kultury?* eds. Zofia Rosińska and Joanna Michalik (Warsaw: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2007), 106–125.

shapes the ‘hidden harmonization.’”²² It provides synoptic insight and builds connections across domains of culture (and thus our lives) that have been left incongruous or isolated. In other words, it helps us harmonize our values and finding meaning in our experience.

Another distinctive feature of this school is its apophatic attitude. The school sees culture and humans themselves as infinitesimally rich in a variety of ways, but always ungraspable in itself (as culture) and in ourselves (as humans). Only through culture, which humanity emerges from and co-creates, can it chart its position within the cosmos, or in other words, be able to “know itself.” But humanity “knows itself” non-exhaustively and only in an open-ever developing, changeable (subject to re-conceptualization), indirect, mediated way. In this sense the school presents radically anti-essentialist and anti-substantialist perspective as well as opposes any form of one-sided objectivism in thinking about and through culture. As Bursztyka puts it,

Culture is no-thing, not an object, not a product, not any kind of substance or some mysterious power underlying the course of history. Neither is it a sum of human products, of material, intellectual, spiritual and axiological achievements. Culture cannot be grasped by means of any concept, neither does it serve as a kind of a general concept under which all cultural products can be subsumed. For culture is neither a fact, nor a simple sum of facts. It always transcends, by its very nature, the sphere of facts, while at the same time making them possible.²³

Instead the Anthropological Philosophy of Culture School presents culture in the light of the category of situation²⁴ and underscores its “essentially” tensive character.

In the light of this category culture appears as having essentially tensive character. It means it is constituted by a series of unsurpassable tensions between: *arche* and *telos* (between the “ground” and the “towards which”), *nomos* and *physis*, essence and semblance, presence and absence, identity and otherness, passivity and activity, participation and alienation, the real and the imaginary (or fictional), immanence and transcendence, human and inhuman, possibility and bare necessity, facts and ideals, and so forth.²⁵

Accepting an apophatic attitude on culture puts one in a position to attend to rather than fully grasp culture, to build connections and insight across different dimensions of culture, to get one’s bearings, to harmonize one’s place within one’s culturally tensive and saturated community life. It also leaves open a pluralism of non-exhaustive philosophical explorations. The UW department for this reason supports faculty and students with very different foci.

22) Rosińska, interviewed by the author.

23) Bursztyka, interviewed by the author.

24) See Rosińska, “Filozofia kultury jako ‘filozofia spraw ludzkich,’” especially 119–22.

25) Bursztyka, interviewed by the author. This vision is also inspired by the work of Professor Krzysztof Okopień (a member of Department of Philosophy of Culture at the UW until 2017) who saw culture as based on and emerging out of the foundational and unsurpassable but highly productive difference between *arche* and *telos*. It is from this difference that all other philosophical conceptualizations (and all other cultural articulations) derive. And it is this difference which provides the ground for apparently foundational (but in fact derivative) concepts: God, Nature, the Other and so forth. For more see, for example, Krzysztof Okopień, “Tezy o ontologii kultury,” in *Co to jest filozofia kultury?* eds. Zofia Rosińska and Joanna Michalik (Warsaw: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2007), 89–105.

One can see the way in which this approach to philosophy of culture harmonizes oneself as a part of a pluralistic cultural community through the very pluralistic community Rosińska co-created at the department at the UW:

The Department of Philosophy of Culture at the University of Warsaw has gathered a group of young scholars, among whom special role was played by Krzysztof Okopień, Joanna Michalik, Przemysław Bursztyka, Marcin Rychter, and Mikołaj Rode. The above concept of philosophy of culture was developed in the course of discussions held in the department, during the classes taught there, and in texts published by its members. Two journals devoted to philosophy of culture were founded out of the department's initiative and thanks to its efforts: *Kronos*, edited by Wawrzyniec Rymkiewicz (in Polish), and *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture*, edited by Przemysław Bursztyka (in English). Together with the Institute of Philosophy, the department organized a number of thematic conferences, which were followed by book publications. More than a dozen doctoral dissertations have been written and defended by members of the department or associated scholars in the process of developing our vision of philosophy of culture. Participating in the above research and directing these activities amount, in my view, to practicing philosophy of culture.²⁶

The department members have carried out quite varied projects, from exploring the character of contemporary experiments in music and studies of contemporary novelists, to essays in the history of ideas on the “sub-cultures” in the sciences and humanities and meditations on the nature of madness. As Rosińska seems to suggest, this department has been more than a prolific center for scholarship and teaching. Rather, this philosophical community has been a place for harmonized and shared pluralistic philosophical development and for the cultivation a meaningful and robust shared scholarly life. Bursztyka was her mentee and is now chair of the department. He elaborated on her role in the department in his interview:

Under her lead the Department was something much more than just an institution within an institution. It was a very special place of the most vibrant discussions where different perspectives and methodologies were constantly confronted, where all participants (faculty and doctoral students) had this agitating feeling that regardless of our philosophical orientations (often quite opposite) we constitute a community of those who search for truth, those who search for wisdom. I said “search” – since it was not about getting or reaching truth – this open dialogue was not, in fact, Socratic (if Socratic dialogue was any form of dialogue at all). This dialogue conducted by Professor Rosińska was about questioning our own knowledge, and about our existential self-questioning. In this sense it was a kind of almost spiritual exercise.²⁷

In this sense, this school is a lived practice of critical self-cultivation, reconstructing and harmonizing all the different perspectives one finds in and on cultural life as a scholar. Thus, this school has deep metaphilosopical commitments. Those well acquainted with philosophy of culture are aware of its propensity for metaphilosophy. Like philosophy of culture elsewhere, Polish philosophy of culture tends toward metaphilosophy. We now turn to this dimension as it stands today. We start shifting away from tracing the roots of particular schools and

26) Rosińska, interviewed by the author.

27) Bursztyka, interviewed by the author.

traditions that shaped or are a force in contemporary Polish philosophy of culture, so that we can explore the distinctive and interesting general trends one can find across them.

Polish Philosophy of Culture as Metaphilosophy

Some of the interviewees were explicit about the metaphilosophical role of philosophy of culture. As already can be seen, the Anthropological Philosophy of Culture School of UW has a strong metaphilosophical orientation. According to this school, certain metaphilosophical commitments are visible in the very name “philosophy of culture”:

As one of my great teachers – Professor Krzysztof Okopień – claimed: to read “philosophy of culture” as *genetivus subiectivus* means to understand two fundamental, and somehow provocative, points about the interrelation between philosophy and culture. First, philosophy is, always and without exceptions, philosophy of culture. Second, philosophy as such originates from and belongs to culture. In this sense philosophy of culture reveals, in a sense, the ultimate truth of philosophy as such.²⁸

In other words, philosophy is both an emergent feature of culture, and seeks in some way to adjust, reconstruct, critique, legitimate, conserve, and so forth, different dimensions of culture, from the legitimacy of the sciences to the order of our body politic. This account leads in turn to two conclusions:

First, philosophy of culture is philosophy. This statement simple, as it is, has double meaning: 1) philosophy of culture is not one among many others philosophical sub-disciplines. It is rather philosophy in its “totality” – philosophy as such, and what decides about its character is its particular approach to reality as the effect and at the same time the realm of human efforts of giving meaning to what is given in different forms of experience; 2) it lacks any distinctive object or field of its cognitive interest – it is interested in the whole of reality as it is the realm of human self-realization.²⁹

Like Cassirer, this school sees philosophy (of culture) as having no direct object of knowledge, instead being an emergent feature of culture that traverses all of its horizons of meaning and reconstructs and harmonizes them. Anthropological Philosophy of Culture is distinct only in the sense that it claims full awareness of this metaphilosophical condition of the task of philosophy (as it sees it) and to use it for more effective ends; to leading the way for a flourishing, wholistic, and balanced cultural life for communities and individuals.

Although not everyone in this school would go as far as to frame philosophy of culture as a first philosophy, they do recognize its pervasiveness across philosophy as well as its metaphilosophical predisposition. For example, Mikołaj Sławkowski-Rode said in his interview:

As much as I think it is a misleading exaggeration to stipulate that “all philosophy is philosophy of culture,” I equally think it is very difficult to entirely avoid issues which could be defined as philosophy of culture in most forms of philosophical enquiry. Metaphysicians, moral philoso-

28) Ibid.

29) Ibid.

phers, epistemologists, philosophers of religion, even without directly appealing to the fact, work within the framework of, and more often than not directly respond to intuitions which undergird the ways culture manifests itself.³⁰

This school is also not alone in Poland in having such a pervasive view of the role and place of philosophy of culture. In fact, this account appeared amongst those from a variety of other contemporary Polish schools of philosophy of culture.

Even Marcin Maria Bogusławski (from the University of Łódź), who does not identify as a philosopher of culture (but is in regular dialogue with it) sees this metaphysical, what he refers to as “metatheoretical,” approach as perhaps the essential feature of philosophy of culture, and part of the reason for the growing importance of it: “I think that philosophy of culture will be an increasingly important part of philosophy, although I think it will become more of a culturalist way of studying various phenomena, a metatheoretical perspective rather than a field that has a rigidly defined object. As a way of research, it will also be increasingly interdisciplinary.”³¹ While we will explore the interviewees speculations on the future of the field in a later section, it is important to note here that there is a trajectory within contemporary Polish philosophy of culture that sees itself as not a field within philosophy, but as a metaphysical, metatheoretical, or even metadisciplinary perspective to reflecting on and engaging with present cultural life in order to help it flourish.

Polish Philosophy of Culture as Spanning the Nature/Culture Divide

Another commitment distinctive to many contemporary Polish philosophers of culture, especially in the Poznań and Warsaw schools, is the view that nature and culture are symbiotic and continuous, and not divorced, domains. Unlike other social-constructivist approaches, both these schools see culture as the spaces created by human/creaturely activity in the natural world. Only through the mediation of culture are we able to better reflect upon and engage with the infinitesimally rich *real* world. Thus, Pałubicka of the Poznań school noted that:

The image of the world that is present in the attitude of the person involved in the world is a reality “for us” not “in itself.” The philosopher of culture is a constructivist and realist at the same time. They are aware that culture is a human construct and that at the same time this human construct has a power of creating a world for a man participating in it. There is no contradiction here.³²

It is only through mediation that we become ever better aware of, readjust to, and reconstruct the natural environment we find ourselves situated within.

Rosińska, from the perspective of Anthropological Philosophy of Culture, further demonstrated in her interview how the biological and cultural are themselves intertwined poles, of a continual transaction between human creatures and their environment:

In my understanding, however, culture is everything that people do (and how they do it), everything they experience (and how they experience), as well as everything they become (and how they become). Such a broad understanding of culture does not obliterate the traditional opposi-

30) Mikołaj Sławkowski-Rode, interviewed by the author, September 12, 2019.

31) Marcin Bogusławski, interviewed by the author, July 13, 2019.

32) Pałubicka, interviewed by the author.

tion between nature and culture, but it greatly expands the domain of their interrelations, mutual influences, and co-determinations.³³

These views echo what Dewey called the biological and cultural matrix³⁴ in which all human inquiry proceeds, culture being the creative place humans have coordinated to reconstruct and respond to the conditions in which they find themselves in the natural environment. But what is supposed to be the upshot, “the difference that makes a difference,” of the view that there is symbiotic transaction and continuity between nature and culture, for contemporary Polish philosophy of culture? As we shall see in the next section, it provides a way to position the role of the philosopher within a cultural and natural world.

The Culturally Relevant Role for Polish Philosopher of Culture

As already noted, another interesting theme that emerged across many of the interviews is seeing philosophy of culture as culturally relevant philosophy. This approach to philosophy of culture is often based on positioning philosophy as a special kind of cultural task, emerging from the natural world. For example, Bielik-Robson put it the following way:

So, it is not natural that we should want to live life which is a finite life. We need culture with all its symbolic means to persuade us into a fragile and perishable life. Culture thus forms a principle of life, a tradition of life, which teaches us how to live: Jews call it *torat hayim*. So culture here becomes really a part and the parcel of the vital process which again is very Herderian: it takes on what biology in us left undetermined. We may be dying as parts of nature – but we live only as cultured animals, *homo symbolicus*.³⁵

On her account, philosophy of culture, then, has the task of supporting life affirming culture which affords us meaning in a fragile and existentially unfinished nature.

It becomes clear from this kind of account that the continuity of culture and nature is used by some in contemporary Polish philosophy of culture as a way to chart the determinative and free aspects of our condition, and what role philosophy ought to play in living a good life that safely navigates both poles. In line with this way of thinking, Marcin Rychter follows his teacher Krzysztof Okopień in defending the view that philosophy of culture must be grounded in “some kind of ontology of culture,”³⁶ or in other words that in order to find balance, meaning, and empowerment in life, we ought to be aware of our being as conditioned and as free; imaginatively developing our cultural life through them.

Besides the ability to navigate living, many of the interviewees also saw philosophy of culture as a critical lens and literacy by which to responsibly engage with culture. Gołębiewska sees this task of philosophy of culture as developing a kind of cultural- and self-awareness:

33) Rosińska, interviewed by the author.

34) For more, see John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953, 1938, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, Collected Works of John Dewey, Vol. 12, eds. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), Part One: Introduction: The Matrix of Inquiry, 7–102.

35) Bielik-Robson, interviewed by the author.

36) Marcin Rychter, interviewed by the author, August 4, 2019.

The philosophy of culture enables the more general and, at the same time, more detailed, analytical recognition of the world of human beings – of a specific social and cultural “environment” (as written by Maurice Merleau-Ponty). It allows the human individual – participating in the contemporary culture dominated by media messages and the content of the so-called “popular culture” (Arnold Hauser) – for a more aware and self-aware reference to the social, political and media contexts.³⁷

This cultural-self-awareness brought about by philosophy of culture does not allow one necessarily to immediately respond to one’s cultural conditions, but upon reflection one can learn to keep ever readjusting to the ever changing cultural landscape. As Leder put it,

“The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk” or to say it in a more contemporary way, philosophy acts only in a retroactive way. However, to have people who are reflexive on phenomena of culture and to guarantee the existence of institutions, where they can pursue their reflection and dispute is crucial for all societies. As crucial as having a reflexive self-consciousness is crucial for individuals.³⁸

Philosophy of culture’s cultural relevancy on this account is as culture’s reflection upon itself, allowing it the freedom to adjust and change course, especially at particularly difficult moments.

Polish Philosophy of Culture as a Way of Life?

The life affirming and critical/reflective dimensions of contemporary Polish philosophy of culture led a few of my interviewees to see philosophy of culture as itself a way of life, or rather that it is one account of how philosophy can clear the path for a good life. This view is most clearly seen in the Anthropological Philosophy of Culture School of the UW. As Bursztyka notes: “The main task of philosophy of culture is twofold: to enlighten our historically determined condition and to do it by providing conceptual frameworks within which we can live good lives in our contemporary cultural universe.”³⁹ In this account, the two culturally relevant aspects of philosophy of culture are brought together; the critical/synoptic reflection of philosophy of culture is meant to reconstruct our situation so as to enable us as individuals and communities to have life affirming ways of living. Philosophers of culture themselves then practice a scholarly polymathic way of living that helps others find a way to affirm meaningful lives as cultural beings. They become renaissance persons of a sort.

While only a few of my interviewees explicitly expressed these kinds of sentiments, it is worthy of attention. For, as Bielik-Robson suggests, it provides a return to a road that was not taken in the twentieth century that is neither analytic nor continental and that could be further revived today:

And then philosophy of culture and philosophy as a way of life become one and the same – because for humans there is no natural way of life, it has to be cultured, it has to be taught. It has to come with tradition and persuasion, always mediated by symbolic forms. So in that sense – yes, although I don’t use Cassirer in my book, I could indeed have a chapter on him and show that this Davos

37) Gołębiewska, interviewed by the author.

38) Leder, interviewed by the author.

39) Bursztyka, interviewed by the author.

debate was actually a beginning of one big, unlucky series of catastrophes in modern humanities, which sort of went the Heideggerian way. But it should have stayed with Cassirer.⁴⁰

One could also add that most of Western philosophy went *either* the way of Heidegger or the way of Russell, Frege, and Carnap. However, it also could have (and in a few cases did) stayed with Cassirer. It is this critical life affirming approach to philosophy that makes philosophy of culture distinctive in the current Western philosophical landscape. Does it have a future though, or will it become another lost road of what could have been?

The Future of Polish Philosophy of Culture

The interviewees had very different assessments of the prospects of philosophy of culture, as well as areas of foci for its future: Some saw developing further dialogue with analytic philosophical traditions as critical for its future; others saw a focus on the Anthropocene extinction crises as the most pressing problem; yet others pointed to themes we already discussed, such as breaking down the nature/culture dualism as of paramount import; finally others suggested a focus on the emergence of new technologies, and a host of other topics, as the most promising routes for it.

A few were concerned that it is disappearing from the academy, as part of a greater cultural sickness. Paweł Pieniążek of the University of Łódź had a particularly grim prognosis:

I think that in line with the progressive disappearance of cultural meaning of philosophy in general, the significance of philosophy of culture decreases as well. This fact, on the one hand, entails the disappearance of the theoretical grounds of philosophy and philosophy of culture and, on the other hand, entails the rise of technocratic-scientific tendencies. Philosophy of culture is losing its ability to comprehensively describe cultural reality.

That said, despite losing its synoptic power, he did see room for it to play across and with other disciplines, as a sort of transdisciplinary, or rather what I would call an *intra*-disciplinary, perspective: “in contrast, it is increasingly entering into active interdisciplinary relations with other sciences, while making use of subtle, heretical, methodological-theoretical tools of an analytical nature.”⁴¹

Despite concerns for its survival in the academy, Bursztyka also sees room for some qualified optimism:

Regardless of what will happen on the institutional level, I believe there are some strong reasons not to lose optimism. There is no doubt that philosophy (as philosophy of culture) will persist at least in the virtual form. As I have mentioned several times – it is the ultimate possibility of culture, and as such it will persist as long as human culture will exist. The question of what other forms of more explicit realization and self-expression it can take is open. Perhaps there are some which are more adequate than traditional academic institutions. One thing is certain – philosophy can (and would) survive outside of academia, whereas the reversed statement is highly dubious.⁴²

40) Bielik-Robson, interviewed by the author.

41) Paweł Pieniążek, interview by the author, September 2, 2019.

42) Bursztyka, interviewed by the author.

This last statement suggests a critical question: are there any insights from these interviews that could help provide a route for philosophy inside of an increasingly hostile academy and beyond it? We now briefly speculate on that question and provide some initial tantalizing hints.

Conclusion

This essay of course hardly covers the full history of philosophy of culture in Poland, and barely scratches the surface of its development. That said, as we surveyed its flowering into a distinct approach to philosophy, and as catalyzed by the transformation in 1989, we found a kind of syncretic approach to philosophy that draws on a variety of traditions to help us find our life-affirming footing in our current cultural terrain. It is this dimension of the contemporary Polish philosophy of culture tradition that makes it distinct metaphilosophically. It is not primarily concerned with what kind of philosophy is best, nor with the nature of the “really real,” nor reduces philosophy merely to cultural politics, as Richard Rorty would have it (though it is closer to the later than the former goals). Instead, it seeks to affirm our lives by harmonizing us with what is available in our cultural condition, and reconstructing what needs to be addressed. It can help us cultivate an equilibrium as natural creatures, creating culture as we go. It also provides an *intra*-disciplinary route, for it not only seeks to be in conversation with other philosophical traditions, but other disciplines and domains of culture in this task. It need not even be housed in traditional professional philosophy departments. Indeed, it can become a sort of metadisciplinary approach to engaging with our cultural present in meaningful ways.

Contemporary Polish philosophy of culture thus provides a route where philosophy is a way of life, a politics, an aesthetics, a philosophy of science, a metaphysics, an ethics, a philosophy of history, and even an approach to higher learning. As the borders of the world become more permeable and identities become ever more fluid there is an opportunity here for other traditions of philosophy of culture, and other traditions of philosophy friendly to this view such as pragmatism, to become collaborators in building a space for meaningful philosophy in difficult times. Such collaboration could be the lasting contribution of this venerable Polish tradition that finds life affirmation in our present situation.