

# Skarbek, Janusz

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## Henryk Elzenberg (1887-1967)

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*Janusz Skarbek* (Poland)

HENRYK ELZENBERG  
(1887–1967)

It is very difficult to present in one article the huge output, and especially the profundity, of that great mind. So let us only look at a few matters, and even those just in some aspects.

Henryk Elzenberg was born in Warsaw in 1887. His father was a lawyer of some renown as well as a columnist, one of the founders of *Niwa* (the leading Polish positivist journal). He also translated French literary works into Polish. Little Henryk lost his parents while still a child. When he was 1 year old, his mother died, and at the age of 12 he lost his father. He grew up in the care of his father's sister.

In 1896 his father decided to put Henryk to school in Switzerland. The idea was to keep the son from compulsory tuition in a foreign language (Russian) and from the oppression that held down most of Poland (The Russian-held part of Poland) then. The reason for picking Switzerland was that in that small country his son would get in touch with several Western European languages and cultures. Henryk was only 9 then. He was taken to Zurich, Geneva, then to a boarding-school high up in the mountains (for health), and again to Geneva where he finished secondary school. At the stage, he wanted to become a writer or literary critic, yet all the time he cherished an interest in philosophy. (While still at school, in the last form, he diligently attended every session he could of the International Philosophical Congress then held in Geneva.)

After moving to Paris he enrolled at the university to study French literary history and, as a supplementary course, history of ancient literature. Right from the beginning he attended – apart from his compulsory curriculum – also philosophical lectures given by Bergson at the Collège de France and Rauh at the Sorbonne, and he benefited a great deal from studies con-

ducted by Borchard, Delbos and Lévy-Bruhl. In June 1909 he received his Ph.D. on account of his published treatise called *Le sentiment religieux chez Leconte de Lisle*.

As a 22-year-old man he came home to Poland, but stayed there only for fifteen months, mostly in Kraków. He went back to Switzerland, to work as *Privatdozent* in French literature at Neuchâtel University in 1910–1912.

In mid-1912, he again went to Kraków. He did some serious philosophical research, which resulted in a translation of Leibniz's *Monadology* and a brilliant study of *The Foundations of Leibniz's Metaphysics*.

His intensive research work was cut short by the outbreak of the World War. No sooner did Józef Piłsudski form his (anti-Russian militant) Polish Legions than Elzenberg joined as a volunteer – already in August 1914. After a trip on a diplomatic mission to Switzerland early in 1915 Elzenberg spent four months at the front with an infantry regiment taking part in several battles (including that of Konary). Back from the front, he was on the staff of the Press Office of the Secretariat General of the Polish Supreme National Committee in Kraków. In the next three years he served as secondary school teacher (with brief breaks including a two-month leave in Vienna as a visiting scholar sponsored by the Polish Academy of Learning, and a brief spell of work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). With the outbreak of the Polish-Soviet war in 1920, Elzenberg again joined the army as a volunteer, on that occasion with the rank of gunner specialising in artillery reconnaissance. He was demobilised in October of the same year.

After those years of continually interrupted – yet always resumed – research work, he could at last concentrate on problems he had taken up before, and he finished a study on *Marcus Aurelius: From the History and Psychology of Ethics*. On the ground of that study he was granted a status of assistant professor at Jagiello University in Kraków.

He then moved to Warsaw where he taught French and Latin at a secondary school at the same time serving as reader in philosophy at Warsaw University. In 1931–1935, he also served as lecturer at the State Teacher's Institute, and in 1934–1936 he delivered lectures in aesthetics at the State Institute of Theatrical Art. In the 14 years he lived in Warsaw Elzenberg wrote several treatises in ethics and aesthetics, a number of philosophical essays in literary criticism, and several revised versions of a comprehensive system of philosophy of value (unpublished).

In 1936, Elzenberg moved to Wilno University where he took up lectures in ethics, aesthetics, general value theory and history of philosophy. He did not confine himself to his work at the university, for he was a founding member of the local Democratic Club, which sought to help ensure a peaceful coexistence of Poles with Lithuanians, among other declared objectives.

He spent the years of the Second World War in Wilno. After the university was closed down, Elzenberg continued to work as teacher for under-

ground schools and university courses. He also delivered lectures for small groups. He earned his living then doing odd jobs, mostly as manual worker.

At the beginning of 1945 he left Wilno going to Lublin. Till the end of the school year, he worked as professor of French literature at the Catholic University of Lublin, at the same time teaching French at the Marie Skłodowska-Curie University and aesthetics at the Theatrical School there.

In the autumn of 1945, he went to Nicholas Copernicus University in Toruń where he became full professor and head of the Chair of Philosophy. His lectures there were in general axiology, aesthetics, ethics and history of philosophy.

In 1950, as Stalinism was spreading to put down social and cultural life in Poland, Elzenberg's teaching activities were interrupted. He used the compulsory leave to embark on very intensive research undertakings (resuming, among other things, his close studies of Plato and Berkeley). He cooperated with editors of the well-known series called Classics of Philosophy Library, being in charge of French publications in that series for a brief time.

In April 1956, he was restored his right to deliver lectures and he resumed the Chair of Philosophy. He retired four years later.

But he worked very hard for another five years producing new studies and preparing his earlier ones for publication. A fatal disease cut short his life. He died in Warsaw on April 6, 1967. He is buried at Warsaw's historic Powązki cemetery.

Henryk Elzenberg was Associate Member of the Warsaw Scientific Society (from 1932), Member of the Philological and Philosophical and Historico/Archaeological Sections of the Toruń Scientific Society, a long-time Member of the Board of the Toruń Branch of the Polish Philosophical Society, and for several years also Chairman of the Pomeranian Musical Society.

Elzenberg's broad personal interests showed in the varied topics he took up in his research work. In his work as philosophy professor Elzenberg concentrated on the history of philosophy, ethics and aesthetics. His main interests included Plato, the Stoics, the Epicureans, ancient Indian philosophy as spelled out in the poem *Bhagawagita*, Leibniz, Berkeley, Fichte, Schelling, Nietzsche, Bergson, existentialism, 20th-century analytical philosophy, and Gandhi. He studied all those thinkers against a broad backdrop of European philosophy, and he presented many other elements of that European context in his own profound and original manner.

As literary and art critic, Elzenberg wrote many essays, articles and reviews bringing out inherent philosophical issues from the studied works and assessing their aesthetic value. He studied works by Montaigne, Goethe, 18th, 19th and 20th century French works, works by Polish writers like Mickiewicz, Żeromski, Berent, as well as by Italian philosopher Croce.

In articles he published in journals, Elzenberg also spoke out on philosophical and ethical implications of different public issues.

He wrote six books: 1) *Le sentiment religieux chez Leconte de Lisle*, 1909 (his Ph.D. thesis); 2) *The foundations of Leibniz's metaphysics*, 1917; 3) *Marcus Aurelius: From the history and psychology of ethics*, 1922; 4) *The trouble with being. Aphorisms in the order of time*, 1963 (a philosophical diary); 5) *Trying to get in touch. Essays and critical studies*, 1966; 6) *Value and human beings. Essays in the humanities and philosophy*, 1966.

The main body of Elzenberg's writings has never been published. At present the manuscripts are kept (in more than 70 portfolios) in the Archives of the Polish Academy of Sciences.<sup>1</sup>

### Selected Philosophical Views

Of his huge output let us now pick a few points relating directly or implicitly to his views of science and his views of scientism, positivism, logical positivism.

#### *Some general Ontological and Epistemological Views*

Reality is varied, composed as it is of many levels and facets. It contains different structures and recurrent regularities and similarities, but – very importantly – it also has in itself definite specific “qualities,” unique “individual features.”

Some constituent elements of reality are easy to explore, some are more difficult to get to know, and there are elements which hardly yield to cognitive exploration at all. Also, some parts of reality can be explored through one specific kind of cognition, and other ones call for other cognitive approaches. At any rate, there is no way to get to know all parts of reality (or its strata or aspects) from one angle only, say from rational cognition (notional-discursive, abstract, symbolic), sensual, by experience, intuitive, mystical or religious, or by introspection (in order to reason by analogy about the outer world). Reality, then, has to be explored from different angles, using different methods and evoking different experiences. That is a great call for man. Although it is a difficult and sometimes fruitless order, it does have a chance of succeeding (to some extent at least), and that alone justifies the endeavour.

This general view of reality and possibilities to explore it (presented here deliberately in a simplified manner) is linked to the long-established distinctions in metaphysics between “essential” and “phenomenal” parts of reality; between “reality in a narrow meaning” and something which is more or less just a “semblance” of reality. Elzenberg viewed the history of metaphysics – a domain of philosophical reflection he thinks is fully justified

to exist in the world today – as an expression of the human mind’s everlasting, to some extent “natural,” concern about what is the ultimate nature of things.

So, sensual perception and using general notions are not enough to get to know the entire reality. However, they are not enough, they are necessary, for some important aspects of reality can best be approached precisely through experience and reason.

Let us now present Elzenberg’s as though dual view of notional cognition: 1) the inadequacy of the cognition, and 2) its indispensability, despite its inadequacy.

## I

Some significant parts of reality, including the afore-mentioned qualitative features, sort of slip through the mesh of general notions; someone who uses only that kind of cognition (notional-discursive) will not grasp them. Speaking on that point, for example when analysing the meaning of cause, Elzenberg said that Russell’s view of causal relation as essentially a functional relation – although based on clear and neat notions, relying on propositions cleared of all ambiguity or contradiction, having the charm of perfect exactitude and indeed aesthetic value – does not enable a fully satisfactory “understanding” of the relation. Russell purged the notion of causal relation of all contradictory or ambiguous elements, yet by doing so he cleared it of all “content,” that is, of what could be regarded as a reflection of a reality. That kind of concepts (as Russell’s) are, in Elzenberg’s view, evidence of the view that interpretation based on pure logic are not sufficient.<sup>2</sup>

To get a satisfactory “interpretation” or “understanding” of some significant points, it is often necessary to resort to intuition. Intuition is a very prominent notion in Elzenberg’s theory of cognitive processes, and it is difficult to present it adequately in all its meanings in this brief article. For want of space, let us therefore outline it in a simplified fashion, regrettably “trimming” it of some of its subtle and extensive theoretical ramifications.

Let us first look at what is probably the most original meaning of the notion (*intueor*) – of beholding. Let us extend the scope of beholding (which is restricted in the original meaning of the term only to images of visible things) to embrace all visualizations. Direct intuitive visualization implies, among other things, 1) its directness (we visualize the object itself, rather than its verbal or other symbol), and 2) its wholeness, i.e., the object is visualized in its entirety right away, as if at first glance; it is not dismantled in its parts which we would visualize one by one (as when we get to know the object from a description of its constituent parts). So we have to do with a kind of immediate apprehension (immediate, i.e. not preceded by inferen-

ce). Let us remember this primary meaning of intuition (which, although dating back to the very beginning, threads throughout the history of epistemology), omit rather (for simplicity) intuitionistic views of Plotinus, St. Augustine, medieval Christian philosophers, and let us go to Descartes and 17th-century rationalists. Reason, they thought, worked in two ways: 1) through deduction (*per necessariam deductionem*, to quote Descartes), and 2) through direct contemplation of primary truths (Descartes: *per evidentem intuitum*), and only from that can secondary truths be derived. Let us concentrate on this latter kind of rational activity alone. Link this “rationalist” notion of intuition to the afore-mentioned “primary” intuition (*intueor*). What we get in effect is something like a wholistic and direct view which comprises both the perceived image and thinking; a view which is directed both at primary simple truths and individual things, really-existing things. To this, expanded, notion of intuition let us add some Bergsonian elements, such as an intuitive apprehension of the quality, individuality, inner character of a thing, the original contents of a really-existing thing without the transformations mind subjects them to. Let us omit Bergson’s idea of intuition as a natural instinct.

Elzenberg’s idea of intuition as put together by us here is something like a pattern which is a far-reaching simplification; a pattern meant to lead the reader only to the direction of Elzenberg’s original thinking concerning intuition.

The attribution to such intuition of a prominent place in epistemological theory, and Elzenberg’s personal experience of such cognitive acts, have to do with his other views concerning cognition. Here are a few of those views.

**Attitude to the imaginative visualization of things.** Elzenberg himself said that a sense of “apprehending” emerged in him when he managed to qualify a thing not only purely conceptually but also with a satisfactory image. Such an image held up some essential feature of the thing, something which slipped through the mesh of pure notions; the image grasped the unique “quality” that disappeared completely in mathematical reasoning. At the same time, Elzenberg did recognise as legitimate the use of abstract non-mathematical formulations which conveyed some small qualitative substance; he also thought in most cases we have got to content ourselves with them; yet he thought such formulations were of limited value, as they failed to satisfy either of the two great wants of the human mind: the intuitive and the analytical.<sup>3</sup>

**View of rationalism.** Generally, Elzenberg took a positive attitude towards classical rationalism and a negative one towards rationalism of his time. He pointed out that great rationalists, the classical metaphysicists of the 17th century, referred ultimately also to intuition in their most fundamental propositions and notions, and after that – but only a f t e r that – they “spread” the notions step by step discursively in their systems. By contrast, philosophers of the Warsaw School, e.g., Łukasiewicz, Leśniewski or Ko-

tarbiński, purged “reason” of the intuitive element completely. In that kind of thinking, Elzenberg argued, algebraic reason and pure discursive thinking in the very act of cognition as if put down the proper object of cognition; all that is positive, all “being,” as though slips through the fingers.<sup>4</sup>

**View of language.** Among his general methodological observations Elzenberg included the following cautionary remark: “Reality is composed of individual contents; individual contents have no equivalents in vocabulary; vocabulary is a collection of symbols for concepts; concepts are only networks of chequered patterns marked on reality; that is why it is a bad idea to have much confidence in language for anyone setting out to explore reality.”<sup>5</sup>

**View of using also imprecise notions.** Elzenberg, himself master at using very precise formulations, admitted the use in some situations of imprecise notions, “floating” notions, ambiguous terms with several shades of meaning and a correspondingly broad range of possible uses. It may happen in some situations that when confining oneself to exact notions you can grasp only one kind of comprehension of a thing, namely its structure. But those who want to portray reality, those who “want to live in this world as in the world, and not in a design room or an exhibition of models,” have to use such “floating” terms as something indispensable. Reality itself is floating, while notions are rigid constructs; reality consists of an uncountable mass of elements, while the range of notions and terms is finite (especially of precise notions).<sup>6</sup>

To sum up the views presented to this point let us look at two observations of Elzenberg’s. 1) On the question of “understanding”: “«To understand» means to provide a discursive logical equivalent to a given intuitive image. Yet if you provide that equivalent alone while removing intuition from consciousness, there is no understanding at all.”<sup>7</sup> 2) on grasping the substance of a thing being apprehended: “I need concepts only as a framework, and not as the stuff of which my world is made.”<sup>8</sup>

## II

The above-outlined propositions on the insufficiency of notional (discursive) thinking are in Elzenberg’s works logically linked to other propositions on the very significant and indispensable role of that kind of thinking. These two aspects of intellectual cognition (the weak one discussed in the previous section and the strong one discussed now) should be kept in mind all along, especially when one concentrates attention on one only. Both aspects are shown by Elzenberg in a context of many arguments belonging to the coherent body of his philosophical views.

For want of space we are not going to present all those arguments, not even those with a broad theoretical base. But one point should be mentioned regardless at this place: the same arguments that speak for the indispensability of notional and empirical cognition speak for the legitimacy of particular disciplines – not only of natural science but the humanities as well, for notions and experience are most vital components of both. (To say nothing on the dominance of discursive thinking in logic and mathematics.) Elzenberg never questioned either the legitimacy of any particular discipline or the capacity for progress in any of them, or the efficacy of their methods of getting to know the different segments of the world, or indeed the sense at all of the exercise of science; in fact, that kind of cognition fitted fully in his outlook (which will be discussed later on in this article).

At this point, though, rather than trying to give an account of Elzenberg's more general epistemological views let us point to Elzenberg's own practical research procedure, his skilful handling of discursive thinking as an cognitive tool.

He used that kind of thinking as an indispensable tool (not to be substituted by any other factors of cognition, expression or information) in three major areas.

First, he used it in all issues he addressed as a scholar. It could be said here that in that kind of activity factors such as perfect use of notional thinking, clarity and precision of expression, ensuring maximum accuracy of meanings of terms, easy communication, lastly criticism, acuity, lack of bias in research etc. – should be normal factors (however rare they may prove to be in practice); that, incidentally, is no ground for giving Elzenberg any special credence, for he should be simply classed with an (admittedly not numerous) top class of scholars having the mentioned qualities. Yet even such a distinction would not do him justice, for what made him so unique a thinker was the simultaneous occurrence of three qualities: 1) the notional unapproachability of the issues he used to study; 2) highest precision of reasoning; and 3) intelligibility of his language. Elzenberg was able to overcome the somewhat “natural” contradictions between these three factors in his work both as historian of philosophy and in his ethical and aesthetic studies. It does not take a great deal of expertise to know that a historian of philosophy embarking on a semantic and philosophical analysis of Plato, Berkeley, Fichte or Schelling is bound to face formidable problems trying to render the meanings of those works precisely in Polish. Comparative studies of different ethical systems which were part of lectures in formal axiology were perhaps even more difficult to render precisely in the sense of finding exact Polish equivalents for the original terms. The problem there was to design for them a notional framework such that would work for all studied ethics (which differed widely for their cultural backdrop and original language) and so would help disclose their similarities and differences. From that point of view, the most unwieldy issue of all perhaps was Elzenberg's

valuating position in ethics and aesthetics. In that domain (where he still acted a scholar while becoming above all a philosopher), Elzenberg took advantage of discursive thinking to the extent of developing his comprehensive normative theory of aesthetic expression as well as his own normative ethical theory. As far as the philosophy of value is concerned, I do not know of anyone in Polish literature producing thoughts that are so profound and, at the same time, formulated in so clear and intelligible a manner. It was in the field of philosophy of value that Elzenberg managed to be the "Polish record holder" in precise discursive thinking even while using colloquial language (to the extent the subject permitted that).

Another line of work involves reflection on his own attitudes and moral experiences which Elzenberg communicates to his readers (as a person and thinker, not as scholar). He spoke, among other things, on different valuating experiences, basic irrational motivations etc. which is usually difficult to give clear intellectual articulation to. It may be asked whether man should impose rules of correct thinking on this part of his emotional and volitional life thus running different dangers arising from purely epistemological categories of truth and falsehood? Should one impose any intellectual pattern on such experiences? Shouldn't man keep just to his emotional, practical and volitional attitude? Elzenberg extended important arguments for limiting discursive thinking in those areas, but he also produced arguments to the contrary, which eventually decided the issue, "Emotional attitude which is purely itself, with no intellectual intervention whatever, lacks consistency. It is apparently established, honestly recognised by the person as his or her own, and yet it is a toy of changing states of heart, while these in turn are often rocked by events, pushes from outside, historical vicissitudes. Intellectual intervention provides something like a frame, a clasp, a core, a direction. It renders you open to criticism, but is protects you against a still greater hazard: losing your integrity."<sup>9</sup>

A third area of discursive thinking refers to a kind of jobs in which such thinking would seem to be totally out of place: it is the question of establishing contact to the "nonrational" world (which is significant, outside and inside man, an ontological and axiological reality); a reality Elzenberg could only experience when "going beyond rational thinking." Elzenberg's point was that man can get across to that "irrationality," or "transrationality," only by "orderly and honest reasoning." That is why having ascertained his subjective experience of that other reality, having ascertained going beyond rational thinking, Elzenberg had this to say at the end of one of his statements, "What is the point of engaging in rational inquiry, however honest? Of the many reasons for doing so, also because by reaching in this way the transrational bottom you can give yourself an experience of a reality which is not easy to get in other ways."<sup>10</sup>

In the views reported so far the following general statement can be found, among other things: If you look at the process of cognition as such, you will see that both intuition and reason, as well as experience, have their own significant parts in it. Depending on the nature of the studied subject, now one, now another, now the third of those factors play a main part.

### View of science and scientism

Let us discuss Elzenberg's view of scientism, logical positivism and positivism which, along with their many variants, will be seen as one general current. This simplification is introduced deliberately in order to bring to light differences between Elzenberg's views and the fundamental elements which are common to all those currents.

Views such as scientism, the subject of which is science and which are metascientific philosophical reflections on science, have a different epistemological status than, for example, a certain natural science, the subject of which is entirely different: a definite physical segment of the world. So, there are as though two "levels" in the domain of cognitive propositions. In order to make the difference between those two "levels" more evident, let us interpret "science" (which belongs in the "lower" level) as "a collection of all empirical and mathematical sciences."

Science in this meaning – as ornithology or ichthyology, say – includes no propositions on the essence of scientific cognition; or its credibility compared with other kinds of cognition; or the ethical and aesthetic value of science, its uses for individuals, cultures and society; indeed, there are no propositions concerning general methods, paradigms, progress in science etc. Propositions that belong in such science concern, say, physical qualities of birds or fish.

The opposite is true at the "upper" level, the metascientific one, the level of scientism. There, no empirical propositions are made concerning physical qualities of objects studied by a science but instead propositions are expressed on matters mentioned above by way of example as belonging in none of the particular sciences. Scientism is not part of science but is a philosophical attitude towards science. It is a cult of science, but cult is not the same as its object.

These are all fairly obvious truths. If they are recalled at this point, then only to show that Elzenberg's different views of science and of scientism reflect his different attitudes towards two different matters.

Three groups of propositions: 1) components of scientism, 2) achievements of science, and 3) Elzenberg's views, are now going to be presented to indicate contradictions between them. That will show that 1) no contradictions exist, of course, between scientism and science, 2) no contradictions

exist between science and Elzenberg (which should be stressed), and 3) contradictions – and very fundamental ones, in nearly all respects – exist between Elzenberg and scientism.

Let us look at points two and three.

### *View of science*

That Elzenberg took a positive attitude towards science must have been clear already from section II where we discussed his positive view of discursive thinking (which is of essential significance in the process and results of scientific cognition). While that particular process of cognition – like the empirical road too – is not sufficient to grasp all reality (as indicated in section I), it is nonetheless indispensable. It is on the way of scientific cognition that human beings get to know their situation in outer space, in the world of living organisms, in society; no other kind of cognition can supply man with more reliable knowledge about many important elements and structures of the world.

To put this general view of Elzenberg's in a more specific manner, let us just point out that his philosophy is perfectly in keeping with what modern natural science recognises as a "normal" position. Supposing Elzenberg himself was a naturalist making known his philosophy in Goethe's times, then despite what section I may suggest, he would not have taken the German thinker's side in his famous dispute with Newton. Goethe could not put up with the idea that the very essential "qualitative contents" of light were lost in the rigid system of Newtonian concepts; that abstractions created for the purpose of mathematical demonstration exist in Newton's theory of rays; that they say little or nothing about what they were supposed to be about; that they fail to grasp the real nature of light. Goethe fought his long war against Newton's successors not only in metaphysics but above all in physics; whereas Elzenberg, it seems, would surrender all such battle-fields, including the most recent ones, to modern natural science without a fight.

### *View of scientism*

Considering the above-mentioned noncontradiction between scientism and science, as well as between science and Elzenberg's views, the question presents itself: what about the afore-indicated contradiction between Elzenberg and followers of scientism? Especially as that was quite a fundamental contradiction – precisely over the nature of science, for what scientism is basically all about is its attitude towards science.

To answer briefly, while both Elzenberg and advocates of scientism recognised scientific cognition as indispensable, while neither questioned the

validity of scientific accomplishments, followers of scientism recognised science as a sufficient and sole way of getting to know reality, while Elzenberg refused to recognise that.

Let us now develop this brief formulation in a context of three major topics:

1) **Within a framework of general theory of reality.** The same reality which followers of scientism (and various brands of logical positivists) regarded as the only reality – meaning the reality which is completely explorable through particular sciences – was recognised also by Elzenberg, as a reality that can and should be explored, but not as the only reality. Elzenberg apparently regards some elements of reality as very important (those specific individual, occasionally unique qualities; or the more “profound” ones that can be grasped only by intuition or jointly by intuition and discursive thinking: cf. p. 129–131), while to followers of scientism such elements quite simply do not exist at all. Followers of scientism equate “something that exists” with “something that can be studied by a particular empirical science.” This is where Elzenberg’s ontology differs importantly from that of scientism and logical positivism (ontology, by the way, in scientism and logical positivism just tacitly assumed, for in these currents taking up ontological problems was explicitly deprecated as a matter of principle).

Let me make this point clear on an example. Suppose three groups of people are wandering along a path across large fields. They stand for (a) followers of scientism, especially logical positivists, (b) agnostics of various colours, especially those close to T. H. Huxley and E. Du Bois-Reymond, and (c) those who believe in metaphysical exercises to the extent postulated by Elzenberg and some others. The fields they are walking across is the area they are to explore, which can be done using methods of particular empirical sciences; the way is that of reason and experience, the way of scientific research, improved systematically through the development of notions, methods and procedures. They all walk together, mostly in agreement (forget the minor differences between them), they pursue essentially the same goals in exploring the area they are crossing, and they all can claim to have discovered what are unquestionably accomplishments in that respect. But all of a sudden, after marching in the same direction for some time they find themselves in new situations. For the logical positivists, the area to be explored suddenly ends; the road of empirical science ends over a cliff: that is the end of the subject of those sciences and, at the same time, the end of all reality (beyond that point there is only a vacuum which can hold no meaningful problem). The 19th and 20th century agnostics, for their part, also find themselves at the verge of an area that had the familiar qualities. But as they are looking beyond that point, they do not see just a vacuum; they see what is a new area, a real one, which is important and interesting, yet nebulous. The way that leads up to the new area is so slippery

and dangerous that there is no chance of getting there ever. So, unlike the logical positivists, the agnostics do not find themselves at the very end of all reality and any meaningful problems, but only at the end of the human capacity for finding answers to those problems. Accordingly, they put up a roadblock on the way at the point where the two very different segments meet, while Dubois-Reymond fixes on it a sign with his famous saying *Ignoramus atque ignorabimus*. But Elzenberg, aware as he is of the differences between the previous and the new areas and between the old and the new segments of the way, puts up not so much a roadblock as a milestone to mark the end of what used to be a relatively safe march and the beginning of a more hazardous part of the way.

”End of reality,” “new reality and a roadblock,” and “new reality and a milestone” – even by looking at this comparison one will notice right away that Elzenberg saw his main adversary in logical positivism.

2) **Within a framework of epistemology.** Continuing along the way in the new, more hazardous, segments, one employs some new means of cognition. Several of them were mentioned before (in section I) when referring to intuition, imaginary thinking, imprecise notions, refusals to keep rigorously to requirements of scientific language etc. These means, which Elzenberg regarded as indispensable in some situations, were at odds with general postulates of followers of scientism, in particular with specific directives devised by logical positivists. The differences in the means, as we saw, echoed the differences in the subjects of cognition (two different realities on both sides of the milestone).

Yet despite the appearance of such different means of cognition, we viewed the new segment largely as an extension of the former segment (the empirical and discursive one); in the new segment discourse and intuition are as though closely intertwined. Together the two factors constitute something like a complete condition of cognition (we prefer to talk of a “complete” rather than a “sufficient” condition, for even that “complete” one gives no guarantee that it is always sufficient for cognition); yet each of the two factors separately is a necessary condition. However, in the new segment, intuition is sometimes the more important of the two, for in case one and only one of the two should be chosen it would have to be intuition. This last principle is totally at odds with the logical positivist style of thinking. On the other hand, though, Elzenberg’s idea of continuing to use the pattern of scientific thinking in that nonscientific area should not be forgotten either. Let us illustrate that by example. In a polemical article Elzenberg presents the case of a valuating aesthetician very different from the pattern spread at the time by positivist-minded and sociologically-oriented aestheticians. The aesthetician’s attitude approved by Elzenberg can be interpreted in a broader sense as the attitude of a metaphysician, aesthetician, ethic philosopher, philosopher of value or philosopher at large – who goes beyond

the above-indicated point of area explored solely by particular empirical sciences. "He knows full well the area is full of traps; that his chance of erring is greater than his chance to succeed; he has a deep-seated sense of uncertainty of his results, of being constantly exposed to criticism by others and by himself – briefly, a sense of continual hazard. That hazard, by the way, is a source of joy for him, for as a mental type he must necessarily have something of an adventurer in him, and his attitude towards the «positivist» is somewhat like the attitude of a skipper who knows he can get drowned any moment, unlike a landlubber who knows he is protected from such an indecent danger. That, in a way, is a source of satisfaction for the skipper, but that is not the decisive thing on matters of cognition; the all-decisive thing is that he does not want to drown. That is why he is above all and very sensibly cautious... He is... critical of his own accomplishments, wary of making any reckless statement, willing to change and correct his views, and, generally, self-restrained above all. Nor would he despise anyone's arguments."<sup>11</sup>

Of the reasons that would justify a decision to go beyond the above-mentioned milestone the following two seem really important: 1) there is a chance of coming closer towards answers to some of the most important problems, or perhaps of finding a new approach towards them; and 2) the essence of humanity (the most important of all reasons perhaps). "If you «get rid» of philosophy, you get rid of the humanity inside you. No sensible person would trade a life bristling with problems, even serious ones, for one with no problems at all."<sup>12</sup> Both reasons, given Elzenberg's interpretation of "philosophy" and "problem," are at odds with fundamental ideas of logical positivism.

3) **Within the framework of philosophy of value.** Let us only look at the valuating (and not the descriptive) part of that philosophy. Logical positivists refused to deal with those questions as a matter of principle, and that is why Elzenberg's position concerns as though the "subcutaneous" valuating current of logical positivism.

(a) The most vocal call perhaps inside that current is that for a dominant position of science in culture. Though such a demand need not logically follow from any confidence in science in the epistemological area, yet actually the cognitive cult of science went along with a cult of science in culture; that connection had long existed in the positivist current (Francis Bacon, Comte, 19th century followers of scientism, logical positivists). Elzenberg's general view of culture was fundamentally different. He believed that most basic judgments within a system of valuating judgments (ultimate premises of normative nature) are products of unique experiences, which are valuating, nonreducible to either perceptions or their intellectual transformations or any *a priori* judgments, but they are a product of experiences in which intuition plays the main part. Hence culture in its essential values cannot be created, or apprehended, solely through those cognitive processes

which suffice to create and apprehend science. So, should the scientific demand for a dominant position of science in culture be met, the result would be damaging for culture, indeed for its most essential part.

(b) Logical positivists apply their scrupulous analyses to distinguish various kinds of statements, among others also valuating statements (evaluations, postulated standards, norms etc.). The fact itself of such distinctions does not undercut valuating views, indeed it can even help produce a better version of such views – as when it exposes in a sentence a tacitly assumed copula of “should” disguised as “is.” But there is more to that. In their repeated actions of sifting the chaff from the grain, in subsequent sifts following a first crude one logical positivists pay close attention to classifying the “grain” but little to classifying the “chaff.” As a result, metaphysical along with normative propositions, and thus all kinds of ethical and aesthetic valuating systems, were thrown in one basket of “chaff” which logical positivists with barely hidden contempt called the “realm of metaphysics.”<sup>13</sup> Logical positivists were against the very idea of building such systems, against laboriously defining notions in evaluations, against the establishment of systems of logical connections between propositions etc., on the argument that such actions, characteristic of scientific activity, impart a semblance of scientific validity to propositions which cannot possibly be scientific because of their (normative) nature. So, logical positivist researchers produced no valuating ethical or aesthetic systems but acted in the domain of *d e s c r i p t i v e s c i e n c e s*: the psychology of moral motives, sociology of mores and morals, the psychology of artistic creativity and aesthetic perception, sociology of art etc. And although the mere specialisation itself in these descriptive disciplines does not necessarily lead towards a depreciation of normative ones (as there are just two separate branches in the same general domain), researchers with such an descriptive orientation tended to impart incomparably greater (scientific) significance to descriptive lines of activity.

That was clearly and fundamentally at odds with Elzenberg’s views. For him, building valuating systems was both a fundamental condition of culture and one of culture’s principal functions.

(c) Of the other points of difference let us mention two only: 1) logical positivists’ inclination towards relativistic view of values, and 2) the occasional demonstration of utilitarianism and hedonism (which looks back on a long tradition inside positivism). These two points are in their way connected, and the latter has a major effect on the former: a person whose conduct is determined by a view to a subjective general favourable balance of pleasure and displeasure as though turns his or her back on absolute values, which are viewed and justified differently (at any rate, independently from that balance).

Elzenberg’s opposite view against the two points has to do with the essential part of his normative ethical theory.

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In addition, let me present two issues of a different kind yet closely connected with the matter under discussion.

## I

Elzenberg had his own general valuating, normative theory (ethical, aesthetic theory, which was an indispensable part of his outlook) which helped him evaluate the range of topics in humanistic disciplines (in descriptive nonvaluating branches as well as in normative valuating branches). He was able to assess the value of things themselves (elements of culture) whether or not they were subjects of scientific study. So, on the ground of his theory, Elzenberg could tell the extremely fragmentary or "small-scale" topics from "futile" ones. In other words, he could evaluate the point of taking up or resigning any actions in the humanities and social sciences; question the point of even the best performance of such actions because of the very little (or zero) value of the studied object itself. Logical positivists could never do that, because they moved all normative theory of value outside the bounds of science in the narrow sense as a matter of principle and they were determined to move about only in that narrow, "strictly scientific," domain in all stages of their work.

Let us be more specific. As a logical positivist, a researcher in a discipline could take either of two positions: 1) as logical positivist and specialist in an area (say, in literary theory) formulating propositions on the segment of culture he studied, as on a literary piece, or the pertinent conditions (unequivocal propositions which are verifiable intersubjectively), 2) as a logical positivist-philosopher using directives of his philosophy and subjecting one's own texts (or other people's) to logical analysis in order to make sure that one did not fall in the trap of metaphysics or an equally "nonscientific" normative valuating theory. Neither the two kinds of propositions (the "specialised" and the "philosophical" ones) nor the logical-positivistic metascientific reflections justified either the importance or unimportance of any topic, because from that angle no valuating statement could be made of what was an "external" object of study which existed no matter whether or not anyone studied it.

Followers of logical positivism seem to be avoiding a confrontation of their propositions with the widely shared view that the "external" value of the studied object determines, to some extent, the value of the research topic itself (that, for its part, can be well or badly elaborated, regardless of its value). Elzenberg always had a firm view of that matter in reference to both the arts and the study of culture. In that he referred to Goethe, among others, in whose view the inherent substance (*Gehalt*) of the studied object was the ultimately decisive factor for art; even though genius and talent, as Goethe put it, can make everything of everything else, the result is an object for

show (*Kunststück*) rather than a work of art; a work of art should have a foundation in an object which has its dignity.<sup>14</sup> The same, Elzenberg believed, was true of disciplines dealing with culture.

Yet despite that situation (which is presented in a general outline only) researchers in humanistic disciplines who leaning towards logical positivism did pick and study those and not other matters. But if their philosophy contained – as a matter of principle – no normative theory which would seek to assess the value of things studied, what made them choose the things they did? The criteria and motives for their choices were many: Sometimes they were guided by their “personal” judgements about the value of the studied object, judgements which were beyond the limits of the logical positivistic philosophy, judgements which generally belonged in no theoretically developed valuating philosophy (for those who were serious about the adherence to logical positivism would not approve valuating general theories). Leaving aside (all possible) personal motives making researchers choose the matters they sometimes did for study, let us point out two reasons for taking up such matters:

1) First, there is something like a suitability of an object for scrupulous study; its objective features are suitable to precise descriptions using experience and well-defined notions; or, the object’s natural proneness to being described in propositions that met requirements of positivist rules; lastly, the circumstance that the object had never or from the given point of view been described. Such and similar criteria are admittedly “measurable” thus meeting logical positivist standards and easy to identify already in a preliminary stage of choosing a topic for research work. But if a researcher confines to these and no other criteria, then he may – albeit not necessarily – see himself choosing the most preposterous topics. 2) Secondly, researchers tend to bow to different conventional standards predominant in a discipline at the moment. Elzenberg viewed that as a great hazard to culture at large. In his view, research was part of work for the benefit of culture, and that in turn was subordinate to a more general purpose: the creation of nonrelativistic and unconventional values which were significant for man. As new special disciplines are emerging, rigid borders are being set up between them and narrowly specialised groups of experts are developing, and so individual disciplines increasingly tend to live their own lives pursuing their own specific goals which are sometimes very remote from the aforementioned general purpose. “Here is one result of that development: what a researcher finds uninteresting as a man, begins to interest him «as» a linguist, biochemist, ornitologist. However, unlike the former «as», the latter «as» turns out to be purely conventional. Proceeding along that way one can accomplish anything, even making statements about Chairefont’s flea leap, but only within the boundaries of convention. Research forfeits its link to culture, to become an irrelevant science about a million fleas and their leaps – with

each member of the guild always thinking of his flea as the first one.”<sup>15</sup> Staunch positivist positions, especially in the humanities, always hold hazards Elzenberg pointed out.

## II

Lastly, let us mention one more reason for which Elzenberg took a negative attitude towards logical positivism: his resentment of intolerance and endeavours to claim monopoly power for one’s own views. That, of course, is not a contradiction with programmes, for intolerance was not part of the logical positivist programme. The problem there was not so much with logical positivism as with logical positivists; not so much with declared programmes as with actual practices; and not with all followers of that school of thinking as with some of them, however large and representative a group they made up. A word of caution should be said at this point though. Each researcher who is positive about the validity of his contentions, or the untruth of the opponent’s views, who feels he should seek to win new followers for his own position and who feels sometimes even a moral obligation to fight for truth – is of course “intolerant” in a way and tend in some measure to “ensure monopoly” for his views. But Elzenberg meant something else: he resented some people’s intentional refusal to try to understand the opponent’s style of thinking; their supercilious rejection of what was to be explored; and their subsequent decision to start arguments – even bitter ones – without knowing a lot about the views they looked down upon. That was a sin both of intellectual and, in a sense, moral nature. Elzenberg remarked in his diary: “Hegel’s admirable saying, *In die Kraft des Gegners eingehen*. That’s the only way to defeat them for good.”<sup>16</sup> Elzenberg, quite simply, just did not see logical positivists making any effort in that direction. As for “meeting the opponent where he is strongest,” Elzenberg himself did that brilliantly in his polemical articles as well as in university lectures. He not only scrupulously reconstructed opponents’ views but often represented them in a more exact and profound fashion, bringing up their most persuasive implicit reasons and drawing conclusions that could hurt his own views even more efficiently. Only then did he challenge the opposite views. Some logical positivists occasionally used inadmissible ways. They did one of two things, both having to do with the afore-mentioned reluctance to “meet the opponent where he is strongest” and both of course occurring not only in the logical positivist movement: 1) twisting, simplifying or misrepresenting the opponent’s views; Elzenberg reacted to such views by taking the trouble to demonstrate their gaps and errors through step-by-step clear-sighted analysis; 2) labelling an opponent’s views using terms that had a bad ring to some people and in connection with some issues, such as e.g., “metaphysics,”

“scholastics,” “ideal spheres,” “Art in its Sublimity,” “aesthetic illumination” etc. In specific contexts such names were meant to ridicule, poke fun at, deride or caricature a given view, but, most importantly, in some cases such names were used as a substitute of honest argument. Ridicule as an argument against derided views was something Elzenberg found detestful both as scholar and as man. He never stooped to debating such propositions, confining himself to a curt denunciation of their character.

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This contribution only presents matters directly or indirectly connected with scientism, yet even within these narrow boundaries we could indicate some issues only partly so as to give readers a general idea of about Elzenberg’s philosophy. In conclusion let us say a few words on that philosophy’s continuing significance as a factor opposed to scientism.

Elzenberg was the most important philosopher of values in Polish history. His position as an eminent scholar and thinker on scientism, whether pronounced explicitly or to be gleaned from the entire body of his views, is therefore of particular weight. Scientism, after all, is not merely a meta-scientific epistemological exercise, but it implies – and often indeed stands for – a definite philosophy of value.

There is more to that though. Advocates of scientism (along with all adherents to philosophy conceived of as logical analysis purging all views from anything that is vague or metaphysical) roll out two kinds of heavy artillery against metaphysics: 1) they point to the development of science (notably modern natural science) as conclusive evidence of the validity of their way of thinking; and 2) they pride themselves of their own remarkable accomplishments in giving notions more precise meanings and demonstrating logical order (or inconsistency) in views they approved or opposed. As has been shown, neither of those weapons can be justifiably be aimed on Elzenberg. He acknowledged both the accomplishments of science and logical positivists’ contributions to notional analysis, an area in which he himself worked (even though he confined himself to descriptive and valuating humanistic disciplines) achieving at least the same degree of accuracy as they did. His work, precisely because it takes account of both kinds of weapons, is also valid today for debates now under way against followers of scientism, debates which concern fundamental issues, mainly the philosophy of man and philosophy of culture. In many views of science and scientism (which we did not discuss here for want of space), Elzenberg never took a stand that would have prevented, or even just interfered in, acknowledging the merits of science which advocates of scientism underscore. Elzenberg was aware of those merits and never questioned them, but he pointed at their epistemological and axio-

logical insufficiency for man. That is why he launched his charges on the limited vistas of science and scientism, denying neither the propositions of science itself nor propositions of different sciences of science (propositions that fitted in the compass of scientific thinking) and only denounced the *narrow* (in some respects) *horizon* of thinking in scientism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This brief biography is an abbreviated version of Michał Woroniecki's article *On the Life of Henryk Elzenberg* (in No. 12 of *Studia Filozoficzne*, 1986) with a few additions and changes of style and presentation (due to abbreviations). In the same issue of "Studia Filozoficzne," Jan Zubelewicz published a complete bibliography of publications by and about Elzenberg.

<sup>2</sup> Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem* (The trouble with being), Kraków 1963, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157, 332–333.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331–332, 282. This point reveals a great deal of similarity between as widely different philosophers as Elzenberg and Henry Habberley Price. Both of them pronounced themselves firmly in favour of "clarity" in presenting views, both put forward important cognitive arguments to support this stand-point, and both were perfectionists in what they did. Yet, with all that, both admitted that in some cases – and very significant ones for men – things cannot be comprehended via the existing body of notions and terms (which are exact and unambiguous enough). Both recommended the dropping of notional exactitude in favour of other ways of penetrating a thing and other ways of communicating personal experiences (such as the use of vague poetic language, metaphors, allegories, hazy pictures etc.). Both philosophers were aware of and put up with the bad damage such a recommendation could have for philosophy and the humanistic disciplines, and therefore often warned against abusing it. H. H. Price, *Clarity Is Not Enough*, "Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society," Supplementary Volume 19, 1945, pp. 29–30.

<sup>7</sup> H. Elzenberg, *Kłopot...*, *op.cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272. It should be pointed out here that under the influence of ethical studies by G. E. Moore and other British ethical philosophers Elzenberg restored a balance between strict discursive thinking and "disorderly" or emotional, aphoristic and intuitive thinking, a balance somewhat disturbed in favour of the "disorderly" thinking in his twenties. H. Elzenberg, *Reply to queries from the journal «Znak», "Znak" 1952 No. 31.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>11</sup> H. Elzenberg, *Estetyka jako dyscyplina wartościująca* (Aesthetics as a valuating discipline), "Pion" 1936, No. 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Kłopot...*, *op.cit.*, p. 453.

<sup>13</sup> R. Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, 1935.

<sup>14</sup> *Kłopot...*, p. 307, referring to a passage in Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217, referring to Aristophanes's *Clouds* and J. Łukasiewicz's *O nauce* (*On science*).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 421.