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Religiopolitical Dimensions of Physical Culture in Polish Philosophy of Action with Special Reference to August Cieszkowski

Abstract

The paper concerns Polish philosophy of action with special regard to physical culture. I mean a peculiar philosophical current of Polish Romanticism (19th century) that focused, among others, on physical education and somatic improvement. The body practice was treated there as one of important components of political resistance during the period of the loss of Polish statehood and independence (1772–1918). I would like to draw special attention to the historiosophical aspect of physical culture as it was developed by August Cieszkowski, an outstanding Hegelian Polish thinker. In fact, he established the world known Polish philosophy of action in strong opposition to Hegelian speculative idealism, pointing out the necessity of real deeds as a means to individual and collective (national) self-realization and liberation. The body valiance was the base for that project. Thanks to body and material substance of nature the Kingdom of God on Earth is possible. God is a synthesis of earthly elements and the mind's thoughts, nature and ideas. Human body and physical education and gymnastics attained a religious character in that philosophical background. I think that this aspect of body as it was understood by Polish romantic philosophers is of religiopolitical character. Nevertheless, Polish philosophy of action with its special focus on the power and harmony of human body has also got a peculiar mystic aspect labeled as messianism, a kind of national soteriology that indicated Poland as the Christ of Europe. Polish Romanticism was very sensitive to the ideas of political martyrdom, sacrifice and liberation and consequently used a religious language to express its projects. Perhaps the idea of mystical eschatology looks like a utopian dream. But all those dreams resulted in concrete deeds, e.g. the program of social reforms and among them physical education and health care as elementary conditions for real changes. Indeed, it developed the awareness of body and fitness culture and prompted some physical and sport movements and associations like in the sixties of the 19th century the Polish Gymnastic Society "Falcon" that formed national awakening and helped with final national revival and struggle for political independence during the last decades of the partition period.

Keywords: physical culture, philosophy of action, historiosophy, Polish Romantic Messianism, integral development, personal self-realisation.

Our physical body is the carrier of our mind and self, we can say our body bears the mystery of our existence in the world; it is a *sine qua non* condition of human existence, basic tool of human experience, learning, living and acting. It is in the body and through its powers, energy, and the complexity of wonderful life, where human being is born, matures, develops, lives his/her life, experiences happiness and suffering, and finally passes away and dies. Generally, corporeality of the human condition is evident and silent, its natural immediacy and intimacy do not interfere with our daily decisions, it is almost imperceptible. However, it brings our attention to its necessities whenever it is in pain or suffering illnesses. It appeals and influences our conscious mind, whenever we thoughtfully and reflexively want to express our intentions, feelings and endeavours. Then we become aware that our body is not pure natural entity because it is subservient to cultural and social constructs¹.

Being mute and helpless in itself (without our consciousness) human body was defined in many ways by philosophers who exemplified its natural potential, essence, expressiveness, sure-footedness (efficiency) and so on. Philosophical definitions of human body are as old as the philosophy itself. They all relate, however, to the body-soul relationship, human being structure, nature of human existence, and the sense of life².

Plato and Aristotle considered body fitness and health as being the condition for any virtue and happiness. Their notion of *kalokagathia* (*lit. beauty-good*) expressed full human potential, the dialectics of beauty and goodness, gymnastics and music, *psyche* and *soma*, body and soul. Some philosophers meant the physical existence to be a limitation and source of humiliation of otherwise unlimited human spirit (the Gnostics). Others considered it a „wonderful fact” (Michel de Montaigne), *magnum bonum* – utmost goodness, which Juvenalis (Roman satirist) described by forging the famous maxim *Mens sana in corpore sano* (*a healthy mind in a healthy body*)³.

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche promoted the ideals of dynamic hygiene and the “great health”⁴. American pragmatists (especially John Dewey, who loved gymnastics, practised it daily and lived happily till the old age) dignified the human body in relation to human mind, pointing to its needs, as well as living, cognitive and axiological potential. This nobility and dignity of human body is well visible in the phenomenology of corporality developed by Maurice

¹ Seeamongothers C. Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi 2003; H. Jakubowska, *Socjologia ciała*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2009.

² See F. Chirpaz, *Ciało*, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Warszawa 1998.

³ See more in: J. Kosiewicz, *Bóg, cielesność i miłość*, Warszawa 2000; M. Zowisło, *Wielkość i miara sportu. Inspiracje antyczne*, “Studia Humanistyczne AWF w Krakowie” 2008, No 8, pp. 151–165.

⁴ M. Zowisło, *Ciało w filozofii życia Artura Schopenhauera*, “Studia Humanistyczne AWF w Krakowie” 2010, No 10, pp. 125–133.

Merleau-Ponty, Francois Chirpaz, Michel Henry and Herman Schmitz as well as in noted *somaesthetics* germinated by Richard Shusterman. Postmodernists also emphasized the importance of artistic and aesthetic development of sensitivity, sensory faculties and healthy life. Among them, Wolfgang Iser and Zygmunt Bauman developed the ideas of *fitness* and *aisthesis*, and „aesthetics beyond aesthetics” (Iser), i.e. the aesthetics reaching beyond pure art towards a beautiful human life in the meaning of a work of art⁵.

In this short essay, I would like to focus on the Polish philosophy of action, with special emphasis on August Cieszkowski’s thoughts and works. Cieszkowski is considered to be the initiator of that original current in Polish Romantic philosophy. He highlighted the special role of human body in our dynamic presence in this world. He regarded both somatic sphere and physical education as being important elements of political struggle for national independence. At that time, Poland was under foreign rule, where Romanticism period is roughly dated for the middle of a 120-year captivity. Philosophy of action, along with an idea of Messianism were at the background of Polish struggle for national and state independence. The ideology was mainly focused not on the revolutionary struggle for independence (although many philosophers have physically taken part in political uprisings of that time), but on socio-economic reforms and individual achievements. Preliminary and permanent condition for the realization of these projects was to educate citizens, where physical education played very important role⁶. Polish Romantic philosophers were well-educated and versed in philosophical tradition. They frequently gained their graduate degrees from Western universities, and their writings in different languages were well-known and appreciated by occidental and Slavic influential thinkers. Their conceptions and systems shared topical trends and ideas prevailing in European philosophy at the time but they treated and reshaped them in a sole, peculiar, independent mode and style. In general, they discerned distinguishing feature and

⁵ See among others: R. Shusterman, *Body Consciousness. A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Cambridge University Press 2008; Z. Bauman, *Ponowoczesne wzory osobowe*, [in:] *Dwa szkice o moralności ponowoczesnej*, Instytut Kultury, Warszawa 1994; W. Iser, *Sport – Viewed Aesthetically, and Even as Art?*, „Filosofski vestnik”, Ljubljana 1999, No 2, p. 213–236; M. Drwięga, *Ciało człowieka. Studium z antropologii filozoficznej*, Księgarnia Akademicka, Kraków 2005; M. Zowisło, *Sport jako sztuka. Wokół postmodernistycznej estetyzacji sportu*, „Edukacja Filozoficzna” 2007, Vol. 44, pp. 27–39.

⁶ It could be very interesting to make a deeper comparison between Polish and Indian philosophy of struggle towards political independence. Great emphasis made on the self-study, development of individual personalities and living condition is – as I think – something which brings together Polish and Indian tradition of non-violent struggling for freedom. The Indian poet and novelist Rabindranath Tagore was a great advocate of such type of struggle which was also developed successfully and effectively employed by Mahatma Gandhi’s *satyagraha*, civil resistance. See Michael. N. Nagler, *The Nonviolence Handbook. A Guide for Practical Action*, Berret-Koehler Publishers, Inc, San Francisco 2014, pp. 9–12.

mission of Polish and Slavic philosophy in positive dialectic overcoming of a German speculative idealism, on the one hand and the irrational French revolutionary deeds, on the other hand. Differently than in European Romanticism, its Polish variant was not a firm contestation against the Enlightenment classicism. Quite the contrary, it intercepted and continued its many ideas and endeavors, especially those involved in educational projects related both to personal and national free development. Such romantic philosophers as Józef Maria Hoene-Wroński, the creator of the messianic metaphysics of the Absolute, Maurycy Mochnacki, a deep thinker on the national consciousness, Bronisław Trentowski, a Freemason and the chief representative of messianic national philosophy, the author of the famous pedagogical treatise *Chowanna*, Karol Liebelt, the messianic philosopher and social activist, the author of an ethic and aesthetic program of human self-realization, and among them the main protagonist of my speaking engagement, August Cieszkowski developed the concept of vital human activity, each of them in his sole original manner⁷.

First, let me give a short explanation of the term Messianism. Almost every single Polish thinker, activist, writer and poet of that Romantic Age was touched by a messianic vision. The messianic doctrine drew from the Christian gospels the idea of the world resurrection through Christ's suffering and ultimate sacrifice by crucifixion. Poland was perceived as the Christ of Europe or the Christ of Nations crucified by its political bondage and redeeming the world owing to purifying torments. Such a vision featured utopian character, but taken together with the philosophy of action it accorded the Poles a significant moral, social and political role and was a dense project of personal and national rebirth through human choices and deeds.

Let us look at last at the essence of that philosophy of action as it emerges from the works of Cieszkowski. Count August Cieszkowski (1814–1894) was not only a philosopher. He combined his philosophical interest and education with pedagogy, economy and politics, always transferring ideas into practice through propounding and performing social reforms, political activity and sponsorship of his own educational projects. Among the Polish Romantics, he was most strictly connected to German philosophy, especially that of Hegel, whom he studied in Berlin and Heidelberg (1832–1838)⁸. But he also questioned pure idealism and proposed a new form of philosophy of praxis, i.e. the philosophy that would not be closed within the environment of thought but would surpass its limitations by undertaking concrete social, political, educational and personal deeds. As a result of the critique of Hegelian idealism Cieszkowski introduced the idea of philosophy of action (Germ. *Philosophie der Tat*) in his *Prolegomena to Historiosophy* (1838). The main task of it was to break and compensate a speculative dimension of Hegelian thought and bestow it a vital and real char-

⁷ See B. Urbankowski, *Absurd – ironia – czyn*, KAW, Warszawa 1981.

⁸ J. Hellwig, *Cieszkowski*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1979, pp. 8–33.

acter owing to human personal and social substantial activity. Though Cieszkowski took over Hegelian concept of a triadic rhythm of history, he converted it to a new shape alluding primarily to medieval millenary ideas. According to him we should admit three periods in the world history. The first was the antiquity, subjected to art, existing in pre-reflective unity of spirit and nature. The second was the Hegelian Christian era, with its disadvantageous gap between God and the world, spirit and matter, mind and body. The overcoming of that damaging dualism is the main challenge of the third, post-Hegelian period, with its integrating activity expounded by a new philosophy, i.e. the philosophy of action. Its destiny is to enact and establish the final synthesis of Heaven and Earth, spirit and matter, soul and body, freedom and necessity. This ultimate aim will be gained by reforming social, economic, political and educational state of society.

In his further writings, Cieszkowski endowed that vision with much more religious appeal. In "Our father" the threefold history he incorporated the epochs of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The philosopher wove the evolutionary line of the world history into the plot of the Christian prayer *Pater Noster*. The Lord's Prayer appeared to Cieszkowski as a prophetic anticipation of the epoch of Paracletus, the Holy Spirit being a great historical landmark ushering the Kingdom of God on the Earth. This will come to pass owing to the Slavic nations and their non-revolutionary act reconciling opposite poles of ideas and matter through creative reforms bringing "our daily bread" and freedom to people. A political way to the Kingdom lies in communal (but not communist!) self-government and co-participation of individuals, groups and nations in confederative structure with "a world government, a parliament of humanity, and a tribunal of nations"⁹. Such unit bears witness of true love and freedom as real signs of "the harmonization of the human and the divine will"¹⁰. As Cieszkowski wrote:

[...] the will of God is the Good of the world, universal happiness, the spiritual perfection of all men... Men must come to the realization that a particular, limited good cannot be *good*, because by its very nature the Good is a harmony, an accord... Thus, the good of an individual depends on the good of humanity and of nations, peoples as well as people, on the *community* of goods and not on that abstract *community* of some misguided communists... Only when men realize that true progress depends on *co-participation*, on mutual ties and obligations, on the harmonious unity of all sides, ... only then will the will of men become the will of God and vice-versa... this will be the *happiness*, this will be the *health* of God Himself¹¹.

The principle of association implemented to European political thought by French socialists Saint-Simon and Fourier resounds here, i.e. the principle of the

⁹ A. Liebich, *Between Ideology and Utopia. The Politics and Philosophy of August Cieszkowski*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht: Holland, Boston: USA, London: England 1979, p. 288.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ A. Cieszkowski, *Our Father*, vol. III, 2nd ed., Posen: Fiszer i Majewski, 1923, pp. 189–190; quoted after A. Liebich, op. cit., pp. 288–289.

proportionate minimum, which would guarantee to each member of a society the means of his subsistence, thus making each individual a true and concrete person¹². It is primarily due to bodily lustiness, skills and energy that political “harmonious unity of all sides” is possible, yielding effectively social and economic practices and reforms. The Divine Kingdom on earth is built on vital appreciation of one’s body along with the real, attentive care for its needs and healthy condition. Thanks to human body and material substance of nature at all, the ultimate reconciliation and personal and national solidarity are possible and the Heavenly Kingdom can emerge on earth. Because God is a synthesis of spirit and nature, He also encompasses matter (it is a kind of panentheism, where God is understood *a totali*, in a manner characteristic both to deism and pantheism). Consequently, the abnegation of the world and the body is perceived as a sinful relinquishment of the divine. Social reforms thus should include various bodily and civil aspects of “the daily bread” and this enfolds not only food, house, clothes, education, employment, but also full access to leisure activity, athletic competitions and public entertainments.

In such a perspective, human body was accorded a special religiopolitical character and destiny. We read in *Our Father*:

Religion *qua* soul and the political state *qua* body have always coincided with each other; once without consciousness of unity [i.e., in antiquity – A.L.]; once in the consciousness of their distinctness [in Christianity – A.L.]. Only today in the recognition of the full unification and harmony of the spirit, does the soul confirm itself in the body and the body in the soul¹³.

While visiting England, Cieszkowski got to know closer the socialist concepts of Robert Owen and co-opted them in his educational projects on rural schools. In his work *On village shelters* we find practical postulates on physical education estimated to be a vital factor of this program. He brought back the ancient Greek tradition of athletic *paideia* and health care and accorded it a trans-historical meaning, serving as an inspiring pattern for modern education. As a member of Polish landed gentry, Count Cieszkowski introduced the project in his rural estates and finally organized the School of Agriculture in one of his manor houses, where he was able to pursue full educational program of vocational training and organic personal development. It is worth mentioning that his approach to learning was strictly bound up with the idea of stable personal development, and consequently he emphasized a permanent human self-education and vital activity. His life bears witness of such attitude with a special focus laid on social responsibility of nobles to the poorest, children and village workers.

Although created in the bygone epoch, such a social commitment and educational practice of Polish philosopher can still attract attention of those dealing

¹² A. Liebich, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

¹³ A. Cieszkowski, *op. cit.*, p. 85, quoted after A. Liebich, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

with physical education and integral human self-realization. It deserves special consideration of those interested in establishing and developing healthy lifestyle through purposeful education and ecological awareness. I mean, among others, different outdoor projects of physical recreation that are now very popular and in vogue. Unquestionably, at the particular level of history and peculiar circumstances of Poland and its political weakness on account of its partition in 1772, the ideas and real work of such a prominent thinker and activist like August Cieszkowski actually created a stimulating climate for individual, i.e. personal and collective, i.e. national, challenge and struggle and subsequently contributed to ultimate victory. In the partitioned Poland thoughts and deeds of Cieszkowski were a portent of the next positivistic epoch with its cry and effort of organic work at the foundations of cultural and social life. And indeed, it developed the awareness of body and fitness culture and prompted some physical and sports movements and associations the crown of which was the Polish Gymnastic Society "Falcon", founded in 1867, that formed national awakening and helped with final political revival. But we cannot overlook the philosophical, i.e. universal appeal of Cieszkowski's philosophy of action. Cieszkowski's romantic and messianic historiosophical thought has got a deeper dimension that exceeds the very political and historical level of influence. Philosophy of action means not only political engagement when necessary but first of all undertaking personal development in all dimensions: mental, psychical and somatic. And indeed, such appeal of integral self-realisation sounds very modern (and even post-modern), and as such it proves its everlasting value.

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