



**FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY**

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Summary of the doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of professor Tadeusz Gadacz, entitled: **“Jerzy Stempowski as a Polish representative of European existentialism”**.

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The purpose of the doctoral thesis entitled “Jerzy Stempowski as a Polish representative of European existentialism” is to prove that Stempowski’s writing output, both his essays and his epistolary work, because of the topics he handles in it and his profound analysis belongs to the philosophy of existence, and its author has every right to take his place among the most important European representatives of this movement. In my dissertation I intend not only to demonstrate this thesis but also to distinguish the original project of existence that Stempowski propagated. Already the initial stages of my research provided basis for claiming that the writer is a precursor in relation to certain primary conceptions of the philosophy of existence, especially those formulated by Jean Paul Sartre.

The present doctoral work therefore aims to: firstly – provide evidence for the claim that the Polish writer belongs in the ranks of philosophers, secondly – provide evidence that Stempowski belongs in the ranks of philosophers of existence, and thirdly – convince its readers that Jerzy Stempowski, as a Polish philosopher-writer should be recognized as a representative of the European philosophy of existence, one whose original “project of the existential man”, broadening previously accepted perspectives, brings new value into its research area.

Assuming that the defence of the present doctorate entitled *Jerzy Stempowski as a Polish representative of European existentialism* is successful, the history of the Polish philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be enriched by another of its practitioners, while the philosophy of existence in the strict sense of the term could for the first time boast a Polish practitioner. Also, the ranks of the representatives of the European philosophy of existence would be extended to include a new – Polish – representative of the movement.

The popular view is that Stempowski has unquestioned place among the most distinguished Polish authors of essays and letters, and important literary and artistic critics of his contemporary culture. It is worth noting, however, that this intellectual contribution, as significant as it is for the development of Polish culture, contains numerous fragments offering profound philosophical analyses *sensu stricto*. It is precisely these fragments that became the research material for the present thesis, in which the literary/critical output of the Polish intellectual is for the first time subjected to a detailed inquiry, focused exclusively

exclusively at bringing out his philosophical thought, and particularly (in line with the topic of the present dissertation) on distinguishing those philosophical categories that form the foundation of the philosophy of existence.

It is important at this point to remember a not infrequent phenomenon of the “profession” of philosopher-writer<sup>1</sup>, or writer-philosopher, both of which imply the intellectual value (philosophical reflection) being supplemented by aesthetic value (or vice versa). Among philosophers of existence, particular place in this respect has been assigned to such thinkers as: Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Emil Cioran, or Miguel de Unamuno. Jerzy Stempowski joins their ranks.

My analysis of the output of Jerzy Stempowski, which covers the entire literary-philosophical oeuvre of the Polish thinker, brings to light the coherent and original “project of the existential man” contained in it. In Stempowski’s writerly experience one may find almost all of the fundamental issues analysed in the philosophical treatises and literary output of the leading representatives of the European philosophy of existence. However, Stempowski’s take on the philosophy of existence is marked with an unconventional trait, since Stempowski as a thinker adopts the perspective, both in his theory and in his actual existence, of “being between” antagonistic philosophical stances: on the one hand, affirming *ratio*, on the other, acknowledging the validity of irrational thinking. It is precisely in this “mental configuration” that Stempowski strove to look at the reality of the external and the internal world, attempting to “adjudicate” its paradoxicality from the position of the “internal fracture” mentioned above, often yielding to the influence of the all-encompassing nostalgia, which – as Camus suggested – can be more powerful than knowledge. Therefore, the edifice of Stempowski’s philosophical vision is based on three foundations: the mind, rationally ordering reality; leaning towards antirational and prophetic philosophy of Russian thinkers (significantly, affirmed from a non-theistic position); and being grounded in deeply rooted humanist values.

The research tool that I employed in my work was the analytic-hermeneutic method. On the one hand, analysis allows me to bring out of Stempowski’s essays and literary works the philosophical strands contained in them (sometimes, though not always, directly); on the other hand, by means of hermeneutic interpretation I juxtapose them with the ideas of European existentialist philosophers. This way I intend to demonstrate the originality

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<sup>1</sup> A study of the output of eminent Polish philosophers-writers: Leszek Kołakowski, Barbara Skarga, and Józef Tischner, was presented by Maciej Michalski in the publication “Filozof jako pisarz” [“The philosopher as a writer”], Warsaw 2010.

of the philosophical thought of the Polish writer in the context of previously known proposals of European philosophers of existence.

My research work was concerned primarily with four areas of exploration. The first of those involved becoming acquainted with the entire literary-epistolographic output of Stempowski with the aim of distinguishing in it themes characteristic for the philosophy of existence, as well as those that made reference to ideas of philosophers and writers considered to be pre-existentialists. At this stage of my work, I created a sort of “catalogue” of existential problems such as: attitude towards existence and towards questions of borderline situations; death, rejection, terminal illness. It also includes the notions of transcendence, freedom, loneliness, faith, hope, truth, good, evil or morality.

The second research area involved a comparative analysis of results obtained during stage one (the collection of existential problems distinguished in the writings of Stempowski) with the current state of research on the European philosophy of existence. The third area of research was first and foremost reflection on the variant of the philosophy of existence that was beginning to emerge in Stempowski’s work. It was precisely here that Stempowski’s original existentialist worldview began to be perceptible, absorbing in equal measure the rational thought of the West and its irrational polar opposite, present for example in the philosophy of Lev Shestov. This in turn encouraged me to devote particular attention to the philosophy of this Russian thinker, which I started to perceive as an important element of Stempowski’s worldview (although perhaps it would be more appropriate to speak about a “foundation of his philosophic intuition”).

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The doctoral thesis is composed of 10 chapters.

Chapter II: “History of existentialism” contains a review of the most important analyses of the history of the philosophy of existence and offers an attempt at ordering a certain terminological confusion present in works devoted to the subject. It is also here that I undertake to distinguish leading representatives of pre-existentialism and of the philosophy of existence. For each of the pre-existentialist philosophers, I point to the reception of his thought in the mature form of the philosophy of existence and its representatives, that is (in line with the list suggested by Gadacz in *History of the philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*) Miguel de Unamuno, Lev Shestov, Nikolai Berdyaev, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The philosophical views of the representatives of the philosophy of existence are expounded in particular in the concluding chapter, in which I carry out

a comparative analysis of existential categories while explaining Stempowski's views in particular thematically profiled chapters.

The only departures from the above assumptions concern a broad discussion of the philosophy of Louis Lavelle, whose status as a precursor in the development of the philosophy of existence is of particular interest to me; and the figure of Lev Shestov, who played a significant role in the process of the shaping of foundations of Stempowski's philosophical thought.

Chapter III, "Stempowski's biography" is divided into five periods of his life and work. In each I present key events in the biography of the Polish essayist and situate the most significant essays, letters, books and acquaintances within those.

Chapter IV, "Reception of the philosophy of existence" presents Stempowski's stance on the claims of existentialist philosophy, which during the years of his creative activity was a relevant and fashionable movement (especially in the French milieu). Analysis of Stempowski's texts reveals his clear disapproval of the circles of French thinkers contemporary with him, including Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty or Mounier, and his particular attention to the thinkers from Eastern Europe: Shestov, Mihailov, Berdyaev, or the intellectual from South-eastern Europe – Cioran. For this reason, the chapter has been split into two separate parts: "The reception of Western existentialism" and "The reception of Eastern existentialism".

Chapter V, "Stempowski's antipositivist declarations" pays special attention to the scathing criticism that Stempowski addressed at the moral and intellectual stance of the humanism of his time. In the subchapter entitled "The aftermath of the philosophy of the spirit", I point to the affinity of Stempowski's philosophy with *Lebensphilosophie*. Stempowski devoted considerable space to the degradation of the well understood humanism that was taking place at the time, with the concept adopting an antihumanist, materialist form, depriving humans both of dignity and of faith in the validity of searching for spiritual values. This is why in this fragment of my dissertation I include Stempowski's reflection on *homo oeconomicus*, mention the views of the theoretician of organization – Alexander Bogdanov, or the polemic with the claims of the lover of Darwin's theory – Samuel Butler. I also took the liberty of making a digression, departing somewhat from my work's central thesis to speculate about the possible position of Stempowski (as a thinker seriously involved in the intellectual thought of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) on the hopes of improving human existence, offered by the most recent gains of technology and developments in neurobiology. In this fragment,

I refer to the figure of the theoretician of anarchism – John Zerzan, and the views of Chantal Delsol. Naturally, these divagations remain an open question.

In the subchapter entitled “Subjective truth – based on art criticism”, tracing Stempowski’s stance on the discipline of art criticism (which he practiced with great success), I stress his attachment to such analytical tools as: emotion, empathy, and intuition. I also present theories by Thibaudet and Taine (the latter was criticized both by Shestov, Dilthey, and Stempowski himself). Furthermore, I demonstrate Stempowski’s affiliation with critics of existentialist provenience.

The following subchapter, “The human being as an individual” concerns mainly the antideterminist views of the Polish writer. In this section of my dissertation, I stress Stempowski’s affirmative attitude towards the individual human existence, marked by a subjective worldview, and draw attention to the fact that the writer’s thinking also encompasses these areas of human life that only take place outside the limelight, and are constituted of “inconsistent, broken, unfinished, and irrational” experiences.

In the section “The battle for the validity of irrational categories” I describe Stempowski’s approach to the irrational categories mentioned above, including magical ones.

“Explaining the human being – on the phenomenon of psychoanalysis” concerns the new, analytical method of knowing the human being, proposed by Freud. I quote the views of Sartre, Berdyaev, Shestov, or Ricœur, who developed their own philosophical stances towards the contributions of psychoanalysis. Stempowski also wrote on this phenomenon on several occasions.

Chapter VI, “A discussion of fundamental categories of nihilism” presents the four constitutive categories of nihilism: atheism, moral relativism, existential absurdity, and the tragic. The chapter is divided into two segments. The first of those concerns the analysis of the phenomenon of nihilism in European existentialist thought, divided into the categories suggested above; the second one presents Stempowski’s views on the above.

Chapter VII, “Problems with existence. Sense or nonsense of existence” is made up of three parts. The introduction is a prelude to the analysis of the category of life, developed in the following part of the chapter, including a discussion of its polar opposites: the apotheosis of life and its refusal. The first part of this chapter directs its attention to the issue of suicide, tracing the views of philosophers, from Antiquity to the twentieth century, but only ones that were ideologically close to Stempowski. Therefore, the following figures are discussed: Epicurus, Seneca, Tertullian, Marcus Aurelius, Montaigne, and Shestov. I also mention the views of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Also

included are the opinions of the founder of psychoanalysis – Freud, and writers whose work Stempowski analysed or reviewed: Dostoyevsky, Cioran, Camus, and Sartre. And finally, the views of Elzenberg – the only Polish philosopher with ideological links to the existentialist thought. In the second part of the chapter I perform an overview of Stempowski's writing to determine and analyse his philosophical views on suicide.

Chapter VIII, "Reflections on *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*" makes a reference to Hanna Arendt's book "The Human Condition", published in 1958, and to its analysis of transformations taking place in the post-Cartesian world in the area of reflection on *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. Invoking the philosophy of the German thinker is no more than a reference point, which seemed to me appropriate for further reflection to which I subject in the following two subchapters the category of silence and the condition of loneliness, as well as the two antagonistic social attitudes – favouring action and refusal to act. After all, these two are primary in the existential self-determination of the individual. I also want to justify introducing Hanna Arendt's thought with the fact that I find at least three ideological stances common to the German thinker and Stempowski: criticism of totalitarian power, a sceptical attitude towards the offerings of natural sciences as those that decreed themselves as having exclusive agency in knowing the human being, and a predilection for "pure", contemplative thinking, not subject to the dictatorship of utilitarianism.

The section "Category of silence and loneliness" offers a dissection of the two concepts, analysed from the Platonic tradition until the present day. In a separate subchapter I sum up their presence in the philosophical thought of Jerzy Stempowski, who devoted a considerable part of his reflection to the phenomena of *apatheia* and *ataraxia*, for which it is precisely the state of solitude and silence that is a condition *sine qua non*.

The subchapter "Favouring action or refusing to act" is structured like the previous one. The first part presents the results of my enquiry into the field of philosophy (here focusing exclusively on the twentieth-century philosophy of existence), the second part reveals Stempowski's profound involvement into analysing the phenomenon of action and its refusal. The Polish intellectual, as he proved on many occasions, was an unquestioned proponent of "autonomous value of action", which he considered in terms of a moral phenomenon.

Chapter IX: "Conclusion" sums up the whole thesis and thus appears to be of key importance. It is here that I undertake to present believable arguments, supported with academic research, in favour of the thesis that Stempowski belongs in the ranks of philosophers, in the ranks of European classics of the philosophy of existence, and to outline, as I have suggested, his original "project of the existential man" and his pioneering

position in the context of Sartre's existentialist claims. To support the former three, I perform a sort of summary of the contents of the chapters presented above, carrying out a comparative analysis of the most crucial categories of existence.

Chapter X: The final chapter is a list of bibliography.

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