

The Philosophy of Polar Extremes



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The topic of day-to-day politics is one I generally strive to avoid in my essays for *Academia* magazine. Writing them (and reading them, I hope) offers a pleasant diversion from everyday life, a place for deeper reflection, a moment to focus on something other than the ongoing conflicts continually reported in the news. However, thinking about “Poles at the poles” nevertheless brings to mind polarization, gravitation to two extremes, and this in turn inevitably conjures up the state of contemporary politics.

In our country, as elsewhere, recent decades have brought an increasing division into two seemingly mutually exclusive camps – two different “poles” of the “Poles” at the polls, if you will. The homonymity here is coincidental, of course, but it might prompt one to consider whether Polish society is in any sense particularly prone to inconsistency and polarization (perhaps we might playfully write: “Pole-arization”?) In any case, whenever I think about how a person or society can manage to accommodate seemingly mutually incompatible views, I turn to a certain revolutionary essay written in Poland back in times of seemingly absolute unequivocalty and an ironclad narrative regime. This essay is “In Praise of Inconsistency,” written by the preeminent Polish philosopher and historian of ideas Leszek Kołakowski in 1958 (cited here in I. A. Langnas and A. Rosenhaft’s English translation published in *Dissent*, vol. 10, issue 1, 1963).

What is consistency? It may be defined as agreement between one’s principles and one’s actions. A consistent individual should try to scrutinize every action in terms of its agreement with the principles he or she professes. As an example of such a stance, Kołakowski cites the philosopher Joseph de Maistre, whose intellectual boldness and absolute internal consistency led him to write a homage even to hangmen, even to the tribunal that tried Galileo – because their work must have constituted a necessary part of God’s plan.

Kołakowski ponders what characteristics an ideally behaved, obedient citizen of the modern state should have: “What is demanded of the citizen of a state? That he be consistent in his loyalty to the state or to the regime. Such a citizen, therefore, will always be proud to collaborate with the secret police, since he knows that it is necessary to the very existence of the state, its perfection and its progress. To prove that this is so is the easiest thing in the world: Any citizen who hesitates to make regular denunciations to the secret police is clearly inconsistent” (202–3).

Kołakowski reduces the notion of consistency *ad absurdum* in order to lay bare the fanaticism that lies inherent in it and in order to show that – speaking very seriously – inconsistency is the only source of hope for the continued survival of the human race. That is so because inconsistency is based on an awareness of the internally contradictory nature of the reality in which we have to function: “Indeed, if the balance of power were the sole source of tolerance, and if the antagonists were otherwise animated by a fanatical spirit of consistency, they would just have to keep killing each other off until one side was wiped out. If this does not happen, or at least not always, it is a blessed consequence of inconsistency” (203–4).

However, adopting the principle of inconsistency – insofar as it can actually be called a “principle” – means the disruption and twilight of the world based on two-value logic. This mostly applies in the space of social ideals, where we realize that two seeming opposite values can nevertheless cooccur, not only without cancelling each other out, but also without either of them losing significance. Inconsistency enables us to move beyond the terrible



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“either – or,” demanding final choices between contradictory values, instead always leaving open the possibility of changing one’s mind. “In the world in which we act, contradictory elements cannot be reconciled. Those that are reconciled no longer belong to the world in which we act but to a world that is already gone and toward which we no longer have to take a position. Contradictions haunt us as long as we act within a world of values, or simply as long as we exist” (158).

In Kołakowski’s view, inconsistency also entails tolerance. However, it must be remembered that the concept of tolerance itself contains a certain internal antinomy: can one be tolerant with respect to something intolerant? Should I eliminate all intolerant individuals, so as to be able to practice my enlightened tolerance in an unrestricted way? Kołakowski maintains that inconsistency enables a person to be tolerant and intolerant at the same time, sometimes one or the other depending on the circumstances. Concurrently, however, the philosopher points out that inconsistency cannot be recognized as a universal principle of a universal nature, as there do exist situations that demand downright absolute consistency. These he calls “basic human situations,” which occur whenever we are faced with necessity and tactical considerations cease to make any difference.

Inconsistency is revolutionary. *A fortiori*: I believe it poses a lethal danger to any totalitarianism, which by nature demands extreme consistency. The citizens of a totalitarian state have to follow the ruling authorities, without asking questions or voicing any doubts. But in the world of values, after all, consistency is not possible. What should one do when moral law and state law stand in contradiction? Can I, as a citizen, refuse to obey the code of law? Do I choose to be inconsistent when such a stance is convenient to me? Does that mean some form of relativism, based on a rejection of any strong theoretical structure of the law as such?

It seems that it is better to think about inconsistency as a continual movement – continually shifting back and forth from strength to weakness, from what is communal to what is private, and also – in the broader context – from the state to civil society. From one pole (Pole?) to another. ■

In the Polish language, the name for the north or south pole, *biegun*, ultimately refers to the Earth’s spinning motion (see the article on the next page). But the same word is also associated with a rocking motion, alternating back and forth, from one extreme to another: for instance, a “rocking horse” in Polish is known as *konik na biegunach*, lit. “a pony on runners”