

Bernd Graefrath

LEM'S PHILOSOPHY OF CHANCE IN HIS FICTION AND NON-FICTION

doi:10.37240/FiN.2022.10.1.4

ABSTRACT

Stanislaw Lem recognizes the far-reaching role of chance both in gaining knowledge and in explaining the development of cultural norms. The consequences are explored by him in fiction and non-fiction.

Keywords: Stanislaw Lem, chance, science fiction, philosophy of technology, philosophy of biology, philosophy of culture.

This universe was not planned as a comfortable home for humans. Even the optimist Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz did not think that human happiness is so very important for the divine creator. For Stanislaw Lem, the pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer is even closer to the truth: This universe with all its shortcomings is not the creation of a perfect designer. Already David Hume saw that the appearance of order and planning can be explained in natural, secular terms. And when several alternative explanations are given, “Occam’s Razor” recommends to choose the most economical one. Later, Charles Darwin developed a convincing theory of biological evolution which only depends on the mechanism of mutation and selection. But humans still tend to interpret their natural and cultural world in terms of messages from a higher authority. So when a catastrophe (like an earthquake or a volcanic eruption) happens, it immediately is interpreted by some theologians as more than a result of natural causes: They give a deeper meaning to it, but their narratives have no objective foundation. Also non-religious thinkers tend to view nature as a benevolent person, taking care of humans; and catastrophes are then regarded as punishments for human guilt.

Lem has freed himself from such human illusions. In his fiction and non-fiction, we find a view of the world which accepts the important role of chance both in biological and in cultural evolution. Even though most enlightened thinkers nowadays accept this insight, the far-reaching consequences of this cold analysis have not found sufficient acceptance. Lem’s work, both in fiction and non-fiction, can help us to clarify our human pre-

dicament. His philosophy may seem misanthropic, but basically, he is a truth-seeker, and he follows this path, wherever it may lead. Once we leave our illusions behind, we might even be successful in transforming a hostile world.

Even though Lem's novels are often regarded as mere entertainment for teenagers, his fiction also constitutes a place for philosophical explorations. At first glance, his early book *Śledztwo* (1959)—like his later book *Katar* (1976)—may seem to be a crime novel. But in the work of a police detective, we see the same pattern like in scientific research. From the evidence which we find, we try to deduce plausible explanations. As Umberto Eco once wrote, the detective novel has quasi-metaphysical suppositions: If several similar crimes occur in a region, the detective tries to link them and to trace them back to a common origin: Were all these crimes committed by the same person? And what was the motive of this person? Lem breaks the convention of the crime genre by showing that alternative explanations are possible: The strange occurrences which look like crimes may have a natural explanation by finding causes which are not properly understood yet; or the crimes are not connected at all, and the deaths were unintended. The title of the English translation of *Katar* gives this point away: It is called *The Chain of Chance* (1978).

In his science fiction novel *Głos pana* (1968), Lem transfers this type of analysis to the philosophy and sociology of science. By chance, a scientist discovers cosmic signals which at first seem to be random, but later turn out to carry technical information for new machines. The first reaction interprets these signals as a message from an alien civilisation to the all humans on Earth. But the humans painfully have to learn that they were not addressed by a message, but rather picked up some fragments which were certainly not intended for them: Humans are not important on a cosmic scale.

In his philosophical work *Filozofia przypadku* (1968 (1975)), Lem discusses the social consequences of the insight that cultural norms are not objectively given, but created by humans to regulate their interactions. In the first phase of cultural evolution, the members of a community are unaware of the constructive foundation of their particular tradition. But this blindness is upset when, through contact with other communities, it is recognized that quite different systems of norms can be used for social regulations. There is an element of chance at the root of all traditions; and once this is realised, the inescapable conclusion is: There is an element of choice, and traditional norms can be changed drastically. In Western liberal societies, we witness the practical consequences of this new freedom. The communal consensus is shrinking, and sub-groups with different identities are at war with one another. Will these societies manage to avoid chaos and civil war? In his non-fiction books—especially in his *Summa technologiae* (1964)—Lem seems to be optimistic that new technological inventions will

help us to solve social problems. But, characteristically, when Lem develops these problems in detail, in his science fiction novels, also these new techniques turn out badly. Thus, in *Wizja lokalna* (1982), an extremely liberal society employs an “ethicsphere” to make crimes physically impossible; and in the “Twenty-First Voyage” of the *Dzienniki gwiazdowe* (1971), the freedom of genetic engineering (for an “autoevolution” of the human species) leads to new regulations by the government. In both cases, a horrible situation only becomes worse ...

Lem's book *Golem XIV* (1973 (1981)) plays a central role in his work: It uses a fictional framework to present his general view of the world in a daring way. In non-fiction books, you bear the responsibility for every claim you make: Your theses must be corroborated by arguments and evidence. In *Golem XIV*, Lem uses the freedom of the fictional form to present hypotheses which he regards as plausible, but cannot be given a scientific foundation yet. In the first lecture of the super-human intelligence Golem XIV, the computer presents his view of the status of humans in the universe. In his final lecture, Golem develops a more general picture of the entire universe and its possible future. Golem's evolutionary anthropology is strictly Darwinistic and anticipates the theory of the “selfish gene,” later developed by Richard Dawkins. Our biological evolution did not aim to produce humans; and this evolution without a designer could just as well have led to others species (which might have developed their own kind of intelligence). Lem's mouthpiece Golem goes beyond an explanation of the past: Once a natural intelligence has developed in the struggle for existence, this intelligence can be used to introduce planning and design! This concerns not only the environment, but also, finally, human nature itself. Intelligent designers (for example, humans) can create an artificial intelligence which can reach new heights of knowledge. Humans can take part in this further development if they transform themselves; but the consequence of this will be that, in the long run, natural *Homo sapiens* will be left behind. We stand before a difficult decision which human civilisation one day will be forced to make. By leaving the natural heritage behind, a powerful technical civilisation could transform the entire universe, perhaps in cooperation with other cosmic civilisations. Will this enterprise be worth the price we have to pay for this? Lem is undecided about this: On the one hand, he is fascinated by all the technical possibilities which will enable groundbreaking new discoveries; but on the other, he is a conservative gentleman who defends traditional virtues, even though he sees not objective foundations for them. The “Cassandra of Cracow” is led to an unsolvable dilemma.

We have seen that Lem uses science fiction to explore the social consequences of new technical developments. But science fiction can also serve other cognitive purposes. As Karl Popper pointed out, scientists have to be creative: Instead of simply collecting data, they have to start with daring

hypotheses which then have to be tested with empirical evidence. If “science fiction” is taken seriously, it can develop hypotheses which cannot be tested yet, but which may give new suggestions for scientific exploration. For example, in Lem’s *Doskonała próżnia* (1971), the fictional cosmologist “Alfred Testa” proposes a new theory about the role of intelligence in explaining cosmic phenomena. It is paradoxical that most scientists regard the planet Earth as an average planet, and so they assume that many other civilisations must exist in this universe. At least several of these must be so old that they must be technically much more advanced than humans. But when it comes to scientific explanations—even of strange phenomena (like “Tabby’s Star”), humans try to avoid explanations which employ intentional actions by alien civilisations as long as possible. Considering “Occam’s Razor,” this is reasonable. But this methodological principle could also be misleading. Like Lem, we should at least sometimes consider the possibility that many of the phenomena which we witness when we observe the stars, might not be natural at all.

REFERENCES

- S. Lem, *Śledztwo*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1959.
_____, *Katar*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1976.
_____, *Głos pana*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1968.
_____, *Filozofia przypadku*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1968/1975.
_____, *Summa technologiae*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1964.
_____, *Wizja lokalna*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1982.
_____, *Dzienniki gwiazdowe*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1971.
_____, *Golem XIV*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1981 (1973).
_____, *Doskonała próżnia*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1971.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Professor Dr. Bernd Graefrath, University of Duisburg-Essen, Department of Philosophy, Universitaetsstr. 12, D-45117 Essen, Germany.

Email: bernd.graefrath@uni-due.de