Polish Renaissance Philosophy

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Abstract
During the period of Renaissance in Poland (fifteenth–sixteenth century) there was a considerable development of learning that expressed itself especially in natural and political philosophy. At the University of Krakow, there was a shift from the Aristotelian approach to the study of nature to new methodologies. The university became well known as a center of astronomical studies. Nicolaus Copernicus studied in Krakow and then in Bologna and Padua. The result of his scholarly activities was his work *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (1543), in which he presented the heliocentric model of the solar system and by which he significantly contributed to the Scientific Revolution and to the development of modern science. Political philosophy, which developed in Poland at that time, had also many outstanding representatives and contributed to the country’s distinct national character. Polish political philosophers emphasized the unity between politics and ethics. The stress on national independence, clearly evident in Ostrorog’s writings, has become a part of Poland’s lasting heritage. Another political philosopher, Modrzewski argued that in order to improve conditions in any country it was essential first to improve citizens’ morals. Goslicki emphasized the value of ancestral virtues and traditions, and claimed that because of cultural differences between nations, different countries could be governed by different laws. Gornicki tried to identify problems in Poland’s political system and to propose solutions. He and other Renaissance philosophers that we introduce are perhaps the most distinguished thinkers of that period, who, coming from Poland and being educated abroad, especially in Italy, synthesized Polish and European learning and expressed this in their works.

Introduction

The Renaissance in Poland (Polish: *Renesans, Odrodzenie*) lasted from the late fifteenth to the late sixteenth century and is widely considered to have been the Golden Age of Polish culture. Many distinguished citizens of the Kingdom of Poland (and from 1569 of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth) were actively involved in the European Renaissance. During that period, the country already had a well-developed educational system consisting of over 2500 schools and three universities (in Krakow, Vilnius and Zamość). Young Polish graduates, especially sons of nobility (*szlachta*), traveled abroad to continue their education. The most popular destinations were...
Italian universities: Padua, Bologna, and Florence. Moreover, many Italian artists and architects travelled to, and spent some years in, Poland. Among them were Francesco Fiorentino, Bartolomeo Berrecci, Santi Gucci, Mateo Gucci, Bernardo Morando, Giovanni Battista di Quadro, and others. The Renaissance period, famously supportive of artistic and intellectual pursuits, produced outstanding philosophers, scientists, poets, artists, and literary persons. Among them are natural philosophers and scientists: Mikolaj Kopernik (Nicolaus Copernicus), Wojciech z Brudzewa (Albertus de Brudzewo), Jan z Głogowa (Joannes Głogouiensis); political philosophers and thinkers: Jan Ostroróg (Joannes Ostrorog), Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski (Andreas Fricius Modrevius), Wawrzyniec Grzymała Goślicki (Laurentius Grimaldius Goslicius), Lukasz Górnicki (Lucas Gornicki), Jan Zamoyski (Joannes Zamoyski), Jakub Gorski (Jacobus Gorscius), Stanisław Orzechowski (Stanislaus Orzechowski), and Andrzej Wolan (Andreas Volanus); poets: Mikolaj Rej (Nicholas Rey) and Jan Kochanowski (Joannes Cochanovius); composers: Waclaw z Szamotul (Venceslaus Samotulinus) and Mikolaj Gomólka (Nicolaus Gomolka); and painters: Stanisław Samostrzelnik (Stanislaus Claratumbensis) and Marcin Kober (Martin Kober). At that time, there was a considerable development of learning that expressed itself especially in natural and political philosophy.

Natural Philosophy: Methodological Pluralism and Scientific Revolution

In the fifteenth century, at the University of Krakow, there was a slow turn from the Aristotelian approach to the study of nature to new methodologies based on the use of mathematics, experience, and observation. A noteworthy influence came from the French nominalist philosopher Jean Buridan (Latin: Johannes Buridanus, c. 1300–c. 1358/61), whose work *Subtilissimae quaestiones super octo Physicorum libros Aristotelis*, was used in lectures on Aristotle’s physics. The nominalists believed that certain knowledge can be achieved only through the investigation of material things and of the concrete, and in physics by studying *corpus in motu*, the body in motion, rather than of mere being in motion. They introduced to the University of Krakow methodological pluralism and eclecticism, which combined medieval realism with nominalism and created an atmosphere conducive to scientific inquiry. As a result of these developments, the university became well known as a center of astronomical studies. Krakow’s scholars were particularly interested in the problem of the movement and location of the Earth. On the basis of their investigations, they started to develop doubts concerning the accuracy of the Ptolemy geocentric system. Albertus de Brudzewo (Polish: Wojciech z Brudzewa) (c.1445–c.1497), the author of *Commentariolous super theoreticas novas Georgii Purbachii*, collected important evidences for the falsity of Ptolemy’s system. His student was Nicolaus Copernicus.

**Nicolaus Copernicus** (Polish: Mikolaj Koper- nik) (1473–1543) was born in Royal Prussia, which was then a province of the Kingdom of Poland, and studied in Krakow and subsequently in Bologna and Padua. After his return to his home country, he was engaged in various administrative-economic duties at the Lidzbark Warminski (German: Heilsberg, Ermland) palace of prince-bishop Lucas Watzenrode (1447–1512), who was both the spiritual and the secular leader of Warmia, an autonomous part of Royal Prussia, and his uncle and patron. While performing public functions, Copernicus clearly identified himself with the Polish state and, like his uncle, defended Warmia against the Teutonic Order’s plans of conquest. He had proven himself to be a talented administrator and economist, who by his writings, particularly his essay *Monetae cudendae ratio* (On Coining Money, 1526), had contributed to his province’s monetary reform. However, administrative-economic duties did not prevent him from astrological observations and scholarly activities. The final result was his major work *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres, 1543), in which he presented the heliocentric model of the solar system. His epochal discovery that it was the
Earth that moved around the Sun, which challenged the commonly accepted geocentric view of the Earth being the center of the universe, was inspired by both his empirical observations and his readings of ancient Greek philosophy. The authority of Aristotle supported the geocentric model, but the Pythagorean philosophers, especially Hicetas of Syracuse (c. 400–335 BC), to whom Copernicus referred as Nicetus Syracusanus (Nicetus of Syracuse) in his De revolutionibus, argued that it was the Earth that moved, with the sun, the moon, the stars remaining still. The movement of the Earth around its axis would not yet explain the observable movements of heavenly bodies but it provided Copernicus with a useful hint leading him to the conclusion that “any visible movement on the firmament does not come from the firmament itself but from the movement of the Earth” (Commentariolus, 1514). He had found additional hints about the Earth movement in some later commentaries to the writings of the Pythagorean Philolaus of Croton (c. 470–385) and of the astronomer Aristarchus of Samos (c. 310–230 BC). Finally, in his research Copernicus was also guided by a mystical idea of the spiritual transformation. He believed that his reform in astronomy had at the same time a profound religious significance, leading from the Earth to the Sun, that is, from a human and earthly oriented world to a divine and heavenly oriented one. By designing his heliocentric model of the solar system, he has made a momentous contribution to the Scientific Revolution and to the development of modern science.

**Political Philosophy: Unity of Politics and Ethics**

Political philosophy, which developed during the early Renaissance period, had many outstanding representatives in Poland and contributed to the country’s distinct national character and its unique political system, which is often described as a “nobles’ democracy” (Polish: demokracja szlachecka) or simply as Res Publica (Commonwealth/Republic, Polish: Rzeczpospolita), a republic with a king, who was elected for life by the nobility.

Polish Renaissance political thinkers emphasized the unity between politics and ethics. The Machiavellian ideas leading to the separation between moral values and political practice had never become popular in Poland, and thus the Polish political outlook, to which these thinkers contributed, has been largely idealistic. On the one hand, they adopted a classical perspective based on virtue; on the other, they supported progressive ideas. The predominantly religious and cosmopolitan attitude of the Middle Ages was replaced in their writings by a modern approach, which would put stress on the secular and independent state and the idea of a nation.

**Jan Ostroróg** (Latin: Joannes Ostrorog, 1431–1501), born one generation before Niccolò Machiavelli and educated at universities in Erfurt and Bologna, was a distinguished public official and diplomat, negotiating among others peace conditions after the 13 Years’ War (1454–1466), which was fought between the Kingdom of Poland allied with pro-Polish Prussian Confederation and the State of the Teutonic Order (German: Staat des Deutschen Ordens). He is best known for his work Monumentum pro Reipublicae ordinatione (A memorandum on regulating the Republic, ca. 1475), in which he called for fundamental political reforms. He supported strengthening the King’s formal powers, universal conscription, writing of laws in Polish, the separation of the state and the church, and Poland’s sovereignty. He argued that the Kingdom of Poland was “in all respects free”. It was free de facto, because the Polish King did not yield to any external power, and de jure, because the King did not consider any external jurisdiction except that of God. In his view, the power of the King of Poland was derived directly from God rather than bestowed by the pope or the emperor. The power of the pope, he claimed, was limited to religious issues and should not extend to worldly affairs. This stress on national independence, clearly evident in Ostrorog’s writings, has become a part of Poland’s lasting heritage.

**Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski** (Latin: Andreas Fricius Modrevius, 1503–1572). Another well-
known political philosopher of that period was Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski. He studied in Cracow and Wittenberg, and then served as a King’s secretary and diplomat. In *Commentariorum de Republica emendanda libri quinque* (1551), divided into five parts – “On mores,” “On laws,” “On war,” “On the Church,” “On education” – he proposed various ways to improve states. His work, originally written in Latin, was translated into French, German, and Spanish and was referred to by a number of scholars, including Jean Bodin, who simplified Modrzewski’s family name to “Andreas Riccius.” Modrzewski argued that in order to improve conditions in any country, it is essential first to improve citizens’ morals, which, he claimed, are not merely subjective or based on mere opinions but have their source in the nature of things and in God’s decrees, written deeply in human hearts. As it was for Aristotle, for Modrzewski politics was an extension of ethics, and required the cultivation of virtues. As they were for St. Thomas Aquinas, positive laws were for him the work of reason, and required compliance with the natural and divine laws. As it did later for Locke, freedom consisted for him in the obedience of self-imposed laws, and was not license doing as one likes. Modrzewski identified the ideal social life with order, virtues, and labor and saw its opposite in conflict and war. Human beings, he believed, were naturally cooperative and social, and any form of superiority or domination among them could only be justified on the basis of greater reason and superior virtue. Therefore, he was critical of hereditary nobility. He claimed that public offices should not be inherited but elected on the basis of qualifications. While these ideas were rare at his times, he was not a revolutionary. Instead of seeking to overthrow the existing order based on inheritance and rigid class divisions, he aimed at changing prevailing social customs and ways of thinking. He argued that nobility was a quality related to virtue rather than to ancestry and was against preserving higher positions in the government and in the Church for the nobles. He also stood against any legal or penal inequalities and claimed that no one should be a judge in one’s own case. Thus, according to him landlords could not have a jurisdiction over peasants working for them, but should be equally subjected to law, the same for all.

**Wawrzyniec Grzymała Goślicki** (Latin: Laurentius Grimaldius Goslicius, ca. 1530–1607) studied in Cracow and then in Padua and Bologna, and after his return to Poland joined the royal chancery and served as a secretary to two kings: Sigismund II Augustus (Polish: Zygmunt August) and then Stephen Báthory (Polish: Stefan Batory). He also became a priest and was successively appointed bishop of Kamieniec Podolski (1586), Chelm (1590), Przemyśl (1591) and Poznan (1601). A man of affairs and a political philosopher, he is best known for *De optimo Senatore*, originally published in Venice in 1568. While appreciating the humanist knowledge that he received during his studies abroad, he stressed in this work that one should never disregard one’s own ancestral virtues and traditions. This conservative outlook, and the ideas of civil liberty, wise statesmanship, and nobles’ democracy that he promoted, had a special appeal in England. *De optimo Senatore* has been translated to English and had four different editions: 1598 (*The Counsellor*), 1607 (*A commonwealth of Good Counsellor*), 1733 (*The Accomplished Senator*), and most recently, 1994 (*The Accomplished Senator*). It became a political and social classic, read by the Queen Elizabeth I of England and by William Shakespeare. It was popular among opposition forces to the Stuart monarchy and was widely quoted in revolutionary pamphlets during the period preceding the British Civil War of 1640. *De optimo Senatore* was written for a European audience, and not merely for people in Poland. Goślicki considered politics as science. To make correct political decisions, he claimed, the leader should employ both philosophy (reason) and history (experience). The empirical aspect of his approach consisted in looking at similar historical cases, as well as on such factors as soil, climate, and other conditions prevailing in a given country, and by considering these, formulating appropriate policies. Then his rationalism was expressed in the idea of *scientia civilis*, of political science that was oriented on the public good and ultimately aimed at happiness in this world, and not in a transcendent world beyond.
Goślicki was a devout Catholic and believed in the creation of the universe and its continuous government by God. However, he also believed that a special role in the divine government was given to human beings, who, according to God’s plan, should exercise their leadership role in a wise and just manner. The ultimate goal of human life was happiness, which, he thought, was not a definite concept, but an idea related to specific living conditions and particular human needs. Like other Polish Renaissance political thinkers, he emphasized the role of moral values and linked happiness in society with virtue. As the most important political virtue, he regarded prudence, practical wisdom: an ability to correctly judge, predict events, and make the right decisions. He emphasized that to ensure good government, prudence must be linked to justice, an ability to give each person what he or she deserves. Another important political virtue for him was friendship, by which individuals, groups, and classes could be linked, thus forming a happy society. While these ideas can be considered universal, Goslicki would also consider cultural differences between nations and claimed that because of these, different countries could be governed by different laws, and that it was laws that should be adjusted to specific countries and not the opposite. According to him, a prudent statesman should always consider what motivates people to action, and promulgate laws improving people morally, rather than those that merely punish them. For moral progress, citizens should exercise right reason by learning how to recognize what is good and what is harmful, and consequently develop harmonious relationships with others. While Goslicki divided society into citizens, who enjoyed political rights, and subjects, who did not have them, he supported the idea of equality before the law, and in his view, any differences among people could only be justified on the basis of merit; the ultimate title to rule being virtue. Those who aspired to become political leaders were thus obliged to work on their perfection. The division of government into legislative, juridical, and executive that he proposed was to ensure that human relationships are based on justice and goodness. The politics that he envisioned had a profoundly moral character.

Łukasz Górnicki (Latin: Lucas Gornicki, 1527–1603) studied at universities in Krakow and Padua, and, after his return to Poland, he performed various public functions and became a personal secretary and chancellor of the Polish king, Sigismund II Augustus. He authored a few works, of which the best known is Dworzanin polski (The Polish Courtier), published in 1566. This book was his unique translation and adaptation to Poland’s needs of Baldassare Castiglione’s Il cortegiano (The Courtier), which had been widely studied throughout Europe since it first appeared in 1528. A simple translation of this famous book, Górnicki believed, would not be successful because of the vast cultural gap between Italians and Poles, especially those parochial “domestic Poles” who would not study or travel abroad. His ambition was to enrich Polish culture with his version of The Courtier and to make Poland a more cosmopolitan place. This was also very much in line with the objectives of the King’s court, particularly of Queen Bona Sforza, Sigismund II Augustus’ Italian mother. The continuation of this ambitious project was Górnicki’s systematic work in political philosophy: O elekcji, wolności, prawie i obyczajach polskich (On elections, freedom, law and Polish customs), which was published posthumously in 1616. Its practical aim was to identify problems in Poland’s political system and to propose their solutions. Having the literary form of a dialogue between a domestic Pole representing backward views and an Italian representing novelty, this work tried to promote the spirit of reform. However, it was also based on classical and Christian concepts, particularly on the four cardinal classical virtues, the most important of which was for Górnicki justice, and on the Christian virtue of love. If there is true love among people, Górnicki argued, there is no need for laws. But even if we have laws, he thought, they could not be really effective without love and goodwill among citizens. Thus, on these values a political community is to be founded, laws being insufficient by themselves to stop wrongdoing. Hence, like other Polish political thinkers, Górnicki emphasized the
importance of moral values in politics. He also made some practical proposals, including court reforms, to make laws effective, postulated that rulers should execute power with wisdom and supported monarchy as the best possible political system because as he claimed that it was always easier to find one wise person for the helm than many.

Impact and Legacy: The End of the Golden Age

The Renaissance philosophers introduced above are perhaps among the most distinguished thinkers of that period, who, coming from Poland and being educated abroad, especially in Italy, synthesized Polish and European learning and expressed this in their works. This auspicious age for science and culture ended with wars. Scientific and cultural developments require peace and are disrupted by armed conflicts, especially if they happen in the country’s territory. Wars against Sweden, Russia, and Turkey and the Cossack rebellion, which occurred in the seventeenth century, weakened the old Rzeczpospolita. They contributed to the declining of scholarly activities and to the breaking of ties with centers of learning abroad. Only in the middle of the eighteenth century, because of the ideas of the Enlightenment and a number of brilliant individuals who were born around that time, did Poland restore its intellectual strength. The outstanding result of the work of Polish intellectuals was the Constitution of 3 May 1791, which is often described as Europe’s first national constitution (and the second oldest in the world after the American Constitution of 1787). It was designed as a legal framework to implement social and political reforms, and to repair the Polish state. But this was already too late. With the third partition of the country’s territory in 1795 among the mighty powers Prussia, Austria, and Russia, whose rulers, influenced by the ideas of modernity, clearly did not link politics to ethics, Poland was removed from the map of Europe until 1918, when it regained its independence.

Cross-References

► In Natural Philosophy
► Natural History
► Nicolaus Copernicus
► Technology Section

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