

ABOUT THE THING ITSELF. KATARZYNA STĘPIEŃ'S LOOK AT THE PHILOSOPHY OF LAW

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Abstract. The text has been written as part of the project “The Scientific Position of Women in the Church and the World,” the idea of which is to draw attention to the achievements of women in various fields of science, with particular emphasis on the achievements of female lawyers employed at the Catholic University of Lublin. The aim of the article is to present the profile and interdisciplinary research work of Katarzyna Stępień, dr. habil., head of the Department of Philosophical Anthropology and Philosophy of Law at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Catholic University of Lublin. The considerations presented here reflect the two-track nature of Katarzyna Stępień's involvement and activity. First, I explore the specific nature of her philosophical reflection on law, and then her work for the university and the popularization of science.

Keywords: philosophy of law; university; interdisciplinary scientific research; popularization of science.

INTRODUCTION

A lot has been said recently about the human rights crisis, which is systematically deepening as a result of the escalation of conflicts in many regions of the world, unregulated technological progress and the breakdown of the effectiveness of international law. In its 2024 *State of Human Rights Report*, Amnesty International presents an alarming picture of disregard for international standards in various areas of life, which is primarily related to the rivalry of superpowers and the “wave of collapsing democracies”, the growing global inequalities, as well as the uncontrolled use of modern technologies for mass surveillance or information manipulation. Amnesty International predicts that the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) along with the dominance of Big Tech (a business model based on building behavioural profiles) will exacerbate human rights abuses on an unprecedented scale if regulation continues to lag behind progress.¹

¹ *The State of The World's Human Rights*, <https://amnesty.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Amnesty-International-Report-2024-25.pdf> [accessed: 21.07.2025].

The problem is that in a world of information overload and lack of wisdom, law-making alone is not enough. We too easily succumb to the illusion that mistakes always concern practices that need to be regulated somehow, not theories and ideas. It is all the more worth reminding that the chaos of today's changes is to a large extent the aftermath of misinterpreted ideas and badly set goals, and what we admit today under the pressure of facts, was announced *ante factum*.

In the face of these and other challenges, social institutions, including universities, should rethink their role. A university can no longer be merely a place for acquiring knowledge, a "factory of skills," or a vocational school. It should be a forge of thought – a place where informed and responsible citizens are educated, capable of navigating a world of rapid change. The role of the academic teacher is also being redefined. Today, more than just knowledge providers, we need guides and mentors – people who inspire, stimulate reflection, and at the same time set a good example when, as a result of the growing crisis of authority and the twilight of code ethics, institutional support and norms are lacking, and the pluralism of ideas is slipping into relativism.

The Catholic University of Lublin, which has always upheld intellectual freedom, creating a space for independent reflection and science free from ideology, continues to respond to the social, cultural, and moral needs of people in a highly polarized and conflicted world. It not only educates but also shapes, becoming a place of authentic dialogue – between science and faith, as well as between different intellectual environments and traditions. However, the university would lose its character and the meaning of its existence if it did not have its mentors – professors whose thoughts, publications and teaching activities have a real impact on students' attitudes, teaching them a critical approach to reality and active participation in social life.

The history of the Catholic University of Lublin consists of the activities of many outstanding professors, including women, who, by breaking stereotypes and barriers – especially at a time when the role of women was mainly associated with the home environment – paved the way for the next generations of scientists. It is worth citing these examples because, as statistics show, the potential of women in science is still not fully recognized, appreciated and used (only about a third of scientists in the world are women).

I devote this article to the profile and research work of one of such women – Professor Katarzyna Stępień, head of the Department of Philosophical Anthropology and Philosophy of Law at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Catholic University of Lublin. It was created as part of the project "The Scientific Position of Women in the Church and the World," the idea of which is to draw attention to the achievements of women in various fields of science, with particular emphasis on the achievements of female lawyers employed at the Catholic University of Lublin.

Of the many reasons why it is worth taking a closer look at Katarzyna Stępień's work, two deserve special emphasis. Firstly, the Professor is the face of the Catholic University of Lublin, and her original achievements, including interdisciplinary research in the field of law and philosophy on the one hand, and various forms of non-scientific activity on the other, make the Lublin university famous. She studied law at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (1993-1998), but it was with the Catholic University of Lublin that she associated her entire professional life, and to a large extent her personal life as well, through numerous and long-term friendships. Here, in 1995, she graduated in philosophy, obtained further academic degrees, and at the same time held positions in the structures of the university and the Polish Society of Thomas Aquinas as a secretary and editor of scientific publications.

Secondly, the Professor's deeply humanistic view of law deserves recognition, manifested in the constant confrontation of legal knowledge with its philosophical, social and political foundations. Katarzyna Stępień perceives law as a multi-layered social practice, which, for better understanding, should be considered from different perspectives. Referring to philosophical discussions, she seeks to expand the boundaries of legal imagination to include knowledge about man, his nature and the specificity of human action, in order to show how far erroneous anthropological assumptions translate into the corruption of law. An important issue, although rarely taken up by lawyers.

Further considerations will correspond to the two-track nature of Katarzyna Stępień's involvement and activity. First, I will show the specificity of her philosophical reflection, and then her work for the benefit of the university and the promotion of science.

1. RESEARCH INTERESTS

Katarzyna Stępień was educated under the supervision of many excellent professors, but she also had the special privilege of being a student of the founder of the so-called philosophical school of Lublin – Father Prof. Mieczysław Albert Krąpiec, under whose supervision she wrote her master's thesis entitled *Funkcja celu w koncepcji prawa u św. Tomasza z Akwinu* ("The Function of the Goal in St. Thomas Aquinas's Concept of Law"), as well as a student of Krąpiec's successor in the Department of Metaphysics – rev. prof. Andrzej Maryniarczyk – the supervisor of her doctoral dissertation entitled *Spór o podstawy racjonalnego prawa. Analiza wybranych stanowisk* ("The Dispute over the Foundations of Rational Law. An analysis of Selected Positions").

Faithfulness to the basic assumptions, principles and methods of Krąpiec's metaphysical realism largely determines the philosophical approach of Katarzyna Stępień. At the same time, she shows courage of thinking

and a creative attitude to the master's philosophical legacy, developing her own reflections in the field of philosophy of law and taking up new issues that Krapiec did not deal with. Her main areas of scientific interest are: (1) philosophy of law and its place in contemporary types of explanation of law, taking into account the specificity of realistic philosophy of law; (2) the anthropological foundations of law and their significance for the integral understanding of law and human rights; (3) cultural determinants of law, with particular emphasis on rules and determinants of human action other than law (metaphysics of human action, law and morality, educational function of law, cultural and civilizational determinants of law). Over the past years, K. Stępień has significantly developed and increased her publishing output. I do not undertake a detailed discussion of it here, I will limit myself to paying attention to the most important studies.

The first area of research falls within the trend of realistic philosophy of the so-called Lublin school, rooted in Thomism and analyzing law on the ontic plane as a specific type of being (belonging to the category of being called relation), in the aspect of the reason for its existence and the foundations of rationality. The aftermath of considerations on this subject is primarily the monograph *W poszukiwaniu podstaw racjonalności prawa* ("In Search of the Foundations of the Rationality of Law") [Stępień 2015a], in which the author shows rational and free human nature as a place where law is realized in the strict sense – as a certain rule and measure of action for the sake of the goal. The law links the acting being to the good that is due to it by virtue of its nature, i.e. it assigns action to the end as the motive of action. Due to the fact that this assignment is rational in nature, it is the fruit of the action of reason, and not an act of will, the ultimate foundations of the rationality of law should be sought in the rational structure of being, and more precisely – in real inter-beingal relations characterized by the obligation to act and in the rational nature of human persons who are subjects-correlates of the legal relationship. This is an important remark because linking the law with the order of being protects against relativism and guarantees the objectivity of the law, and at the same time it values the human person as capable of reading the rational order of beings and acting according to the acquired knowledge.

The next question setting the framework for Professor's research concerns the final subjective grounding for natural law. Considerations on this subject have been taken up in two articles. The first one *Idee, prawo odwieczne i porządek natury* ("Ideas, the Eternal Law and the Order of Nature") [Stępień 2006, 281-95] shows the relationship between natural law and eternal law against the background of Augustin's concept of ideas and Aquinas's theory of ontic participation. The second one, entitled *Cel prawa i działania prawnego* ("The Purpose of Law and Legal Action") [Stępień 2008b,

237-52] contributes to the discussion on the dysfunction of contemporary legal culture. K. Stępień argues that one possible cause of this dysfunction is the omission of teleological explanation, i.e., the role of final cause in legal theory and practice. Therefore, she proposes that the internal relationship between law as a rule of action and the purpose should be considered based on the concept of the common good. This is a normative category of statutory law, still used as a tool for revealing the foundations of law, also in the context of the contemporary concept of human rights, understood as a plane of grasping by law particular areas of the good of a person.

The starting point for the research undertaken in the second area of interest are the accusations formulated against the contemporary concept of human rights, among others: atheoreticalness, lack of philosophical (especially metaphysical and anthropological) justifications, indefinability, excessive practicalism, relativism, internal contradiction, etc. According to Katarzyna Stępień, these accusations could be avoided if international and domestic protection of human rights went hand in hand with philosophical reflection on the determinants of human rights, their essence and justification. Hence the need for research aimed at explaining the essence of human rights and their connections with the philosophical understanding of human nature. Who man is? What is the meaning of his life and what is authentic good for him? K. Stępień addresses these issues in several texts.

In the articles *Human Rights and Nature* [Stępień 2007, 247-55] and *Antropologiczno-metafizyczne podstawy praw człowieka* ("Anthropological-Metaphysical Foundations of Human Rights") [Stępień 2011b, 63-76] the author develops the understanding of human nature as an internal principle of action and a source of rights (nature as a norm of law), while law is understood as a real interpersonal relationship, characterized by the obligation to act or not to act. On the other hand, in the encyclopedic entry *Godność osobowa* ("Personal Dignity") [Stępień 2016a, 376-83] reflects on the concept of dignity, central to the contemporary concept of human rights, indicating the reference of rights to their anthropological source.

The issue of the rights of the person is developed in studies on the rights of communities that are a natural environment of life for a person, such as the family or the nation. In the articles *O prawach rodziny* ("For the Rights of the Family") [Stępień 2010, 67-73] and *Obraz rodziny w Konwencji o prawach dziecka* ("The Image of the Family in the Convention on the Rights of the Child") [Stępień 2015b, 114-21] Stępień reminds after John Paul II that the rights of the family are not only a mathematical sum of the rights of its constituent members. The family as a community of parents and children, and often a community of many generations, has its own subjectivity, and consequently it demands specific rights corresponding to this subjectivity.

In turn, in the text *Prawo narodów do istnienia a ludobójstwo* ("The Right of Nations to Exist and Genocide") [Stępień 2013a, 134-41] the author refers to John Paul II's appeal to the UN in 1995 for respecting the rights of nations. In the course of deliberations, she juxtaposes the fundamental rights of nations, including the right to exist (in the context of the crime of genocide), which leads her to the conclusion that the greatest and most severe violations of human rights in history were committed through the mediation of the state apparatus (crimes against humanity, genocide). This grim discovery became the subject of the next article *Prawa człowieka a państwo* ("Human Rights and the State") [Stępień 2011c, 193-98] devoted to the relationship between man and the state as the main entity obliged to protect human rights.

Finally, the third area of Katarzyna Stępień's scientific interests focuses on rules of human action other than law (e.g. moral virtues as an improvement of action) and the problem of cultural and civilizational determinants of law. The opportunity to address these issues was the research and editorial work on *Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii* ("Universal Encyclopedia of Philosophy") and *Encyklopedia Filozofii Polskiej* ("Encyclopedia of Polish Philosophy"), as part of which the Professor reflected on the specificity of Polish philosophical-legal and philosophical-social considerations. Taking in her attention to the successive centuries of Polish literature and spiritual culture, from the Middle Ages to modern times, she came to the conclusion that a kind of separate attitude of thinking had been formed – original, different from the approaches of Western thought – which can be described without exaggeration as the Polish school of the theory of civilization. This approach, represented by many distinguished thinkers, such as Paweł Włodkowic, Jan Kochanowski, Erazm Majewski, Bogumił Jasinowski, Henryk Romanowski and others, is characterized by an appreciation of the personalism of European civilization and realism in the assessment of the organization of social life and political principles.

Interest in this issue has been expressed, *inter alia*, in articles on the necessary conditions for human moral perfection, the educational function of law, as well as the role of elites in democracy: (1) *Kultura prawa a kultura osoby* ("The Culture of Law and the Culture of the Person") [Stępień 2014, 85-92] (2) *Ideał nauczyciela i wychowawcy w pedagogice klasycznej* ("The Ideal of a Teacher and Educator in Classical Pedagogy") [Stępień 2013b, 71-84] (3) *O roli elit w demokracji według Cz. Znamierowskiego* ("On the Role of Elites in Democracy according to Cz. Znamierowski") [Stępień 2011a, 75-84] They also resulted in the popularization of the thought of outstanding authors dealing with the relationship between law and morality: Jacek Woroniecki, Feliks Wojciech Bednarski and Mieczysław Kreutz.

2. RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

If the significance and originality of the research work is determined by its focus on a key issue, constantly deepened and approached from different perspectives, then Katarzyna Stępień is undoubtedly a specialist in children's rights. She devoted a series of articles to this topic: (1) *Prawo do wychowania* ("The Right to Education") [Stępień 2008a, 93-102] (2) *Prawa dziecka a szkoła i wychowanie* ("Children's Rights and School and Upbringing") [Stępień 2011d, 121-131] (3) *Problem praw ucznia* ("The Problem of Pupil's Rights") [Stępień 2009, 82-87] (4) *Rozwój dziecka w kontekście współczesnej ochrony praw dziecka* ("Child Development in the Context of Contemporary Protection of Children's Rights") [Stępień 2012, 111-31] (5) *Antropologiczne podstawy praw dziecka* ("Anthropological Foundations of Children's Rights") [Stępień 2018, 9-33], but above all the habilitation dissertation *Filozoficzne źródła sporu o rozumienie praw dziecka* ("Philosophical Sources of the Dispute over the Understanding of Children's Rights") [Stępień 2016b]. This work, as one of the few publications contributing to the global debate on the anthropological foundations of children's rights, constitutes a significant novelty in Polish philosophical and legal thought.

No one needs to be convinced of the importance of the considerations undertaken. Failure to respect children's rights is a global problem today, the effects of which affect not only individuals but entire societies. According to UNICEF, one in four children in the world lives in a region affected by a humanitarian crisis, often caused by war. In such conditions, the most basic rights of children (i.e. the right to life, health, education, protection from violence, as well as the right to participate in social life and express their own opinions) are violated.² Another area that requires urgent action is the safety of children and young people online, which, in addition to benefits, also carries serious risks (i.e. pathological content, disinformation, data abuse, etc.).

Although the legal protection of children is anchored in international documents (e.g. the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), both the very understanding of children's rights (the subject and object of rights, the specificity of the goods belonging to these rights as human rights, the specificity of the child as a dependent being, etc.) and the systemic mechanisms of their protection are the subject of dispute among representatives of specific legal sciences. K. Stępień analyzes and explains this dispute, organizing its various aspects from a philosophical perspective.

The context for the implementation of this task is provided by realistic philosophical anthropology understood as the metaphysics of the person

² See <https://unicef.pl/co-robimy/aktualnosci/news/unicef-alarmuje-co-czwarte-dziecko-naswiecie-zyje-w-krajach-dotknietych-kryzysami-humanitarnymi> [accessed: 19.07.2025].

(metaphysical personalism). To be more specific, the author uses the substantive and methodological potential of realistic philosophical anthropology to explain problems formulated on the basis of detailed legal sciences and pedagogy in the field of children's rights. The premiss of this approach is, on the one hand, the Professor's conviction that the applied potential of the philosophy of man has not yet been fully utilized, and, on the other hand, the conviction that realistic philosophical anthropology, presenting a general and theoretical concept of man, should serve to solve problems formulated within the framework of specific and practical sciences about man.

The first chapters of the dissertation present the circumstances of the birth of the idea of the protection of children's rights, its stages and attempts at positivization, the substantive and formal premises for protection, and the characteristics of the subject and object of individual rights, adopted in law. On the basis of the fundamental documents of international law, especially the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Katarzyna Stępień first describes the obligation relationship between the child (the subject of rights) and the goods due to him (subjective right) in a social situation, and then defines the most important points of the dispute over the understanding of children's rights, placing them on two levels: formal (elements of the doctrine of protection of children's rights, definition of the child and children's rights, catalogue of rights, sources of protection, the problem of claims for the protection of children's rights, premises for distinguishing a specialized type of protection, etc.) and material (content-based formulation of rights, understanding of individual rights of the child under protection, such as life, subjectivity, health, etc., the child's status in the family, at school, in culture, in relation to the community).

The considerations constituting the central part of the dissertation concern the philosophical sources of the dispute, which mainly focuses on the understanding of the child as a human-person. The discussion on this subject seems to reflect the more general anthropological chaos of contemporary culture (the so-called anthropological error), as evidenced by the lack of precise definition of human rights and children's rights in the literature, which in a way forces the use of intuitive or colloquially understood terms.

According to Katarzyna Stępień, it is impossible to deal with these difficulties without revealing the anthropological foundations of children's rights: "Since children's rights are an element of human rights, they are subject to the characteristics of rights adopted in the contemporary understanding of human rights [...] Therefore, the premises of rights should be sought in the personal way of existence and existential status of the child, i.e. a human being at an early stage of development" (transl. M. Borkowska) [Stępień 2016b, 98-99]. As K. Stępień argues, only in this way can the sources of diverse

interpretations of children's rights be identified, and ultimately proposals for resolving the dispute can be formulated.

Adopting such a perspective sheds light on other issues entangled in the cultural and ideological context of the dispute over children's rights. Particularly noteworthy is the problem of contemporary redefinitions of the classical understanding of marriage and family, which results in attempts to equate the so-called alternative models of the family with the traditional family. Referring to these issues, K. Stępień emphasizes that the social status of a child depends on the status of the family and the determination of its function. In the family, man is not only born to life, but also constantly "born in his humanity", matures to be fully himself – a rational being, free and developing through love. In the family the rights of the child are realized. This means that any dysfunction that destroys the life of the family, changes the status of the child and limits the possibilities of exercising his rights.

The crisis of the family reveals another dimension of the dispute, related to upbringing. Stępień warns against the effects of 20th-century anti-pedagogical trends (democratic education, *unschooling*, alternative pedagogy), that negate the need for educational influence as such. This tendency is often accompanied by a kind of absolutization of the state of childhood and at the same time a depreciation of maturity in favor of striving for eternal childhood, which results in the infantilization of the entire culture. In the Professor's opinion, these ideas – although motivated by the recognition of the child's autonomy – have brought almost irremediable confusion in the matter of defining new attitudes, postulated in place of educational interactions. This situation also indirectly translates into the understanding of children's rights, the child's relationship with adults, as well as the attitudes of the latter towards children.

As Katarzyna Stępień argues, in order to turn back from the wrong path, it is necessary to recognize that "A child as a subject of action requires help in realizing himself through learning the truth and acquiring good, hence he is the subject of such rights as: on the level of cognition – the right to education, on the level of action and creation – the right to education, on the religious level – the right to religion" (transl. M. Borkowska) [Stępień 2016b, 229]. Seen from this perspective, education no longer appears as oppression imposed from the outside on defenseless beings, but a right rooted in man's ability to act rationally and freely.

These are just some of the areas of dispute over the understanding of children's rights analyzed in the dissertation. These considerations lead to an unambiguous conclusion: in order to resolve the disputed issues within the framework of positive law, they should be placed against the broader background of the concept of man-person, which requires the necessary conditions of just and just law to be sought in the extra-legal sphere

– in the nature of the personal being with its objective inclinations to life, to the transmission of life and personal development. There is a close connection between the indicated areas of dispute, the diversity of positions and adopted solutions, and the concepts of: man, child, family and upbringing. K. Stępień believes that the most adequate theoretical reference for the discussed problems is provided by realistic philosophical anthropology and selected areas of classical philosophy of education (*paideia*). Reaching for these sources, she formulates philosophically stimulating and at the same time practical postulates that can be applied on the basis of legal sciences as well as other specific and practical disciplines about man.

By the way, it is worth making one more remark. The habilitation dissertation reveals the most important features of Katarzyna Stępień's work – in addition to the erudite language and rich source base, the in-depth analyses, in which the author's presence is always clearly marked, deserve recognition. K. Stępień is not afraid to formulate original, critical, and sometimes politically or socially unpopular opinions and observations, but courageously challenges the usual patterns, explores the unknown, searching for the truth despite uncertainty and obstacles, often against the current of intellectual trends or fashions.

3. ORGANIZATIONAL, SOCIAL AND POPULARIZING ACTIVITIES

A commonly used criterion for evaluating the work of scientists is publication achievements. However, such a practice has significant limitations, because it omits or pushes into the background other activities, often important in the context of the functions of the university not directly related to individual research work, such as popularization of science, teaching, mentoring, as well as participation in the activities of various institutions of social life. In short: science should be measured not by how much and where you publish, but by what value you create. This thought aptly describes the attitude of Katarzyna Stępień, for whom social, organizational and popularizing activities are – as she often emphasizes – at least as important as scientific work.

This commitment, roughly speaking, includes the implementation of three tasks: (1) promoting philosophy in order to deepen the understanding of socially important issues and avoid misunderstandings related to them, (2) promoting various fields of philosophy and showing the possibilities of their application to solve contemporary problems, (3) promoting the scientific community of the Catholic University of Lublin, especially the achievements of the Lublin philosophical school in the field of metaphysics, anthropology and philosophy of law, which is one of the tasks of the Department of Philosophical Anthropology and Philosophy of Law.

A special place in Katarzyna Stępień's activities is occupied by the popularization of science, involving various tools for reaching the audience: occasional articles, reports from conferences, interviews published in popular science periodicals, as well as editing and co-editing of works in the field of philosophy, mainly in the form of projects and studies of new publishing series, i.e. *Zadania Współczesnej Metafizyki* [“Tasks of Contemporary Metaphysics”],³ *Wykłady Otwarte* [“Open lectures”]⁴). Particularly noteworthy is a series of interviews conducted with representatives of the Lublin community, devoted to various aspects of practicing philosophy: “On the Lublin Philosophical School”, “On Polish Philosophy and the Lublin Philosophical School in the Context of Work on the Encyclopedia of Polish Philosophy”, “On the Need for a Guide to Philosophy”, “On Catholic Educational Ethics and Its Author”, “Faith and the Deceptive Traps of Atheism”, “On the Service of Culture”.

Katarzyna Stępień strives to demonstrate that philosophy, including the philosophy of law, is by no means the domain of a narrow elite of initiates, but rather concerns everyone – uniting those who, despite diverse interests, aspire to live well, have the courage to think critically, ask questions, and seek meaning. It is no surprise that it is her organizational, social, and popularizing activities that have earned her the greatest number of honors, including the Rector of the Catholic University of Lublin Awards for: organizing international symposia in the “Tasks of Contemporary Metaphysics” series (2004); for her participation in the development of the 10-volume Universal Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2009); and for outstanding organizational, social, and popularizing activities (2011); the FENIKS 2016 Award in the “Publishing Series (Collected Works)” category for publishing the “Tasks of Contemporary Metaphysics” series; and the Medal of the Commission of National Education for special contributions to education and upbringing (2017). The President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda honored Katarzyna Stępień with the Silver Medal for Long Service (2021).

CONCLUSION

As I have tried to show, Katarzyna Stępień's achievements are a testimony to the skilful and consistent combination of research work with social activity for the protection of human rights and the popularization of science.

Convinced that the law needs philosophy, Katarzyna Stępień conducts interdisciplinary scientific research, in which she traverses various areas

³ 2006-2014. Series: *Zadania Współczesnej Metafizyki*. Vol. 8-16, edited by Andrzej Maryniarczyk, Katarzyna Stępień, et al. Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu.

⁴ 2011-2017. *Wykłady otwarte im. Ojca Profesora Mieczysława Alberta Krąpca*, edited by Andrzej Maryniarczyk, Katarzyna Stępień, et al. Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu.

of the humanities and social sciences, using the methodological apparatus of realistic philosophical anthropology. In this way she makes an important contribution to the Polish tradition of humanistic studies on law, placing the philosophy of law among full-fledged philosophical disciplines.

Calling for a law that respects the dignity and subjectivity of the person, she emphasizes that the philosophy of law cannot (like the dogmatics of law) accept the existing legal order without criticism, but should evaluate it from the point of view of rationality and rightness. *Ius est ars boni et aequi*. And when it is detached from its ethical, anthropological and cultural foundations, it becomes nothing more than the letter of the law, susceptible to manipulation and various distortions – the more dangerous the more binding regulations serve as a tool in the hands of political power.

This remark refers to another, more practical, task of the philosophy of law, which is to build the foundations of civic and ethical education. People should not only know their rights, but also be able to protect these rights and live in accordance with them. Katarzyna Stępień understands this very well, which is why for years she has been involved in educational activities, social campaigns and public debates aimed at deepening social awareness and sensitivity to human rights, including children's rights. It can be said that the popularization of science is a kind of extension of her research work, resulting from the conviction that knowledge on matters of such fundamental importance cannot only be the property of scientists, but should reach a wider audience, becoming a tool for shaping a more conscious, sensitive and engaged society.

It seems even that popularizing knowledge better than scientific research reveals Katarzyna Stępień's general disposition as a critical, open, consistent, and at the same time kind person who knows how to listen. So if Leszek Kołakowski is right when he claims that nature rarely combines in one person the strength of character needed by military commanders, with the strength of the intellect [Kołakowski 1988, 118], then prof. Stępień is this peculiar exception. She does not resemble a soldier in her manner, but she is characterized by a truly soldierly stubbornness and consistency, which, merged with her passion for science, ensures the success of her projects. Perhaps all of this put together explains the mystery of her popularity in our *Alma Mater*.

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