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Thinking science and being a Polish scientist in Europe in the first half of the 20th century: Learning from Leon Chwistek (1884-1944)

Leon Chwistek was a Polish mathematical logician, philosopher and artist whose most important creative period was between the two World Wars. Presenting his biography and work, I want to shed light on the scientific culture of his time: Academic institutions, networks, schools of thought, and discourses within Polish philosophy in the first half of the 20th century – in their national as well as transnational dimension. These elements of scientific culture can be seen as conditions that structured Chwistek's work and career – conditions that made his career (im)possible and that inspired him to write about the issue of reality in science and art. At the same time, Chwistek reflected critically on the scientific culture of his time and created his own philosophical theory.

First of all, I will present Chwistek's academic and artistic career on the basis of his biography published by Karol Estreicher (1906-1984) in 1971, a Cracowian historian of art, former student and friend of Chwistek whose focus is on Chwistek as an artist. While I will pass over Estreichers's interpretations of Chwistek's work and the comments on his personality, I will use the biography as a source about Chwistek's main places of inspiration and production as well as his intellectual engagement. Furthermore, I will present Chwistek's philosophical theory of the plurality of realities („wielość rzeczywistości”) which was disapproved by his Polish colleagues, mainly members of the Lwów-Warsaw School of logic. Chwistek's theory can be seen as a critique of his colleagues and a warning of dogmatism in Polish science and philosophy. At the same time, the similarities between Chwistek's theory and the epistemology of German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) indicate a transnational dimension of his concept, in other words European entanglements in the philosophical field at that time.

1 Karol Estreicher (1971): Biografia artysty (1884-1944), Kraków: PWN.