

TADEUSZ  
KOTARBIŃSKI'S  
ACTION  
THEORY



reinterpretive studies

**PIOTR TOMASZ MAKOWSKI**



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## PREFACE

The idea to write this book first appeared during my Fulbright Scholarship at the University of California, Davis, in 2012—where I had a pleasant opportunity to discuss some initial ideas about Kotarbiński’s action theory with the community of UCD philosophers. From that moment on, these ideas have been developed into the shape which is now presented as a seven-chapter monograph.

As an outcome of several years of work, it is much indebted to feedback received on various occasions. I had an opportunity to discuss many important fragments of this work during conferences, workshops, seminars, talks and discussions in Finland (Helsinki), India (Mumbai), Italy (Rome), Japan (Osaka), Poland (Warsaw and Poznan), Switzerland (Bern), Turkey (Çanakkale) and the USA (Davis and New Orleans). I have also been discussing some issues in private communication. I would like to thank everyone who was patient enough to learn about praxiology and comment on my talks and earlier drafts which helped me to elaborate the interpretation of Kotarbiński’s theory which is now presented in this book. I am especially grateful to Timo Airaksinen, Olle Blomberg, Michael Bratman, Christian Budnik, Karolina Cern, Tadeusz Ciecierski, David Copp, Mario DeCaro, Wojciech Gasparski, Cody Gilmore, Magnus Frei, Ranjan K. Panda, Karol Polcyn and Gerhard Seel.<sup>1</sup> All the remarks and comments helped me a lot to avoid numerous mistakes. Naturally, I bear sole responsibility for those flaws that have remained.

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## *Introduction*: Theory of Efficient Action— The Task of Reinterpretation

We are effectiveness-oriented agents. At least, being effective or trying to perform effectively is the sense of most of our intelligent actions—no matter if they are simple or complex, planned or improvised, automated or consciously intended, mental or physical, individual or shared. Effectiveness and efficiency—initially, and roughly: *getting things done*<sup>1</sup>—are crucial in the lives of the beings of bounded resources.

Frequently people simply know-how to get things done, but sometimes the task is too tricky to be performed without advice or information. Modern culture invented the institution of an expert who can instruct us about effectiveness in specific spheres of life, and we may also refer to tons of more or less serious scientific books and papers to learn how to get things done in our personal and professional lives. Indeed, the talk of effectiveness has been repeated *ad nauseam* today, both in everyday life and in the social and practical sciences—‘the sciences of the artificial’ (to use Herbert Simon’s popular phrase). More or less intuitive talk of effectiveness and efficiency is rampant in academic publishing. Let me illustrate this with a few random titles. In business and management: *Handbook of Effective Management*, *Efficient Asset Management*, *Effective Leadership*; in organization science: *Efficient Organizational Design*, *Organizational Effectiveness*; in communication: *Effective Speaking and Presentation*. It is widespread in personal advisement and (more or less naïve) psychological counselling: *Personal Effectiveness*, *Efficient Life*, *The Seven Habits*

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<sup>1</sup> More precise definitions are introduced in Chaps. 2 and 3.

of *Highly Effective People*. It has even entered pop-culture: *The Efficiency Expert* (a novel and a movie). And—not so surprisingly—sometimes appears in the philosophical discourse: *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Thinkers* (a specific witticism by Stephen Yablo).<sup>2</sup> Titles may be multiplied at will. Undoubtedly, the fact that all these titles refer to the idea of effectiveness is not a coincidence. One may take them, reasonably, as signs of something more than a mere superfluous trend in low-quality publishing or in pop-culture. These issues are actually philosophically absorbing. Effectiveness and efficiency are the concepts which evidently capture some practical—and doubtless important—dimension of our lives. The commonness of the talk of effectiveness and efficiency is striking to the extent that it deserves some attention and discussion. At least, it should not be anything surprising or odd in thinking that the issue is worth of philosophical curiosity. So, can the theme of effectiveness and its conditions be explored generally, by the use of appropriate conceptual tools in philosophy?

Human effectiveness and efficiency can be explored in various aspects. In cognitive psychology and in management science these concepts have already been fruitfully investigated. Still, despite the fact that they are interesting typically in relation to some types of highlighted empirical contexts, they seem also be entangled in specifically philosophical conceptual constellations and patterns. Since they describe some properties of agents and/or their actions—it appears as natural to expect that the action theory is the first and best candidate to study them philosophically.

Nevertheless, it is rather a difficult task to find the proposal among modern and contemporary action theories that would try to investigate directly, openly and comprehensively these compelling aspects of our agency. One might immediately respond: it is not true, because various aspects of agential effectiveness have been present in different philosophical proposals. If someone gives a subtle and detailed account of constraints on instrumental rationality, isn't it a theoretical approach to human effectiveness? If someone takes one of these concepts as a signboard under which an interesting work in action theory should be done (Mele 2009), isn't it an evidence that effectiveness or efficiency has fully entered into the debates of contemporary action theory? The answer is: no. At least, there

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<sup>2</sup>References to all these titles (in order of appearance): Huffmire and Holmes (2006), Michaud and Michaud (2008), Adair (2009), Weiss (2007), Cameron (2010), Lee (2001), Murdock and Scutt (1997), Gulick (1907), Covey (2004), and Yablo (2010).

are reasons to stipulate that the negative answer to such questions opens an unusually interesting perspective.

So it seems that the most widely discussed clusters of problems in the contemporary action theory have not been openly or explicitly studied from the angle of effectiveness or efficiency (and their conditions). We can see that contemporary action theories have been aiming at giving a reliable picture of what is crucial for the understanding of being a practical creature: the metaphysics of action, the basic structures of agency (individual and shared), practical rationality (instrumental rationality, reasons for action, rational choice), psychology of action (desires, beliefs, intentions, related issues as motivation) and the practically distinguished dimensions of actions and agents (autonomy, enkrasia, prudence, morality, emotions) and so on. No doubt, to deal with these problems is to deal, in part, with the problem of effective and/or efficient action/agent. But, despite this, it seems that we do not have an action theory which would *even try* to answer the question of effectiveness and efficiency and their conditions in an explicit and systematized way. Or so it seems.

Nonetheless, I believe that there is at least one interesting exception to the above sketchy diagnosis. The purpose of this book is to show this exception, investigate it in detail and convince the reader why it is still philosophically attractive. This exception is ‘the theory of efficient action’, called also: ‘praxiology’, proposed in the 1950s by Tadeusz Kotarbiński who was a friend and teacher of Alfred Tarski. Kotarbiński’s action theory, elaborated mainly in his *Treatise on A Good Job*, is a historical example of an *attempt* at such theorizing on effectiveness and efficiency. Astonishingly, it is almost completely absent in the mainstream action-theoretical debates. In this book I intend to show that even if it has been staying in the shadow for years, it should not be so. There are reasons to consider it as something more than the peripheral example from the history of the lesser known philosophy.

Indeed, I am prone to think that Kotarbiński’s action theory, in several respects, has not only been a pioneering theoretical proposal, but it also still is able to offer an attractive and fertilizing perspective in the philosophy of action. The following six chapters of this book have been devised to vindicate this thought.

To be sure, the two claims—that in several aspects it has been pioneering and that it still is attractive—taken together with the fact that Kotarbiński’s theory of action is almost entirely unknown in the mainstream philosophy may appear as desperately bold or even dubious. If it has not been accepted

as a serious philosophical party in the debates on action theory for so many years—even as a *sole direction* of investigations—and it still stays on the margins, it is probably all but dead. This challenge seems serious. In Chap. 2 I try to deal with this in a more systematic way. This chapter defends the view that the Kotarbiński action theory is a full-fledged example of the philosophy of action, points to its innovative and fresh aspects and tries to explain the reasons why it has been remaining nearly unnoticed for over a half of the century. So Chap. 2 frames the interpretation of Kotarbiński's theory proposed throughout this book. In the remaining five I explore the most important concepts and strategies used by Kotarbiński to materialize his idea of the theory of efficient action. To show its fresh and innovative aspects, I develop his proposal with the aid of selected proposals of the classic philosophers of action, occasionally using also the most recent ideas from the social sciences (especially: from the areas of cognitive and social psychology). The content of these chapters is as follows:

Chapter 3 gives an interpretation of Kotarbiński's views on effectiveness, efficiency and economy of actions. It points to some inaccuracies in the elaboration of his view, develops his ideas in a possibly critical way and confronts the outcome gained with selected contemporary accounts. Several distinctions accepted in this chapter are then used in the rest of the book.

Chapter 4 is an analysis of Kotarbiński's views on rationality with the use of the conceptual tools of two theoretical perspectives: Herbert Simon's account of rationality and the theory of the reasons for action. Besides showing that Kotarbiński's overall idea of rationality to some extent out-paced Simon's proposal, the task of the chapter is rather modest: it strives to reveal the nature of Kotarbiński's understanding of rational agency.

Chapter 5—the most extensive in the book—is devoted to the issue, which has probably been discussed by Kotarbiński in the most comprehensive way: the organization of action by means of plans. It discusses in minute detail Kotarbiński's views in the context of the most well-known approach to plans and planning in the philosophy of action, namely: Michael Bratman's philosophy of planning agency. It uses Bratman's conceptual apparatus to show the extent to which Kotarbiński's ideas seem feasible. It also develops several Kotarbiński ideas and shows that, in certain respects, Bratman's 'planning theory' may be enriched with the use of the praxiological view on agency.

Chapter 6 explores the problem of automatic actions, that is, those ones which are taken to be performed without thinking. The phenomenon of

automaticity is interpreted in the praxiological context of the economization of actions. The chapter offers an account of Kotarbiński's views and—to unveil their fresh character—supplements it by the survey of selected cognitive-psychological research. It also explores the relation between automaticity and the problem of know-how in Kotarbiński's theorizing and, lastly, shows the most important worries for the philosophy of action which are posed by automatic actions in the context of causalism and intentionality.

Chapter 7 aims to introduce the praxiological approach to shared agency. It begins with a—largely historical—interpretation of Kotarbiński's account of collective actions. Then it explores selected contemporary philosophical accounts to highlight the most problematic issues for the theory of joint action and to display the specificity of intentionality in shared agency. In the final step, it sketches a perspective which can serve as a praxiological research programme for the work on shared agency.

The scaffolding of the first three chapters has been elaborated during my research stay in 2012–13 in California. The entire Chap. 5, which thoroughly draws from my three papers (Makowski 2015, 2016a, 2016b), has been written in Rome when I have been affiliated at Roma Tre University (2014–15). Large parts of Chap. 7, which is a thoroughly modified and expanded version of Makowski (forthcoming), have been prepared when I did my brief fellowship in Helsinki in 2015. Chapters 4 and 6 have been written in Poland in 2015 and 2016. The overarching goal of each of these chapters is to show that Kotarbiński in his *Treatise* dealt with central problems for the philosophy of action and offered an opening but explicit exploration of its terra incognita: efficiency, effectiveness and economy as central for practical creatures and, thus, significant for theoretical concerns.

## The Virtues and Vices of Kotarbiński's Praxiology

*Wenn ich meine Teufel vertreibe,  
dann vertreibe ich auch meine Engel.*

*Rilke ('If my devils are to leave me, I am afraid my angels will take flight  
as well' (quoted by Rollo May, *Love and Will*. New York: Delta 1969: 122))*

### INTRODUCTION

In the international philosophical arena, Kotarbiński is mostly known as a proponent of so-called reism or concretism—views in semantics and ontology (Kotarbiński 1966a; Woleński ed. 1990). But the author of the *Treatise on A Good Job* (Kotarbiński 1965; originally *Traktat o dobrej robocie*, henceforth *Treatise*)<sup>1</sup> considered himself rather a praxiologist. It is beyond question that praxiology was his main area of specialization during his whole career—both in research and in teaching (Kotarbiński 1986: 14). To say anything more about praxiology, we first need to know how he understood it. So let us begin with one of the many definitions of praxiology:

By praxiology I mean the science of efficient action. Consequently, the tasks of praxiology are to formulate and to prove recommendations concerning what must be done: what is advisable to do under definite circumstances in

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<sup>1</sup>Where possible, I give references to English editions or versions of Kotarbiński's works. In the case of the translation of *Treatise*, I have changed, when necessary, the term *work to job* (for Polish *robota*), which satisfies better both philological and philosophical needs.

order to attain the intended results in the most efficient way. To put it more briefly, the tasks of praxiology is to investigate the conditions on which maximization of efficiency depends. It is superfluous to add that the formulations given above cover both positive recommendations and warnings and the avoidance and eliminations of effects that disagree with our intentions as well as of all shortcomings of efficiency in action (Kotarbiński 1962c: 211).

Definitions such as this make praxiology an unusually ambitious project. Kotarbiński construed it here as a ‘science’, but it is rather clear that this characteristic was roughly equivalent with the statement that it is a ‘theory’ (e.g. Kotarbiński 1965: 1) and he used these terms interchangeably. Nevertheless, the ambiguity remains and it results from, on the one hand, the projected development of praxiology as the whole discipline of knowledge, and its actual outcome gained in Kotarbiński’s work, especially in the *Treatise*, on the other. Before I proceed to the task of presenting all the ambitions of praxiology as a ‘science’ in more detail, a few remarks are in order.

The reader who is at least a little acquainted with economic theory might be surprised that the Kotarbińskian ‘praxiology’ is spelled differently than the so-called praxeology, which has been typically associated with the renowned name of Ludwig von Mises (1949). It is not a mistake; this slight terminological difference warns us against putting them both under one heading. Although they share a few basic interests (as, e.g. an investigation of general problems concerning action under the auspices of a general ‘science’), there are many dissimilarities between Misesian and Kotarbińskian perspectives (Gasparski 1996, 2013: 3–4).<sup>2</sup> I am not going to discuss them both; here, I believe, it is worth to mention only one, which is not sufficiently stressed. Kotarbiński’s work, exposed originally in 1955 in his *Treatise*<sup>3</sup>—as a result of over 40-years-lasting research—is, in my opinion, not only much more philosophically interesting than the work of the Austrian economist, but it

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<sup>2</sup> It is good to note that there is also the French root of praxiology connected with the work of Louis Bourdeau and Alfred Espinas (see e.g. Alexandre and Gasparski 1999). Kotarbiński used to stress that praxiology has some predecessors (e.g. Kotarbiński 1965: Chap. 1), but I agree with those who claim that it was just a result of his modesty. In fact, these two French authors had had an indiscernible influence on the shape of praxiology in the *Treatise*. Compare: Stonert (1970: 257).

<sup>3</sup> The birth of praxiology can be dated from 1910 when Kotarbiński wrote his address: *The Goal of An Act and the Task of An Agent* (Kotarbiński 1983a). For more (see e.g. Gasparski 1993, 1996). The term praxiology was first used in a 1923 paper *Zasady teorii czynu* (Kotarbiński 1927). I will not go into historical details of the birth of praxiology since it is beyond the interest of this study.

also is much more nuanced and philosophically refined.<sup>4</sup> Instead of defending this bold statement by a meticulous comparison of these two approaches to agency, we do better if we present praxiology itself in more detail.

The body of this chapter consists of the detailed analysis of the above definition of praxiology. Its structure is as follows: firstly, I describe the project of praxiology as a 'science' called 'a grammar of action' (Kotarbiński 1965: 7) and its realization in *Treatise*. By focusing mostly on the structure of Kotarbiński's theory, I try to show the richness and relevance of its conceptual details and stress its most important aspects. Secondly, I try to give a critical philosophical explanation of why praxiology could not have been widely recognized as a serious philosophical party in the debates on action theory. In other words, there are serious historical and philosophical reasons which are responsible for the fact that praxiology is still an open question. Since this critical diagnosis also discloses—in the light of the virtues described in the first step—some positive aspects of praxiology, I attempt—in the fourth step—to sketch a new perspective which aims to provide praxiology with a new conceptual framework. The overarching goal of this chapter is, therefore, an attempt at the revival of praxiology. To reach this goal, we need to know the virtues of the Kotarbińskian project, but the latter also requires that we need to know its vices.

### THE KOTARBIŃSKIAN PRAXIOLOGY

Until the second half of the twentieth century, the philosophy of action had been in its infancy—not only in Poland. Although Kotarbiński declared that his 'theory of efficient action' was a result of decades-long research—a potential mark of its maturity—it bore traits, which are quite typical for the philosophy of agency before it gained its relative autonomy as a *theory of action*. So it should not be a surprise that praxiology contains various threads, which may cause that it appears as an eclectic work.<sup>5</sup> The variety of ideas contained in Kotarbiński's praxiological works should not veil the fact, however, that it is an inventive work. Still, the insertion of praxiology into the easily recognizable viscera of the mainstream philosophy of action can be a philosophical brain-teaser.

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<sup>4</sup>This statement refers to praxiology understood as *the philosophy of action*. From the perspective of economics, the matter may look differently.

<sup>5</sup>Kotarbiński himself considered eclecticism as the most unjust criticism of his philosophy (see Woleński 1985: Chap. XI).

*‘The Science of Efficient Action?’*

At first glance, the initial Kotarbiński approach to praxiological investigation appears to be quite typical and understandable. Kotarbiński sketched three tasks of praxiology: (1) an analytic description of ‘the elements of action’, including a clarification of concepts, (2) the construction of general norms (‘positive recommendations and warnings’). Both (1) and (2) constitute so-called grammar of action. And (3): the investigation of historical progress in the efficiency of action (‘the dynamics of progress’) (Kotarbiński 1965: 8). The whole *Treatise* aimed at fulfilling especially the first two tasks in a systematic way. It aspired to the ideal, which was typical both for the Lvov-Warsaw School and for the Vienna Circle, of conceptual precision and clarity. Still, Kotarbiński was aware of the limits of his pioneering—and therefore: incomplete—enterprise. These limits made Kotarbiński’s *Treatise* rather something that ‘spreads the word’ of praxiology, than something that aspires to its systematic grounding.

Three tasks of praxiology were to be realized under the umbrella of the whole ‘science of efficient action’. Let me make a brief comment here. Even if we realize these tasks, it is highly problematic that we, by this means, develop a ‘science’. The contemporary expansion of practical effectiveness-oriented disciplines of knowledge (management, organization science, economics, logistics, etc.) suggests that the realization of these three jobs is something that goes far beyond the aspirations of a philosophical work. Nevertheless, let me take the idea of ‘science’ seriously. What would such a praxiology amount to? Would it be at all feasible?

To answer these questions, we need to turn back to the problem of the growth of the ‘sciences of the artificial’. Today, there are many branches of more or less nuanced knowledge that tell us about effectiveness and efficiency in specific practical *empirical* circumstances. In the context of a project of a full-fledged science of efficient action, this raises serious difficulties. To take a palpable example—there are tons of ‘practical guides’ (as the bestselling *Efficient Golfer*, *How to Write a Lot* or *The Ultimate Guide to Waking up Early*), which aim to solve the big problem of ‘getting things done’ in a specific context or situation. If, for some reason, our practice fails, we may look for help and instruction in these fantastic publications. We believe that we can *do better* and improve our effectiveness thanks to the practical knowledge contained in them. We believe that such practical guides give us useful ‘recommendations and warnings’ (to use Kotarbiński’s language) that work in different settings. Slightly more advanced samples of practical knowledge can be found in everything that our ‘efficiency experts’

say about effectiveness in marketing, management, policy, organization, communication and the like in their popular books, papers, posts and talks (a few of the titles to which I have referred to in the *Preface* should serve as a fair example). This is an immense area of useful practical knowledge without which our everyday practices of the so-called liberal market and modern society cannot live. But these samples will not exhaust all the cognitive interests that might appear when we think of the idea of the 'science' of efficient action. Besides managerial and entrepreneurial practical guides (often: of suspicious quality), we have so-called management science; besides advices for leaders in *vademecums* or 'companions', we have the so-called theories of leadership and so on. All the practically oriented social sciences ('sciences of the artificial') that belong to the standard area of study in the departments of economics, management or business schools realize (in their own, sometimes methodologically subtle way) at least a big part of the Kotarbińskian ideal of the 'science of efficient action'. They are *about* effective or efficient actions in specific contexts, they frequently use highly articulated language to describe these actions, and, in many cases, they often employ formal rules or normative conditions which describe how such effectiveness or efficiency can be achieved. And what about *game theory*? In this type of study there are quite well-grounded formal rules (e.g. solution concepts such as the *Nash equilibrium*) that can be used to improve our understanding of the effective strategies of some actions in non-cooperative behaviour. The same can be said of *decision theory* (with ideas like Kahneman's prospect theory), which concerns individual agents' actions. There are no clear reasons for which we should exclude such theories from the project of the 'science of efficient action'.<sup>6</sup>

Let us take stock for a while and look back at our definition of praxiology as a science. We have basically two crucial philosophical competences of praxiology at stake: the ability to (1) describe 'the elements of action', and to (2) construe the general norms of agency. (*Pace* now the description of 'the dynamics of progress' which would only be a margin of such 'science'<sup>7</sup>). It is clear that these two undertakings constitute the theoretical (descriptive and normative) core of praxiology. How should we understand them, therefore, in the context of the competences of the above-mentioned disciplines and theories? It is perfectly clear that *Efficient*

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<sup>6</sup>In fact, Kotarbiński's followers quickly realized this fact (see e.g. Szaniawski 1972: 10–12).

<sup>7</sup>Such a study of the dynamics of progress in efficiency would be methodologically similar to, say, the history of biology or the history of physics. Kotarbiński was aware that its role would be 'ancillary to the preceding two' (Kotarbiński 1965: 8), so I ignore it in what follows.

*Golfer*, *Handbook of Effective Leadership* and *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* explore quite different aspects of being effective or efficient. You need a good tool to describe and analyse some type of economic behaviour—you take the von Neumann and Morgenstern. You want to know about standards of efficiency in being a good leader—you look into books in the area of leadership; you want to be a better golfer—you follow the advice of *Efficient Golfer*. But in such cases—do you really need a general theory of praxiological norms or values? If these norms exist, it seems they are completely beyond your interests. Detailed and concrete directives and standards, which are useful in one context (but totally useless in another), is what you need to be efficient as a golfer, public speaker, manager and so on. Then, does praxiology as a ‘science’ make sense at all?

Let us try another way to secure the idea of praxiology as a science. For the sake of argument, imagine that we have something that meets our definition, that is, offers a good descriptive language of action and a complete set of general praxiological norms. Suppose also that the reasons for which we prepare practical guides, handbooks (etc.) do not make void the reasons for which we construe such a praxiological language of action and a set of praxiological norms. How could we use this language and these norms on all the different levels of empiria which are explored by the above-mentioned disciplines and theories? It seems that there is no such a thing like a *cognitive ‘lift’* which could take you from the level of practical directives (say, in logistics or in playing golf) to the level of general praxiological norms without losing their normative significance.<sup>8</sup> At least, no one has ever shown that there are such ‘lifts’ that take us directly from the level of everyday practice to the abstract levels of investigation in philosophy in the way that would not destroy the idea of a unified ‘science’.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I shall have something more to say about this issue in the conclusion of this chapter.

<sup>9</sup> The idea of bridging theory and practice—which is at stake here—is an old and complex issue. Naturally, I do not claim that there is no such thing as a connection between empirical practical sciences and practical philosophy. (Nor do I want to claim that philosophy does not have a practical import at all). But this is a different problem than the problem of praxiology as a systematized, unified ‘science’ with something like ‘bridging laws’ between simple practical advices and abstract praxiological norms.

Notice also that the relation which is criticized here is a bit similar to the relation between the Kantian categorical imperative and individual rules of actions (‘maxims’). I cannot go into details of this comparison; it will be enough to say that such similarity is only structural (and one cannot save praxiology as a ‘science’ from the Kantian position).

The two arguments I have just given are very sketchy. Nonetheless, I believe that we do not have sufficient reasons to understand praxiology as a science. In other words, we should get rid of this idea.<sup>10</sup> Historically, Kotarbiński's endeavour to create praxiology as a science was not anything outstanding. Just recall the nineteenth- and twentieth-century analogical attempts in morals (Bentham or Ossowska). After all, these attempts do not become valueless after we realize that thinking in terms of 'science' is a dead end in practical philosophy. We may investigate and draw inspiration from praxiology without this big idea. In other words, we may simply abandon it. This strategy promises that the content of praxiology will not be refuted from scratch, as a stillborn project based on too demanding assumptions.

### *Praxiology as an Action Theory*

There is a safe and natural tactic that can secure the project of praxiology as viable. The two tasks which have been listed by Kotarbiński as crucial for praxiological interests (let us recall them once more): (1) an analytic description of 'the elements of action', (2) the construction of general norms—should be interpreted in terms of the philosophy of action, or: *action theory*.<sup>11</sup> This is nothing unusual, given the content of his work and his mostly philosophical research interest. Kotarbiński called praxiology 'the theory of efficient action' or 'the general theory of action' (Kotarbiński 1965: passim)<sup>12</sup> and used these terms interchangeably with

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<sup>10</sup>In Poland, many of Kotarbiński's pupils and followers could take this manoeuvre as unacceptable (odd at best). This might be so because the idea of praxiology as a science gave birth to a great number of more or less viable and interesting proposals. To list only a few: *praxiometrics*, an attempt at strictly *quantitative* account of praxiological concepts and relations (see e.g. Gasparski 1969); *formal praxiology*, a project of the deductive science of action with a new conceptual-logical apparatus (Stonert 1967, 1968; Konieczny and Stonert 1971); *praxiosemanitics* (or praxiosemiotics), a theory of optimal sign (Wójcik 1969), praxiological *organization science* (e.g. Zieleniewski 1969). I cannot discuss these proposals here. Nevertheless, many of them deserve much attention—not only for historical purposes. At any rate, the reader should also be aware of the following: the strategy I use in this book is not meant to undermine the weight of all the valuable applications, or extensions of praxiology that emerged from Kotarbiński's *Treatise*.

<sup>11</sup>Again, this is what makes the Kotarbińskian approach to praxiology much more refined than the von Misesian.

<sup>12</sup>There are also other terms, such as 'general methodology', or 'methodology of practical skills' (Kotarbiński 1937, 1971), but for the purposes of this book, I prefer to stick to the term *action theory*.

the ‘science of efficient action’. Given this, we should only remain consistent and just forget about thinking of praxiology as a science. At best this term should be treated as a poor metaphor. Therefore, praxiology cannot serve as a unified scientific platform embracing theories like those which are developed in, say: organization theory, management science or decision theory. This idea is obsolete. If praxiology has some role to play in their context, certainly it is not the role of an all-embracing practical super-discipline (which, apparently, was Kotarbiński’s dream—see for example Kotarbiński (1938: 190–194, 1965: Chap. 1, 1986: 14)).

Why should praxiology be understood just as an action theory? Despite his predilection towards logic, most of the philosophical works written by Alfred Tarski’s friend and teacher have been devoted to the questions concerned with action. Among them there are crucial problems in the contemporary action theory: the nature of action, the problem of action explanation, the concept of an agent and choice, an account of cooperation/shared agency or practical rationality. The spirit of the Lvov-Warsaw School, constantly infiltrating Kotarbiński’s style of work, resulted in the analytic approach to essential problems of the philosophy of action.<sup>13</sup> Despite alleged presumptions, this makes his work not at all distant from the works of those who are considered as the twentieth-century classics of the philosophy of action: G.E.M. Anscombe, Roderick Chisholm or Donald Davidson. I dare to say even more—Kotarbiński can be considered as a *pioneering* author in a few key areas of action theory. The fact that praxiology has been projected as a far-reaching investigation proposed consequently from the angle of effectiveness and efficiency should not veil this. Before I offer an overview of the structure of Kotarbiński’s praxiological theory, it will be worth to give a few samples from the *Treatise* to resolve any doubts concerning Kotarbiński as an action theorist. Let me give five examples:

1. An account of actions in terms of *events*. For Kotarbiński, actions are understood in terms of results: ‘By “result” is meant here all [the] effect[s] of a cause consisting in an optional impulse; and an

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<sup>13</sup>Those authors who think that praxiology does not have much in common with the analytical action theory probably treat the latter too rigidly. It is well established that philosophy in the Lvov-Warsaw School—even the philosophy of Kotarbiński himself—shared its specificity with the Vienna Circle. We have strong reasons to treat Kotarbiński’s praxiology as belonging to the analytic tradition, even if it stands out of its mainstream.

effect is always an event.’ (Kotarbiński 1965: 23).<sup>14</sup> This line of thinking is known from Davidson, who proposed a very similar approach more than ten years later in his paper *Causal relations* (Davidson 1967). Additionally, Kotarbiński divided events into changes and states of affairs (Kotarbiński 1965: 23)<sup>15</sup>; from the 1960s and 1970s this distinction has been subject to more thorough philosophical dispute (see Casati and Varzi 2014). The *Treatise* offers the whole ‘theory of events’ (Kotarbiński 1965: 9, 22–32) which also is an interesting account and is waiting for a more comprehensive discussion.

2. The concept of *choice*. Besides the interesting and detailed definition based on the idea of comparing options (Kotarbiński 1965: 43), the Polish thinker proposed to understand the concept of choice in connection with the idea of *Buridan’s Ass* (Kotarbiński 1965: 43–44). This is a well-known ‘paradox’, which in contemporary action theory is usually being recalled to illustrate the fact that humans have a fundamental capacity to make choices. It is a transit from the state of awareness that two or more options are similarly sensible to the state of being settled on one of those options.<sup>16</sup> Michael Bratman (whose work will be subject to my analysis in Chaps. 5 and 7) has a very similar view of such ‘Buridan cases’, as he calls them (Bratman 1987: 11). Bratman, to support his own account, recalls the view of Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Sidney Morgenbesser (cf. Morgenbesser and Ullmann-Margalit 1977). We already know that Kotarbiński’s ideas had been proposed 20 years before this philosophical duo made their valuable contribution to the issue discussed.
3. The concepts of *attempt* and *endeavouring*. As we shall see in detail in the following chapters, the Polish philosopher often pointed out to the problem of action *preparation*. Therefore, it should be no surprise that praxiology has had to account for the concepts of attempt and endeavouring—as they are cognates. Discussing the idea of attempt, Kotarbiński proposed an interesting typology. He differentiated attempt understood as diagnostic testing (attempt per

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<sup>14</sup>Translation slightly altered (*optional impulse* instead of *free impulse*). The need of such alterations is explained in what follows.

<sup>15</sup>‘States of affairs’ in the English edition of *Treatise* appear, misleadingly, as ‘states of things’ (*Ibidem.*).

<sup>16</sup>Kotarbiński to highlight this phenomenon recalls the French dictum: *embarrass de richesse* (Kotarbiński 1965: 43).

se) from conative attempts (i.e. endeavours) and from exercises.<sup>17</sup> For the Polish praxiologist, all of them ‘share a striking characteristic—the endeavour to do something’ (Kotarbiński 1965: 51). Nevertheless, he maintained that there is a difference between them, since mere endeavouring (i.e. the second type) does not prepare our actions, as diagnostic testing and exercises do. Without going into the details of this view, we should know that the concepts of endeavour and attempt entered the philosophical debate in action theory much later on (see e.g. the works of Roderick Chisholm 1976b and Gideon Yaffe 2010). They also are related to the problem of trying, which has also attracted philosophical attention (see e.g. Armstrong 1973; Schroeder 2001).

4. A theory of *plans* and planning. I mentioned that action preparation is one of the most important dimensions of praxiological (i.e. effectiveness-oriented) thinking about agency. In this context, more than by attempts and by endeavouring, Kotarbiński’s philosophical attention was occupied by the idea of planning. The concept of a plan and the issues related to it constitute one of the most central areas of praxiological investigations. The Polish philosopher examined this area on many pages of his works (Kotarbiński 1961, 1965, 1983b), offering a detailed analysis of a plan and its relation to planning. Also, he proposed an account of the norms that govern our plans. Kotarbiński’s theory of plans is an original, painstaking work, which (chronologically) outstripped the debate on plans which began its philosophical period with Bratman’s *Taking plans seriously* (Bratman 1983) and continued through his later works and the works of others (see e.g. Bratman 1987; DeHelian and McClennen 1993; Pollack 1992a).
5. Finally, the idea of *mind-infusion of actions*. The Kotarbińskian praxiological approach to the relation of agent-mind-world (‘the three-fold cord’—as one, after Putnam, might say) is that our actions are essentially mind-permeated:

every act includes elements which are mental in nature. This is so because in every act there is contained an optional impulse directed towards a

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<sup>17</sup>In English translation all these three are called *tests*, which is, again, somewhat misleading. I discuss the problem of Kotarbiński’s language (and its translation into English) in section 1.3.

certain goal, which means that the agent not only moves but also is conscious of the purpose of his movement—and that consciousness undoubtedly is a mental factor. Hence, human actions cannot be reasonably classified into physical and mental, since there are no physical actions without mental elements (Kotarbiński 1965: 175).<sup>18</sup>

By 'mental elements' Kotarbiński understood the agent's 'thought': to be active agents we require knowledge-how, which has propositional content. I shall not elaborate on this claim here (it will be the subject to more detail discussion in Chap. 6). It is enough to say that it can be treated as a proto-stance in a debate on the so-called problem of *know-how*, which emerged after the work of Ryle (1949). The debate has had some pre-ludes (e.g. Ginet 1975; Carr 1979), but it would not be a mistake to think that its flourishing falls in the last two decades. In this context, the Kotarbińskian approach may appear as a predecessor of the intellectualist view proposed recently by such authors as, for example, Jason Stanley (2011). How precisely his stance should be interpreted is a matter of further investigation.

These five examples should be enough to claim that Kotarbiński's praxiology is an action theory *par excellence*. They also give some reason to assume that, historically, it is an important approach in the analytic philosophy of action.

### *Praxiology in the Treatise: Ontology, Values and Normativity: An Overview*

From what has been said so far, we know four characteristics of praxiology: (1) it is an action theory; (2) it is effectiveness- or efficiency-oriented; (3) it offers an analytic discussion of the most important dimensions of action and (4) its aim is to investigate the conditions on which the 'maximization of efficiency [or effectiveness] depends' (Kotarbiński 1962c: 211). For now, only the first aspect of praxiological thinking is sufficiently clear. Answers to the next three questions should give the image of praxiology that is needed to understand its essence. My aim here is to propose at least a sketch for this image. To realize this, I shall overview the spectrum of problems which are discussed in the *Treatise*. I organize my discussion by dividing the spectrum of praxiological research interests into three

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<sup>18</sup>Translation slightly altered.