QUESTIONS AND COGNITION. ON EROTETIC REASONING
WITH REFERENCE TO SOME AJDUKIEWICZ’S IDEAS

1. Questions in Cognitive Processes

Questions – or, strictly speaking, mental states corresponding to questions – play an important role in cognitive processes and, in particular, in scientific cognition. This is why the theory of questions (scil. erotetics) has a lot in common with epistemology, general methodology and with methodologies of particular disciplines.

Firstly, volitional acts which express themselves in questions are ‘conductors’ of our cognitive operations. Secondly, questions and answers play a crucial role in the process of transmitting knowledge between people. Thirdly, questions are irreplaceable cognitive tools in some scientific disciplines (e.g. psychology, sociology and medicine). Fourthly, every scientific discipline may be characterized by its problems – i.e. the set of questions to which representatives of a given disciple try to find an answer or to which an answer has already been given in this discipline.

In my paper, I shall concentrate only on one aspect of the theory of questions, situated on the border of epistemology, methodology and formal logic, i.e. on the role of questions in reasoning. I shall present two ideas connecting the theory of questions with the theory of reasoning: the idea of questions conducting reasoning and the idea of erotetic reasoning, in which questions play a role of premises and conclusions.

1 The article is a result of the project “The Significance of the Lvov-Warsaw School in European Culture,” supported by the Foundation for Polish Science. The article partially corresponds to the chapter 13 of Brożek (2011).
Both ideas have an important part of their roots in the tradition of the Lvov-Warsaw School. The idea of questions conducting reasoning was formulated by Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz (1955). The theory of erotetic inferences was developed by Andrzej Wiśniewski (1995), preceded by Tadeusz Kubiński (1970). Ajdukiewicz was one of leading figures of the school. Kubiński as a student of Maria Kokoszyńska and Wiśniewski as the student of Koj and Kubiński are sometimes counted into younger generations of this formation. In keeping with this splendid indigenous tradition, I shall propose my own proposal of how to combine the two ideas mentioned.

Before presenting details, let me recall a few important elements of the general theory of questions and the theory of reasoning which I shall use in my considerations.

2. Conceptual Scheme

2.1. Questions and Question-States

Let us suppose that somebody asks:

(1) Who carved the altar in the Church of Our Lady in Cracow?

Let us suppose, further, that the person posing this question does it seriously, e.g. it is a person who is visiting Cracow for the first time and who wants more information about the treasures of Cracow’s culture. Assuming that this person is asking seriously – what can we say about the experiences of this person? What experiences, in particular, are expressed in this kind of linguistic expression? What motivates this person to ask?

The majority of question theorists agree that the mental state corresponding to a question is complex and consists of:

(a) a particular conviction (in my example – the conviction that somebody carved the altar in the Church of Our Lady);
(b) a lack of some conviction, i.e. ignorance with regard to something (in my example: not knowing who the sculptor was who carved the altar in the Church of Our Lady);
(c) a desire to obtain certain information (in my example: a desire to know who carved the altar).

In what follows, I shall call a state composed of these three elements “a question-state.” Let me add that the sentence expressing conviction which is a cognitive component of a question-state is usually called “a supposition of a given question.”