

History of the Open Letter in Defence of Reason

Tomasz Witkowski

In its official *Classification of Occupations and Specializations* The Polish Ministry of Labour and Social Policy included, among others, the professions of fortune-teller, astrologer and dowser. Polish scientists from all over the world have protested against this absurdity.

Many of my friends know that I am interested in pseudoscience and other related absurdities and that is why they keep sending me information concerning such issues. In February 2009 someone wrote to me that the official governmental classification of occupations included such entries as fortune-teller, astrologer and dowser among others. I took a closer look at these entries – they were strikingly preposterous. I decided to comment on this in my blog entitled *In defence of reason* (www.tomaszwitkowski.pl) and sent out by mail a note about this to those who are interested in it. Some of them reacted with a smile what the Ministry did, others with disbelief or pity. Among them was Professor Łukasz Turski from the Center for Theoretical Physics of the Polish Academy of Sciences among them. Turski, Tomasz Sowiński from the Center for Theoretical Physics and I wrote the letter which appeared on Internet. Those readers who shared our view signed it. Below are the excerpts of the letter:

Open letter to Jolanta Fedak, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy

Dear Minister,

Labour Offices, being public institutions subordinate to the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, have published on the Internet (www.praca.gov.pl) a document entitled:

Classification of occupations and specialisations. This document (...) approves the exercise of occupations listed in the *Classification* in Poland, as well as, in an exceptionally precise manner, defines what the essence of performing the occupations in question is.

We, the undersigned, deem it scandalous to add to the list a number of occupations not having anything in common with the civilisations of the 21st century, and by no means with the official mission declared by the government of the Republic of Poland to create a society based on knowledge and reason. Such entries include the “professions” of **astrologer, fortune-teller, bio-energy therapist, reflexology therapist, dowser**, etc. Two of those entries are described at length below:

(...)

Fortune-teller

Synthesis:

intentionally uses inborn talents to act in the area of supernatural phenomena, gains insight into past and future events with the application of various forms of foretelling shaped by tradition, such as: cards (tarot in particular), fortune-telling, I-ching (based on the Ancient Chinese *Book of Changes*), chiromancy (palm reading), catoptromancy and crystalomancy (foretelling by means of a mirror or crystal), and others.

Professional tasks:

- foretell, or, occasionally, reveal past – depending on the adopted method and level of the fortune-teller’s knowledge – related with specific counselling or psychotherapy;
- counsel with respect to missing persons or belongings;
- explain the origin and settings of phenomena defined as extraordinary.

Additional professional tasks:

- use the skill of clairvoyance, clairaudience, support the foretelling with mediumistic phenomena, use telepathy, teleportation, as well as draw on information in morphogenetic fields;
- apply methods characteristic of astrology, numerology, psycho-graphology or other bio-tronic areas.

We firmly state that the texts of the above entries are completely senseless and full of fundamental scientific errors. They also spread superstitions as well as a para-scientific approach to the reality. They also allow persons, who conduct healing activities to invoke the aforementioned document in case of revelation of such activities which breach the law, e.g. conducting a kind of “healing” practices (compare Professional tasks of astrologer).

We would like to emphasise the fact that the definition of **dowsing** validated in the directive as one of types of crafts, was the basis for the Supreme Court to allow opinions of dowsers on equal grounds with opinions issued by other forensic experts (...).

We indicate that the publication of the document “**Classification of occupations and specialisations – descriptions of groups and occupations**” on the website of an

institution subordinate to the Minister ridicules your office and thus jeopardises the dignity of the Republic of Poland.

We believe that wasting of public funds and funds provided by the European Union for the preparation of these kind of absurd documents should be subject to punishment. That is why we demand that full names of perpetrators of this scandalous list should be made public. Owing to economic turbulence on the world markets Poland is in a very difficult situation, which will be not easy to escape. In this challenging task we will find no support from fortune-tellers or shamans, but from engineers, scientists, teachers, doctors and other hard-working people from different walks of life. We consider placing them on the same list as astrologers and reflexology therapists, allowed by the constitutional authorities of Poland, as an unqualified insult. On behalf of all those people we demand an apology and removal of the “occupations” in question from the Classification.

Professor Łukasz A. Turski, PhD

Tomasz Witkowski, PhD

Tomasz Sowiński, PhD

Soon after our letter had been published, we sent out by mail information about our protest. The letter was made available for signing for five days and was signed by as many as 4982 persons. Initially primarily scientists signed it. In addition to representatives of the majority of Polish universities, among the signatories were also employees of scientific institutions from the entire world.

The media quickly spotted the announcement of the protest and for a few days information about our campaign had the status of hot news. It was given wide coverage on Polish TV and daily press, as well as on the Internet. The Ministry was requested by journalists to take a stance on the letter. The below quotation is the first official statement with respect to fortune-tellers in Poland:

„We will not exclude fortune-tellers from the list of occupations; there is an occupation of scientist, there is also a fortune-teller” – Bożena Diaba, the press officer of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, said to PAP (Polish Press Agency) with reference to the letter of scientists protesting against such occupations as astrologer, fortune-teller or bio-energy therapist being placed on the list (<http://finanse.wp.pl/kat,104762,title,MPiPS-w-odpowiedzi-naukowcom-wrozka-to-tez-zawod,wid,10890320,wiadomosc.html?ticaid=17934>).

Apparently, the press officer had not bothered to look through the list. There is neither occupation of scientist or, for instance, ...a poet.

We closed the list of signatures on 2 March 2009 and submitted it, along with the open letter to the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Jolanta Fedak. A copy of those documents was also submitted to, the Secretary of State in the Chancellery of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland.

We received an official reply from the Ministry on the 13 of March presented on five pages. It is worth quoting this fragment in full:

III. Fortune-teller in the Classification of occupations and specialisations

The Classification of occupations and specialisations for the needs of the labour market, called often for short an economic classification, comprises those occupations and specialisations, which in fact are found on the labour market. Hence such classification should objectively reflect the fact of existence of a set of occupations performed by persons active economically, and the types of activities conducted by them. They also include activities, which are deemed unconventional, e.g. paramedical, astrological, spiritualistic, etc. It is of no significance what their ontological status and the essence of performed ascribed tasks are. The classification does not provide for any obligation to use services of entities/persons performing individual occupations, either. The official recognition of a given occupation, which is preceded by inclusion in the Classification is understood exclusively as a possibility to keep on in records, primarily for statistical purposes. Fortune-tellers, astrologers and bioenergy therapists will provide their services irrespective of whether names of their occupations will be allowed or deleted in the Classification. The advantages of such deletion seem doubtful, since it would lead to an incomplete or limited image of the structure of occupations found in the labour market.

The fact of including an occupation in the Classification indicates only that this occupation functions in the labour market, regardless of the fact whether it is legally sanctioned or not. The Classification of occupations should not be mistaken for so-called list of regulated professions, the exercise of which is subject to regulations of law.

Assuming that each working person should find their professional affiliation in the Classification of occupations, it should be understood that this also relates to those

persons, who perform such controversial – in your view – occupations as fortune-teller, reflexology therapist, dowser, astrologer or bio-energy therapist.

As mentioned earlier, the Classification of occupations and specialisations is primarily applied to conduct statistical research and prepare analyses of the labour market. If it lacks any of occupations/specialisations actually found in the labour market, it may significantly distort the image of reality.

MINISTER

Jolanta Fedak

One may try to re-read this text several times, replacing the mentioned occupations of fortune-teller, dowser, astrologer and others with such professions as matrimonial racketeer, prostitute, drug dealer, contract thug. The logic of arguments will be equally coherent in these cases. These are actually performed occupations, functioning on the labour market, and nobody forces anybody to use services of the service providers. These people will also provide their services regardless of whether their jobs will be included in the Classification or not. The lack of these occupations in the Classification does lead to an incomplete or limited image of reality.

The Minister has not however taken a stance toward the legal consequences resulting from individual occupations being included in the Classification. What I have in mind is mainly the consequences related with the decision of the Polish Supreme Court to allow a possibility to establish forensic expert in the area of fortune-telling, astrology, bio-energy therapy and similar specialisation on the on the same grounds as other forensic experts. It is only the matter of time now when a clever lawyer makes use of this provision and forces a decree of divorce with the help of a clairvoyant. After all, his opinion is of the same weight as, for instance, a

criminological opinion. I even fear to think about any other possible consequences resulting from taking advantage of such decisions.

There are also some more legal consequences of this situation, which refer to education. The inclusion on the occupation list creates a legal opportunity to apply for official description of the occupation of fortune-teller by a minister competent for this specialisation. In response to an application of, for instance, the Harry Potter Society of Fortune-Tellers addressed to a government minister, the latter should prepare a catalogue of skills necessary for performing tasks of fortune-teller, based on which the education minister, in turn, works out curriculum for schools and standards of examinations. The only thing left is to hope that nobody in court will have to face an opinion issued by a forensic expert in the field of fortune-telling, and no wizard societies will flood ministers with petitions. But this is only a hope. Unfortunately, the Polish law allows for this.